one of its icons, Anne appears at first as a bloodied and tragic victim, but soon emerges as a formidable, empowered presence, claiming the head discarded by her enemies and even challenging them with it. The cradled head represents everything about Anne that seems to have been cut off: her influence at court, her quick (but often snide) wit, her ability to speak in her own defense, her ability to raise her daughter. Anne could be silenced, but her ghost legend remains irrepressibly vocal, and in this sense she emerges as England’s only cephalophoric Protestant saint. Rather than dismissing such an idea as “unhistorical,” fantastical, or irrelevant, scholars can view acephalous figures as extensions of the literary motives of biographers, hagiographers, and storytellers as a form of imaginative communication with their audiences. Anne’s legend, and the willingness of her twenty-first century admirers to seek it, laud it, or buy it, maintains a continual and consequential dialogue between the world of the dead and the world of the living.

"ANSWERING THE CALL OF THE SEVERED HEAD"

Asa Simon Mittman

"a very important part"

As William Ian Miller writes, “there are few things that are more unnerving and disgusting evoking than our parthibity.” We wish to have integral bodies, complete not only from head to toe and inside out, but more fundamentally, to have our intellects (our souls, for medieval and early modern culture) permanently linked to our bodies. Miller continues at length:

Consider the horror motif of severed hands, ears, heads, gouged eyes. These do not strike me as so many stand-ins for castration. Castration is merely a particular instance of severability that has been fetishized in psychoanalysis and the literary theoretical enterprises that draw on it. Severability is unnerving no matter what part is being detached [...]. Part of death’s horror is that it too is a severance of body and soul and then, via putrefaction, of the body’s integrity.  

Miller is absolutely correct to note the uncanny and horrifying prospect of the body’s “parthibity,” but in placing the head in a list of other parts—hands, ears, eyes—as if it were merely one part among many, he overlooks the fundamental role of the head, and therefore the primacy of significance in its severance. The head, in modern, as in medieval, imagination is “tanta corporis portione” [a very important part], as Abbo of Fleury writes with understatement in his vita of Saint Edmund, English king and martyr. This Latin vita (ca. 987), and Æthelric of Eynsham’s Old English version (ca. 990) based upon it, contain nuanced presentations of the theme of beheading, but before turning to Edmund and his noble, severed, lost, found, reattached, incorruptible, skeletonized, severed, stolen, unreturned head, it is worth re-examining the polyvalence of beheading

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1 The role of the head as “tanta corporis portione” [a very important part] (ca/11–2), is from Abbo’s vita of Edmund, discussed by Faulkner, 43, in this volume.


3 Miller, Anatomy of Disgust, 27.

4 For dating, see Faulkner, 50, in this volume.
and its roots in the importance of the head, itself, to medieval conceptions of humanity.

In this volume, severed heads serve a remarkably broad semantic range. They appear as deeply embodied (Leech, Boyer), ambiguously fleshy (Coleman), and ethereally disembodied (Cervone). They are granted voices (Faulkner), robbed of voices (Leech), and allowed to speak through mute presence (Tracy, Cervone, Boyer). They are horrifying (Coleman, Boyer) or humorous (Massey), themselves noble (Fleck), conferring nobility on others (Ward), or degrading (Boyer). They respond to literary tropes (Tracy, Cooper-Romato, Massey), and contemporary execution practices (Cooper-Romato, Fleck). They are supernatural (Cervone, Herron) and sacred (Faulkner), or disenchantingly neither (Tracy, Massey). They deeply engage with their own cultural moment (Faulkner) and its politics (Fleck, Gates, Herron), or resonate long after it is past (Coleman, Cervone). They subvert the power structure (Fleck) or reify it (Boyer, Herron, Tracy). Beheading is a beginning (Herron) or transformative (Ward) or permanent (Tracy) or atemporal to the point of impossibility (Masclandaro). There is, in short, no such thing as "the role" of the severed head in medieval and early modern culture. Rather, there is a great diversity of roles (speaking and non-speaking parts, alike) played by severed heads. As Caroline Walker Bynum writes of the place of the body in the Middle Ages:

It would be no more correct to say that medieval doctors, rabbis, alchemists, prostitutes, weavers, preachers, and theologians had "a" concept of "the body" than it would be to say that Charles Darwin, Beatrix Potter, a poacher, and the village butcher had "a" concept of "the rabbit."6

So too, this collection establishes resolutely that there is no singular "medieval view" of decapitation or of the resulting severed head. Such variation is the result of the great importance of the head itself, too cen-

tral to medieval understandings of humanity to be reduced, even in its severance, to a single meaning or essentialized trope.

Yet in order to establish the centrality of the head to medieval notions of the human self, it may be expedient to look away from humanity to the omnipresent monsters appearing in all media and in all contexts, functioning throughout the period as a point of comparison against which people were able to define themselves and establish their identity.7 Medieval monsters are constructed in a variety of ways, including hybridity, the addition and subtraction of parts, and dwarfism/gigantism (as with the several accounts of giants in this volume, including those found in Boyer, Tracy, and Ward), but above all it is the head that forms the basis for such figures' monstrosity. The Old English Wonders of the East, a sort of encyclopedia of monsters (bound in its earliest extant version with Beowulf in British Library, Cotton Vitellius A.xv), is roughly contemporary with the vita of Edmund, and so provides a good point of comparison. It contains, in addition to purely bestial wonders like the burning hens, a number of human wonders (about sixteen). Of these, fully half deviate from the "norm"—that is, their English audience—primarily through alteration to their heads. The cynocephalus is monstrous for having the head of a dog (and a horse's mane and a bear's tusks; they also breathe fire—all of which are deviations located on the head), though the rest of its body is apparently human. The homodubii bears two faces on a single head. The panotii has extraordinarily large ears. The people whose eyes shine brightly have, of course, eyes that shine brightly in their head; and so on. Even among the bestial wonders, there is a focus on the head. There are two-headed serpents, two-headed "inconceivable beasts," and asses with huge ox horns.8

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7 It should be noted that medieval artists and authors were well aware of Classical motifs of decapitation. One Anglo-Saxon image survives, for example, of Persus holding the severed head of Medusa. It appears in an astrological context, in an illustration of the constellation of Perses. It lacks any particular visceral punch, perhaps resulting from being several steps removed from the event—it is an image of a constellation of an ancient Greek narrative, rather than a present or recent or local event. See British Library, Cotton Tiberius B.v, f. 34 (See note 10 for more on this manuscript). See also British Library, Harley 2506, f. 37 (image online at: http://prodiv.b.uk/illcat/ILLUMIN.ASPTSize-mid&lllt=9984) for a tenth-century French cognate.

8 For a more extensive discussion of the role of monsters in establishing human identity, as well as a bibliography on the subject, see Asa Simon Mittman and Susan M. Kim, "Monsters and the Exotic in Early Medieval England," Literature Compass 6 (2009): 10.111.
The *blemmye* is among the most well-known of the "human monsters" (to borrow Foucault's phrase) in large measure owing to the compelling illumination accompanying its description in the Vitellius manuscript and, even more so, its image in the slightly later Cotton Tiberius B. vii bilingual (Old English and Latin) *Marvels of the East*. In both images, the figure is turned toward the viewer, whereas all other images are shown in at least partial profile. This is most likely owing to the *blemmye*’s curious deformity. As the *Wonders* explains:

Ponne syndon operæ eadum sud from b[r]ixon[te on Pan beð [men] buton heedful Pa habbað on hyra brestum beora eagan 7 mud by seconde eaha fota lange 7 eahal fota brade.

[Then there are other islands south from Brixonites on which are men without heads. They have on their breasts their eyes and mouth. They are eight feet long and eight feet broad].

Since the *blemmye* cannot turn its face away from the viewer without obscuring it entirely, the frontal torso instead bears the full face. And here, the viewer should pull up short: In both of these manuscripts (as well as the later Oxford, Bodleian Library, Bodley MS 614), the images present not merely the eyes and mouth called for in the text, but the entire head, complete with hair, brows, eyes, nose, ears and mouth, nasolabial folds and a delineated philtrum. Between the shoulders of the Tiberius *blemmye*, a small arc defines the top of the head that is not there. Similarly, the top of the Vitellius *blemmye*’s body (because, of course, it has no head) is crowned with what may be a tuft of saffron-colored hair. The result is

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11 *Vitellius Axx. Wonders*, f. 57r-59v. Transcription and translation mine, with Susan Kim. Note that, as the manuscript contains no diacritical marks, none are added here.

12 For a more complete discussion of this figure and the complete nature of its head, see Asa Simon Mittman and Susan Kim, *Inconceivable Beasts: The ‘Wonders of the East’ in the Beowulf Manuscript* (Tempe: The ACMRS, 2012), chapter on “Naked Monsters.”

that this monster, defined by his very lack of a head, nonetheless seems to possess one.

These resolutely headed, defiantly headed, impossibly and yet clearly headed figures ask the question: Can a body even be a body without a head? Or is the head so vital and integral to the understanding of the human body that without it the body ceases to be human and ceases, therefore, to be a human body?

The frequency with which monsters’ abnormality is located in the head demonstrates the head’s central role in defining a figure. This carries over to fully human figures, as discussed throughout this volume. For example, it is the central importance of the head that allowed, as Fleck argues, for Sir Walter Raleigh to turn his execution into a staged drama, through which he carefully manipulated his audience and thereby regained his place as a popular hero.15

"his body showeth us"16

If a body without a head is not human, not a body, what is the audience to make of all the cephaloporic saints of medieval *vitae*? The trope of the cephaloporic saint is quite common, as writers of this collection have pointed out. As Henri Moretus Plantin writes, “il est certain que la céphalophorie est le prodige le plus fréquemment rapporté dans la littérature hagiographique” [It is certain that the cephalopore is the most frequently recounted miracle in hagiographic literature].17 Likewise, there are innumerable images of cephalophores, such as those arranged across the front of the thirteenth-century reliquary of the martyr-saints Lucianus, Maxianus and Julianus from Beauvais, created for Sainte-Chapelle18 [Fig. 10]. The presence of a large number of cephaloporic saints in medieval French art is perhaps due to the headlessness of Saint Denis, the

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15 Fleck, n. in this volume.


"ANSWERING THE CALL OF THE SEVERED HEAD"

incorrupt, showing no trace of the cruel tortures inflicted on Edmund. A
series of miracles followed."

In this case, the beheading allows for positive transformation, as the
defeated king becomes the victorious martyr and saint. On a greater scale,
Herron offers an insightful reinterpretation of Macbeth’s death. He ques-
tions the traditional assumptions by asking, “Does Macbeth’s death augur
only further disaster and revolt, or also opportunity, light, and optimism
amid the oppressive darkness, Celtic twilight, and political cynicism that
otherwise pervades the drama?” His answer is no: “Macbeth’s lopped-off
head and the soldiers who die fighting him are analogous to seeds promis-
ing new life.”

Faulkner argues that Ælfric’s Vita of St. Edmund is not simply one of
his vitae of Saints, but a translation commissioned as companion piece to
Abbo’s vita, probably written very shortly after Abbo completed his Passio.
The passage from Ælfric’s Vita of Edmund containing the quest to find
the king’s missing head is central to the present argument. It has already been
“struck off,” an action that curiously happens twice:

Pa gesah hingwar se arleame flot-man þeet se æpela cyning noldre crieste wíð-
sacan ac mid amnedum geleæfan hine æfre clypode het hine þa þealfhātan
and þa hæðenan swa dydon Betwix þum þe he clypode to crieste þagat þa
tugon þa harþënan þone hæl ing to skege and mid anum swencæ slogom hígon
of þeet heaðad and his sawl ðipode gesægæ to criste.

[When Hingwar [Hinguar], the wicked seaman, saw that the noble king
would not deny Christ, but with steadfast faith ever called upon Him, then
he commanded men to behead him, and the heathen did so. For while he
was yet calling upon Christ, the heathen drew away the saint to slay him,
and with one blow struck off his head, and his soul departed joyfully to
Christ].

Because of the curious phrasing of the passage, Edmund is already
beheaded (“the heathen did so”) when his head is “struck off.” This effect
is echoed in the images of Pierpont Morgan Library, MS M.736, a lav-
ishly illuminated manuscript containing among other texts the Offices,
Miracles, and Abbo’s vita of Edmund, made in Bury St. Edmunds, ca. 1130.

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10 Boyer, 154, in this volume.
11 Faulkner, 40, in this volume.
12 Herron, 262; 265, in this volume.
13 Faulkner, 50, in this volume.
14 Skeat, Ælfric’s Lives, 322–23. Skeat does not provide diacritic marks here, so I will not add them.
15 For further information on this manuscript, see the entry for Pierpont Morgan Library, Manuscript M.736 in the Morgan’s online catalog, Consol. (no date) <http://mu.
 Folio 13r, part of a lengthy prefatory cycle of images, depicts the taking of Edmund by the Vikings [Fig. 11]. His body is bent over, but it is clear that were he to stand erect (as on the facing folio), he would tower over his captors. On each of the first several folios, he wears different, elaborate robes. On 13r, three Vikings have pulled his outer garments over his head, while a fourth (visually doubled, appearing on both 12v and 13r in nearly identical positions and poses, and yet again on 13v) raises a club over his head to abuse the king, already humiliated by his undignified position. The green robes are pulled up over his head, and his arms are apparently lost somewhere in their folds. With the club-wielding figure in the pose of executioner, with the king, bent forward as if to receive the fatal blow, and with his head lost, replaced by the swirl of fabric, this seems a scene both of decapitation and of a figure already having lost his head.

And yet, the actual scene of decollation does not appear until folio 14v [Fig. 12]. The illuminator has gone to great pains to associate these two scenes. The figures of Edmund on 13r and 14v are mirror images, each framed by a green box against a royal blue square, each bounded on the lower edge with a series of small green, grassy scallops. Edmund’s robes are the same in each of these scenes, though in the actual beheading scene they have been returned to their proper arrangement. His head, of course, has not. It hangs suspended, frozen, no longer attached, but not yet on the ground. Perhaps this allowed an audience two and a half centuries after Edmund’s actual death to experience a greater sense of immediacy, of contact with the event and therefore with the sainted king. His mute presence speaks volumes, more positively but no more palpably that that of Boccaccio’s Lorenzo, as discussed by Leech.\(^{15}\)

Returning to the image of Edmund’s beheading [Fig. 12], there is a curious absence at the center of this image. It contains neither beheaded body nor disembodied head. The tip of the executioner’s sword is perilously close, but even that hangs below the precise center. This lack at the heart of the image, conversely balanced by the text’s double-beheading of the king, suggests the illuminator’s avoidance of the actual moment of the beheading, a terror that would have been perhaps poorly conveyed in the manuscript’s static and hieratic style.

Just as significantly, the headless figure of Edmund in the illumination— suspended between life and death, the body still standing under its own power—continued to speak to later audiences, reflecting their concerns as well as those of the ninth century. Cervone similarly notes:

*The cephalophoric figure of Anne Boleyn represents the sixteenth century as an iconic era for those who came later. Because she is both enduring and complex, Anne, via her headless ghost, helps both her English and American admirers connect to a past they feel is their own.*\(^{16}\)

However, in these various accounts, the headless figure endures as a cultural symbol through repeated representation. Masciandaro’s essay in this volume argues for the basic impossibility of the depiction of beheading, a counter-intuitive notion that at first glance might seem to be refuted by the images from Edmund’s *vita*. He writes that the realm of beheading

is a movement beyond time and a time beyond movement, an impossible place where what will happen has already happened and what has happened has not. Or, in Jean Luc-Marion’s terms, beheading is a *saturated phenomenon*, something unforeseeable, unbearable, absolute, and unseeable.\(^{17}\)

The Morgan manuscript, in fact, matches this description quite well. In the pre-martyrdom scenes, the decapitation that the audience knows to be coming has visually already happened, with the headless, hunched form of the abused king on folio 13r. The actual scene of the beheading on folio 14v shows not the instant of the beheading, which Masciandaro presents throughout as “impossible,” but the moment just after the fatal stroke. He writes:

*Beheading severs the space around it, producing in its *before* the presence of something that already has/can never happen and in its *after* the presence of something that did not/never stops happening. The synthesis of this duration, grounded in the integrity of the stroke, may thus produce the idea of a doubling or multiplication of the beheaded’s head, as if decapitation would disclose in reality the capital organ that it requires to be withstood, another head from whose perspective the previous is relinquished.*\(^{18}\)

The image on folio 14v lacks a representation of the actual moment of beheading, the most vital and quintessential moment in the narrative, giving the “after” of an event that the viewer never sees happen. However, the

\(^{15}\) Leech, 115-36, in this volume.

\(^{16}\) Cervone, 292, in this volume.


\(^{18}\) Masciandaro, 31, in this volume.
frozen status of the beheading scene ensures that the moment of beheading never quite ends. The static, dignified representation of this moment of violence and horror ennobles the scene. The Anglo-Saxons frequently celebrated glorious defeat (more notably in *The Battle of Maldon*). However, as Gates demonstrates, the same motif can bear sharply different implications. The beheading of the traitorous Eadric, as written by a sympathizer of the Conqueror, allows him to serve as a synecdoche for the English, but not for the justly defeated nation.  

The text of Edmund's *vita* also denies the actual decollation as "something that did not" happen, as the head becomes reattached to the body. Tracy writes at the opening of her essay, it seems as if "nothing is as final as beheading," and yet, as she notes, in many accounts beheading is anything but final. In the vita of Edmund, for example, all that remains to mark the tragic and violent event is "an extremely thin red crease, like a scarlet thread."  

"and his neck was healed which before was cut through"

The fate of these figures relies on the nature of their existence as literary and artistic [re]creations. While Holofernes is forever suspended between life and death in the famous images by Caravaggio, Gentileschi, and Mantegna, and while Edmund's head is forever frozen in midair in the Morgan manuscript [Fig. 12], real heads fall, hit the earth, and die, ultimately and finally. Some figures, like Raleigh, straddle the divide, using their real beheading as a mythic stage, at least as the events are themselves recorded in texts. It is here that the saint's life is at great variance with lived reality, which more closely accords with Tracy's reading of Malory. In the *Morte Darthur*, when Gawain accidentally beheads a woman, she remains dead. As Tracy writes, "[i]n the very dangerous world of fifteenth-century England, human heads do not reattach, nor do they talk." The "severed" heads of Ugolino and Ruggieri in Cantos 32 and 33 of Dante's *Inferno* (in this case, not technically severed, but appearing as disembodied because the figures are buried to their necks in ice) are, as Coleman argues, played for shock and horror, not redemptive miracle, as one of the heads tries to cannibalize the other. As he writes, "if Ugolino could not tear at Ruggieri's bloody skull with his teeth, much imagery and meaning could be lost." Perhaps Margery Kempe splits the difference, offering images of martyrdom that, in Cooper-Rompeto's argument, reflect "a combination of both hagiographic patterning and historical execution practices of the late Middle Ages."  

Edmund's head, on the other hand, is reattached, "and his neck was healed which before was cut through," as *Alfric's vita* has it. This is not what happens, though, when heads are actually severed, as documented in real, present, modern beheadings. Photographs survive from the early twentieth century, such as that appropriately reproduced in Richard Vinen's *A History in Fragments,* and, yet more recently, a search of the *New York Times* reveals more contemporary accounts than ought be conceivable. The most well-publicized recent accounts are of Americans in Iraq (especially Nicholas Berg, a private contractor, killed in 2004). However,
similar accounts are hardly restricted to Iraq; they range from Pakistan\textsuperscript{43} to Russia\textsuperscript{44} to India\textsuperscript{45} to Somalia\textsuperscript{46} to Mexico\textsuperscript{47} to Puerto Rico\textsuperscript{48} to Virginia\textsuperscript{49} to California\textsuperscript{50} to New York.\textsuperscript{51} The abhorrent practice of decapitation can no more be relegated to the historical past than to a geographic distance. Now, of course, these modern actions are not sanitized by the beautifying forces of poetry or manuscript illumination. Instead, they are videtaped and posted online. While the videos themselves frequently disappear from most sites, accounts of them endure. In 2004, for example, a video was posted of three Kurds, supposed members of the Kurdistan Democratic Party, being beheaded in Iraq. The \textit{Times} account reads as follows:

The video shows in low-resolution black and white a close-up shot of each of the three men as they state their names in Kurdish. A man wearing shorts, his face off screen, then takes a large knife to each of their necks and vigorously slices off their heads as blood pours onto the ground. After each killing, he places the bloody head on the back of each body.\textsuperscript{52}

As in Edmund's \textit{Vita}, each head is placed back on its decapitated body, and yet, of course, here no miracle intervenes. The heads do not reattach. The wounds do not heal. As with the woman beheaded in the \textit{Morte Darthur}, the corpses stay dead.\textsuperscript{53} Jeffrey Jerome Cohen begins an influential essay on \textit{Monster Theory} by arguing that "We live in a time of monsters."\textsuperscript{54} Amazingly, horrifyingly, this is also a time of beheadings. Such a realization robs a study of beheadings in the Middle Ages and early modern period of the illicit thrill that comes with the study of things horrible-yet-utterly-distant. Whether these videos, as abhorrent as most viewers find them, confer glory or shame on those wielding the knives is a matter of perspective, dependent on the codes of conduct in a given society and the individual circumstances. As Ward argues, most knightly acts of beheading ennoble the warrior, but in \textit{Octavian Imperator}, for example, they do not.

\textit{"that it might not be buried"}\textsuperscript{55}

Despite the prevalence of the motif of the severed head, and the actual practice, there are comparatively few \textbf{actual} medieval and early modern examples surviving.\textsuperscript{56} Most of the cases discussed here and elsewhere are purely literary, were lost over time, or, according to the logic of their own narratives, eliminated, as is the case of the formerly severed head of Edmund, miraculously reattached. In a French example, located in the crypt of Saint-Denis (a doubly appropriate location: a traditional burial site in a church dedicated to France's great beheaded patron saint), we see Edmund's severed head carried in procession.\textsuperscript{57} It is gendy cradled in swaths of drapery as a cleric carrying a large processionary cross leads its bearer toward the door of the church. Still, for those familiar with the full narrative, this moment is not as final as it might seem. We know that the
head will only be detached briefly. To seek verification of Edmund's story would be to seek an integral form, not the image found at Saint-Denis.

The most ancient of accounts discussed here, however, is the one that provides a superabundance of evidence for its verifiability. Masiandaro discusses the beheading of John the Baptist, a story salacious enough to have invited representation by several of the more sensationalist, sensual, and severe artists of the canon—Caravaggio, van der Weyden, Bellini, Titian, Cranach, Dürer, Tiepolo, Verrocchio, Rembrandt, Moreau, Beardsey. Even the staid Giotto provides a certain excess by presenting the severed head on its platter twice in one image, offered both to Herod and Herodias.

In addition to these artistic renderings, however, there remarkably also survive more than a dozen actual severed heads purported to have belonged to John the Baptist, impossible yet there, tangible, wrapped in silver and gold. These reliquaries, compelling as they are, have garnered very little scholarly attention. As Ilene Forstyth notes of the genre:

Body-part reliquary images, by virtue of their style and/or their materials, often fall outside the canons we have constructed for the art of Greece and Rome or of the Renaissance [...] The insistent presence of these reliquary objects is frankly unsettling.

Isabel Combs Stuebe writes similarly of the head relics of St. John the Baptist:

reforms of the Church and destruction of idolatrous images were responsible for the loss of a number of representations of the Johannisschüssel while the gruesome character of the subject has hardly contributed to the preservation or popularity of its depiction in recent times. Examples outside ecclesiastical institutions are generally relegated to museum storerooms or dark corners in the rooms of private collections, regardless of the artistic quality. They are seldom photographed or published so that it is almost impossible to ascertain how many representations are extant.

More recently, two state-of-the-field essays on body part reliquaries were published together in Gesta, though neither deals with any of these images. Still, heads appear as a major theme in both articles, with six of eight images depicting bust reliquaries, like that of Saint Eustace in the British Museum [Figs. 13/14].

Just as heads were of particular importance in the periods, just as images of decapitation remain more troubling than other scenes of dismemberment, so too, head reliquaries, especially those revealing the skull, induce a sense of horror (at least in modern viewers, though a painting by Erhard Altdorfer suggests that sixteenth-century viewers were moved to devotion, not revulsion, before an image of the Baptist "painted with such gruesome realism as to suggest the actual presence of the severed head, rather than a polychromed "Johannisschüssel"). It is not surprising that so many foundations would wish to house the head of John, rendered more important than other relics of the Baptist because it is the focus of his martyrdom. The importance of the head is further reinforced by its association with head-related miracles, such as the curing of headaches. Still, the overabundance, the presence of several such heads merits attention. Indeed, as Stuebe writes:

as early as the twelfth century [...] Guibert de Nogent [...] stated that the head was claimed in Amiens, Constantinople and S. Silvestro in Capite in Rome. By the end of the fifteenth century the controversial relic was venerated in so many places in Europe that the matter had become ridiculous. Deploiting the contradictions within the Church, John Calvin named no less than thirteen churches, all of which allegedly possessed various and conflicting parts of St. John's head, while S. Silvestro in Capite supposedly had the entire relic.

Perhaps the version (if one can speak of heads as having "versions") in Amiens is the most haunting [Fig. 15]. It presents a human skull emerging from a golden platter that looks much like a paten, itself set on a red velvet pillow complete with fleur-de-lis and tassels. The eye holes are covered over in what look like leather patches, giving the skull the vague appearance of sleep, as if this death's head might yet prove animate, might

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21 Stuebe, "The Johannisschüssel," 4. Stuebe provides a list of these churches and their relics in her note 23.
complete the story by evoking, as all reanimated saints do, the ultimate resurrection.

Faith made the mutual impossibility of these skulls irrelevant, as each anonymous skull became what it had to be—a conduit to the divine. As Peter Brown writes in his seminal study of the *The Cult of the Saints*:

The cult gloried in particularity. *Hic locus est*: “Here is the place,” or simply *hic*, is the refrain that runs through the inscriptions on the early martyrs’ shrines [...] The holy was available in one place, and in each such place it was accessible to one group in a manner in which it could not be accessible to anyone situated elsewhere.  

In a sense, *Arthur and Gorlagon*, Massey’s text—a parodic work of medieval border fiction—can be seen as conjointing many of the trends present throughout this volume and the primary texts it considers. His explication of the peculiar tale of Gorlagon, a king-turned-werewolf-turned-king, and his treacherous, adulterous wife, culminates in the revelation of a severed head. His wife is weeping, forced to repeatedly kiss the embalmed head of her dead lover every time Gorlagon kisses his new wife in enforced penance for her unfaithfulness. This head is physically palpable and dead and silent, but nonetheless meaningful. Its revelation is clearly a moment of horror, compounded by the revolting echo of once-warm passion. And yet, in Massey’s reading—based on close observation of the manuscript—the whole text was a performance, a sort of set-up for a joke, “part of a gross ‘reveal’ that abruptly drives home the parodic nature of the interlude.” Filled with feasts that should not have been eaten (Arthur has sworn not to eat until he figures out “artem et ingenium mentemque femineam” [the wiles, nature, and mind of woman]), *Gorlagon* was likely intended as a comically inappropriate piece of dinner theater. The revelation of the severed head while the audience eats would be in intentionally bad taste.

But, of course, that head is just a prop in the play, tangible but fake, much like the Green Knight’s head, kicked down the hall by dinner guests, as Tracy explains. Its role highlights the function of so many of these heads—humorous or deadly serious. Each is, in its way, a device, a prop holding up the rest of the narrative. Even the most viscerally present accounts of beheading—those that appear not in 1000-year-old manuscripts but on the covers of today’s newspaper—are props in a macabre narrative, constructed for the cameras.

In Aelfric’s *Vita* of Edmund, the king’s followers cry out for him, “Where art thou now, comrade?” The king’s severed head responds, “Here, here, here.” These heads call out, and modern audiences answer them with continued attention. As Regina Janes notes, “while severed heads always speak, they say different things in different cultures.” In each case, though, as in the ancient gladiatorial “games,” the genuine violence to which these heads bear witness is not a break from the show; it is the show. It is the nature of the act of decapitation, impossible to comprehend but not to enact, to be a spectacle, polyvalent, utterly arresting, and ultimately affirming of embodied existence.

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57 Massey, 194, in this volume.
58 Massey, 201, in this volume.
59 Massey, 199-250, in this volume.
60 Translation from Massey, 188, in this volume.


15. Reliquary of the head of John the Baptist, Amiens Cathedral, 19th century replica of reliquary brought from Constantinople after 4th Crusade. Photo: Rafael Knops.