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'Fro Paris to Inglond'? The danse macabre in text and image in late-medieval England

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CONCLUSION

The main aim of this thesis has been to investigate the development of the *danse macabre* theme in late-medieval England, from John Lydgate's translation of the French *Danse Macabre* poem to the spread of the theme into drama, painting, print, and even sculpture and tomb iconography. Vital for assessing the nature and importance of the Dance of Death, however, is an understanding of how this English interpretation of the theme relates to other examples of the *danse* on the Continent, most notably in France where Lydgate originally found the inspiration for his poem. For this reason, the scope of the thesis is in reality much wider than the title implies.

As we have seen, the *danse macabre* is but one of several *contemptus mundi* themes that were in circulation across medieval Europe, albeit with both regional variations and changes in perspective over time. There are earlier poems in both Latin and the vernacular that describe the state of the body after death, including dialogues between the soul and the body or between the body and the worms consuming it, of which some were depicted in art. These various themes may have influenced the development of the *danse* in different ways: the story of the Three Living and the Three Dead as both a dialogue and as a visual motif that was effective in transmitting its message even without text; the *Vado Mori* verses as a monologue in which various representatives lament their imminent demise (rather like in the early Latin-German *Totentanz*); and the cadaver or *transi* effigy, which often combines vivid images of decomposition with verses in which the dead remind the living of their own end, 'Sum quod eris', or 'as I am now so will you be' – a much older idea also voiced by the Three Dead and by the dead dancers. An important parallel is the *Ars Moriendi* tradition, which offers guidance on how to prepare for death. The increasingly horrific – and even violent – depiction of death in the fifteenth century does not suggest so much a greater obsession with mortality amongst the population at large, however, but rather the opposite: the fact that moralists felt the need to emphasise and reiterate warnings about man's inevitable fate indicates that contemporaries were too much inclined to focus on earthly pleasures instead. In the case of the *danse*, a normally joyful but worldly pastime is transformed into a horrifying and deadly encounter.

The performative nature of the *danse* is yet another interesting aspect, both in relation to its origins and to its subsequent development. Encounters between Death and the living are a regular feature in medieval drama, from the death of Herod in mystery plays to morality plays such as *Everyman*. These raise the question of whether the *danse* may have had its origins in some type of performance, as has often been suggested. Related to this is the question of whether the original idea was that of a dialogue between Death and the living, or an actual dance in which the dead compel the living to join them. The latter scenario may yet have Death as the key orchestrator to whose tune all dancers – both living and dead – must dance; an image that we find not only in the Lübeck *Totentanz* where a flute-playing corpse figure leads the cortège of dancers much like the Pied Piper, but also in the enigmatic 'Imago mortis' woodcut in the *Nuremberg Chronicle*. One may hypothesise about the performative nature of the extant texts or of the surviving murals – the latter with their sense of movement, body language and gestures, that may have taken their inspiration from drama yet also have inspired performances in their turn. Surviving records indicate that the *danse* was indeed performed at times, yet there is insufficient proof that the theme had its origins in some form of dramatic enactment.

Until now, scholars have been unable to offer a satisfactory explanation for the long silence between Jehan le Fèvre's first mention of 'la dance de Macabré' in his 1376 poem and the creation of the mural in 1424-25. If le Fèvre was referring to a *Danse Macabre* poem of his own composition, then that work has been lost (which was the fate of all too many medieval texts). Yet it is proposed here that such a lost poem – either by le Fèvre or another version that Le Fèvre was probably familiar with – formed the basis for the anonymous *Danse Macabre* poem that was adapted for the mural at Les Innocents and that Lydgate subsequently translated into Middle English. This extant *Danse* still contains the remnants of opening verses that address each preceding character; a feature it shares with the Spanish *Dança General de la Muerte*, which was itself probably derived from a French prototype, although further research is needed to try and understand the relationship between these two strands of the *danse macabre* tradition. As a future project for literary scholars, a comparison between the *Dança*, the extant *Danse Macabre* poem and le Fèvre's other poetry may help shed further light on the still nebulous origins of the theme.

The historical situation in Paris in 1424 – most notably the death of Charles VI in 1422 and the English occupation of the city – explains how some anomalies and allusions in the *Danse* at Les Saints Innocents were probably introduced for political reasons. As we have seen, one of these anomalies is the glaring omission of the duke: a figure that occurs in both the *Dança*, the *Totentanz*, and in at least one early illumination cycle (*i.e.* Morgan MS M.359), but not in the mural nor in Lydgate's translation. If the mural did indeed contain a cryptoportrait of Charles VI and anti-Orléans references, then it must have been a deliberate adaptation of an earlier didactic poem to suit a political purpose, with the most likely patron being Philip the Good, duke of Burgundy. This makes the *Danse Macabre* poem as we know a palimpsest of an earlier, lost poem possibly (but not necessarily) by le Fèvre himself; a poem that was sufficiently well known to inspire a Spanish translation, although once the *danse* had risen to unprecedented fame through its inclusion in the mural it was the revised poem that became the accepted version, superseding the earlier text. By omitting the addresses to preceding characters and changing *le mort* into Death personified, Lydgate's *Dance of Death* was thus another stage in this process of adaptating the now redundant prototype.

Whether Lydgate was aware of the political connotations of the French poem and the mural is hard to establish, but it seems likely. The second stanza of his added 'Verba translatoris' reads very much like a lament for the sudden death of Henry V and in addition he chose to introduce a named contemporary character – Henry V's tregetour – in his own poem. The *Danse Macabre* mural in Paris was instrumental in the spread of the theme throughout France and beyond, culminating in Guy Marchant's woodcut editions which themselves served as a model for subsequent schemes, including the mural at Stratford-upon-Avon. Yet it was the incorporation of Lydgate's *Dance* in John Carpenter's painted scheme at Pardon Churchyard in London that made the theme known across England, not by the title 'Dance of Macabré' used by Lydgate but by the name derived from its location at Old St Paul's Cathedral. The fact that a reference to the 'Dance of Paul's' can already be found in a Bristol will in the 1440s shows how rapidly its fame had spread, for although Carpenter's scheme cannot be securely dated it was probably created some time in the early 1430s or even the late 1420s; Carpenter himself died in 1442, but a 1430 licence for a chantry priest in a nearby chapel illustrates his interest in Old St Paul's at this time. The question is whether Carpenter's scheme was based on a revised version of Lydgate's poem in which civic representatives predominated, as has been claimed, or

whether it followed the A version with its allusions to Henry V and his tregetour. If the schemes in Paris and London did contain cryptoportraits of the two recently dead monarchs, it would support the tradition of cryptoportraits of the by then likewise deceased Sigismund and Albrecht in the *Totentanz* mural of *c.*1440 at Basel.

Crucial though Carpenter's scheme was for the dissemination of the Dance of Death theme in England, Lydgate need not have envisaged such a scheme when he first composed his poem. There is also no evidence for the traditional assumption that he subsequently revised the text specifically for this project, nor are there any records of what Carpenter's painted *Dance* looked like or which characters it comprised. As we have seen, there is great variation not just between the so-called A and B versions, but also amongst the different B copies themselves. Several of the new or revised stanzas in the B version are unlikely to be by Lydgate, albeit that further textual analysis is needed to determine the extent of later variance and interpolation. There are also more extant copies of the A text, which is moreover the version that Richard Tottel chose to use for his 1554 edition of the *Dance* as an appendix to Lydgate's *Fall of Princes*. Tottel's choice of text is another argument in favour of the A version if this relatively late appearance of the *Dance* in print was indeed motivated by antiquarian interest in the Pardon Churchyard scheme, which had been destroyed only five years earlier.

Just as happened in France and elsewhere, the rapid dissemination of the *Dance of Death* in art is evidence of its appeal to patrons. It is doubtful that Lydgate's poem was the immediate inspiration for the many ways in which the theme was visualised by English artists, or even if the scheme at Pardon Churchyard served as the actual model. The recorded Bristol cloth hanging with its painted 'Dawnse of Powlys' was probably a variation on the theme as it was understood by its donor William Wytteney. The same applies to Thomas Cooke's lost brass at Ludlow, which according to his 1513 will was to depict himself, his wife and a figure of Death 'after the daunce of powles' with a text scroll bearing the familiar 'as I am now ...' warning.

Wytteney's and Cooke's wills are but two examples that testify to the appeal that the *Dance* held for donors; there are other, extant monuments showing *Dance of Death* influences, such as the brass of James Gray (d. 1591) at Hunsdon (Hertfordshire) or the much earlier brass of John Rudyng (d. 1481) at Biggleswade (Bedfordshire). Imported *Danse Macabre* or *Totentanz* prints from the Continent probably served as inspiration for artists or for such donors as Ralph Hamsterley (d. 1518), whose shroud brass at Oddington (Oxfordshire) is an unusual example of the 'verminous' variety in England. Despite there being no early printing tradition of Dance of Death texts and images in England, the theme found its way into other media, such as stained glass at Norwich or sculpture as at Windsor, Coventry and – if we include Scotland – Rosslyn Chapel: evidence of the impact the theme had on an unusually wide variety of artists and patrons.

The (destroyed) misericords in the church of St Michael in Coventry are important as English examples of the *Dance* not only because of their iconography or the relatively rare use of *danse macabre* imagery in choir-stalls across Europe, but also because of their association with late-medieval drama. The misericords were probably once situated in a chapel used by the Drapers' Guild, who were responsible for staging the lost Doomsday play in the famous Coventry Corpus Christi pageants. The misericord carvings, which are known to have featured the Last Judgement as well as juxtapositions of the Dance of Death and the Corporal Acts of Mercy, would have fitted well with the Guild's interests. For comparison, two of the plays in the

extant late-medieval Chester Cycle also appear to contain allusions to the Dance of Death that the playwrights expected their audiences to understand.

The Coventry misericords serve as further proof of the adaptability of the *danse macabre*, in this case in a combination with the Corporal Acts of Mercy. Quite apart from the political meanings it held at any time of its history, most notably in the Paris mural, the *danse* lent itself well to a juxtaposition with other moralising themes. For example, we know that the *Dance of Death* scheme in Stratford-upon-Avon also incorporated a separate cycle of the Seven Deadly Sins. Combining social satire with didactic lessons about sin and death, the *danse* characterises many social types by specific sins such as greed or pride. Yet it was also influenced by other popular medieval themes, such as the Ages of Man, and some of the characters in the *Dance* – most notably the child and the *amoureux* – were unmistakable representatives of specific Ages.

Words can be read in different ways by different people, and it is vital to remember when studying the poems that the *danse macabre* was not just a literary but also a visual theme. It was probably the combination of text and pictures – or, in the case of drama, actual performance – that provided the necessary clues to help readers or viewers appreciate the theme at any given time in its history. This is true as much of the lost *Danse Macabre* mural in Paris and of Carpenter's *Dance of Death* scheme in London as it is of other instances where references to the theme may not have been recognised or understood by later scholars. It is symptomatic that such references relied on medieval people's familiarity with the *danse*, whereas they can only be understood nowadays if we accept that the theme was indeed much better known in the late-medieval period than it is today. The importance of early *danse macabre* schemes, such as the snow figures of 1434-35 in Arras or the marginal decoration in BnF ms. 2535, is also often not registered by medievalists who mistake them for just common occurrences of an overly familiar medieval theme. This lack of understanding and the loss of so many medieval records, texts and art at the Reformation and long after have meant that we are no longer capable of grasping the full extent of knowledge and culture of the Middle Ages, and this includes an appreciation of the former importance of the *danse*.

There are many examples in literature and art that attest to a continuing interest in the Dance of Death and other *vanitas* lessons in the Middle Ages and beyond. What should not be forgotten is the fact that not only the forms of these lessons may differ, but also their messages. The story of the Three Living and the Three Dead originally conveyed a salutary warning about the need for repentance before it is too late; it is in the course of the fifteenth century that this warning loses its positive meaning and instead becomes one of sheer horror, especially in art where the dialogue is missing and the emphasis is instead on the terrifying appearance and aggressive nature of the Dead. The Triumph of Death (which was prevalent in Italy) illustrates the suppremacy of death over life, yet one also finds the positive message that fame is stronger yet. Many monuments aimed to show that death is merely a transition into a better life and that the corruption of the body constitutes only a temporary loss, pending the general resurrection on Judgement Day.

The *danse* likewise developed and changed over time. It probably began as an all-male theme comprising in particular clerical and courtly characters, the latter reminiscent of both the Three Living and of the doomed rulers and heroes in Boccaccio's *De Casibus Virorum Illustrium*; the latter text was subsequently adapted and expanded by Lydgate to illustrate how the mighty may fall. Yet in the course of the fifteenth century the *danse* came to include female characters as well as an

increasingly wider range of social types. The element of social and religious satire also grew stronger, at the expense of the moralising message of the *danse*, which is what we find in Holbein's woodcuts. A much later example of such a satirical approach is Thomas Rowlandson's *English Dance of Death*, which once more combines text and image, albeit that this work illustrates very much a revival of interest in the theme.

There is still a great fascination with the *danse* on the Continent, where monumental examples survive to this day. Yet in England the Dance of Death has become largely unknown or poorly understood theme, despite the fact that Francis Douce was one of the earliest scholars to take an interest. Too often the *danse* is studied in isolation, as just a text or a visual motif, and as national phenomenon without external influences. This also pertains to the English variant, the Dance of Death, of which there remain but few examples in art. Lydgate's poem was not just a translation but a link in the literary development of the theme; misericords and tomb monuments provide further evidence of its reception and interpretation. We may still not know whether the theme originated in France, Germany or elsewhere, or in what form. Much more work also remains to be done on such aspects as reception, dissemination, estates satire, and the relevance of the *querelle des femmes* to the *danse*. This thesis has shown the importance of studying and comparing the theme on an international scale. The *danse* may not always have inspired great poetry or great art, or even provided a very helpful view of late-medieval society. It may have been only one motif in a much wider range of death-related themes that emerged and developed in the course of the Middle Ages. Yet unlike the story of the Three Living and the Three Dead it never quite disappeared, even if it underwent many changes over time and generated yet new forms and motifs, such as Death and the Maiden.

Though an earlier version of the poem may have been in existence for decades, in 1420s Paris the *Danse Macabre* may have been the right text for the right circumstances at the right time, as Lydgate may have recognised when he adapted it for an English readership. From probably its earliest and best known public manifestation in the cemetery of Les Saints Innocents in Paris, the *danse* spread, evolved, and continued to inspire artists and writers until the present day; a development far beyond anything the unknown painter and poet could ever have imagined. Lydgate's *Dance of Death* is just one example of this dissemination, albeit a more important – and in many ways enigmatic – example than has hitherto been appreciated. What contemporary visitors to Les Saints Innocents and Pardon Churchyards saw and understood can only be guessed at; what later generations made of the *danse* on either side of the Channel is an entirely different matter.

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