Mixed Metaphors

Mixed Metaphors:
The *Danse Macabre* in Medieval and Early Modern Europe

Edited by

Sophie Oosterwijk and Stefanie Knöll

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Pl. 13. Death riding a bovine, in a cortege comprising *Eaige* (Age) as a man playing tambourine, *Maladie* (Disease) holding the banner of 'Atropos', and *Accident* as a man blowing a horn, illustration of Pierre Michault's *La Danse aux Aveugles* (Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, ms. fr. 1989, fol. 34r), late fifteenth century. © Bibliothèque nationale de France.

Pl. 14. Vincent of Kastav, *Danse Macabre* fresco on the west wall of the church of St Mary, Beram (Istria), 1474. Photo: Science and Research Centre, Koper.
Pl. 15. John of Kastav, *Danse Macabre* fresco in Holy Trinity church, Hrastovlje (Istria), 1490. Photo: Science and Research Centre, Koper.
Pl. 16. Death and the King, illumination in a French luxury *Danse Macabre* manuscript (Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, ms fr. 995, fol. 3r), early sixteenth century. © Bibliothèque nationale de France.

PREFACE

HARTMUT FREYTAG

A book like the present volume is long overdue, for it fills a serious lacuna in this field of study. *Mixed Metaphors* will not only benefit researchers but also the many aficionados of the *Danse Macabre*. This French term that has long since become familiar in all European languages reminds us of the famous cycle that was painted in 1424-25 on the walls of one of the charnel houses in the parish cemetery of Les Saints Innocents in Paris. It is this French mural that appears to have been the origin of all later artistic examples of a medieval motif that has proved to be as inspirational as no other from this period. If I may be permitted a pun, I would say that the *Danse Macabre* still has not died nearly six centuries after its first appearance on the scene.

If the *Danse Macabre* – also known as the Dance of Death, *danza de la muerte, dodendans, Totentanz, Dødedansen* or *Surmatants* – has had such a profound impact all over Europe from its emergence in the later fourteenth century until the present day, it is because text and image meet the criteria of a mass medium and have thus had a widespread impact. The reasons for this success are manifold. The *Danse Macabre* is easily understood by many different audiences because it encompasses both text and image, and even when one component is lacking the other still manages to fill the gap. Furthermore, the language of the *Danse Macabre* is not that of literary and academic texts – *viz.* Latin – but that of the vernacular, which means that nobody is excluded from the lesson transmitted through its words. The *Danse* is of its time, yet also timeless; it is valid for today and for eternity. In the face of plague, poverty, war and suffering in the world, it picks up on the individual and collective anxieties of mankind and by representing both physical and spiritual death it raises fear – but also hope. After all, the *Danse Macabre* never fails to remind us of salvation through Christ and the mercy of God as our final judge. The *Danse* thus appeals to the desire of each individual to fulfil his duty in *ordo christianus* for the benefit of the Christian community during his life on earth. This duty is based on a system of values that applies to all

mankind and thus transcends the social hierarchy – a system that nobody could ignore as it was in accordance with the religious beliefs of the time.

As a mass medium that was as familiar in the cities of late-medieval Europe from Paris and London to Basel and Lübeck as well as in remote areas, the *Danse Macabre* exhibits its migratory character. Meanwhile the *Danse* remains constant – but never identical – in its core message of *memento mori* (Remember that you must die). It changes according to location and language, it continues earlier forms of imagery and text, and soon sheds first the one and then the other medium, only to resume it later in another form. The *Danse* reduces and expands its repertoire of characters and contents, and in line with its adaptable character it always finds new and fascinating ways to bring across its key message. And it achieves all this *omnibus locis* (in all places), *omnibus linguis* (in all languages), and at the same time *omnibus mediis* (*i.e.* in text and image), in public as well as in private sacred and profane spaces, on a monumental scale as well as in manuscripts and in print. In its continuation of existing, and appropriation of new and newly combined forms and contents, the *Danse Macabre* is characterised by the principle of an *adaptatio continua*, the ability to change and adapt itself continuously.

It is the great merit of *Mixed Metaphors* that this volume addresses all the above characteristics of the *Danse Macabre*. As its editors, the art historians Sophie Oosterwijk and Stefanie Knöll have chosen English as today's scholarly *lingua franca* in order to reach the widest possible readership – rather in the spirit of the *Danse* itself – and moreover to inspire Anglo-American researchers who until recently showed a comparative lack of interest in the subject. An additional merit of this volume is that the contributors do not devote themselves to just one visual or textual source, or fix their attention solely on the dependence of one version on another, or confine themselves to general overviews of particular motifs. Neither do they address the tedious and unanswerable question of the etymology of the word *macabre* nor the problem of what came first – image or text. The present volume corresponds instead with the principle of an interdisciplinarity that transcends national boundaries. This principle is particularly appropriate not only for the subject but also for the many countries and academic disciplines brought together here. The complex title of 'Mixed Metaphors' likewise suits the *Danse Macabre* very well: it sums up facets of the paradoxical elements that are presented to the viewer in the chain of living and dead dancers.

In addition the title of the book outlines incongruities that are genre-specific: ambivalences, ambiguities, contrasts and contradictions that are all found in the incompatibility of transience and eternity, life and death.

The title ‘Mixed Metaphors’ also takes into account the principle of adaptability of the *Danse*, while the subtitle indicates not only the central theme but also the time frame and the geographical spread of the examples discussed in this book, *viz.* Europe in the Middle Ages and early modern era.

The contributions by the mostly younger and mid-career scholars in this volume who represent a multitude of languages and countries reflect how the *Danse Macabre* is a pan-European phenomenon that transcends linguistic and national boundaries. The multiple questions they address and their methodological starting points match the many disciplines they cover. They address specifically the *Danse Macabre* as well as wider issues, such as the components of dance, music and dialogue, the inversion of the natural order, violence, gender distinctions, iconographic and related aspects. Moreover, the book introduces sources that have often been neglected, such as the Istrian examples of the *Danse* in Slovenia, the ‘Representació de la Mort’ from Majorca, and a virtually unknown wall painting in a wooden church in Poland.

By addressing so many different aspects in their contributions the seventeen authors in this volume paint a diverse but also representative cycle that is symbolically reminiscent of its very subject in the number of dancers. In view of the cycle of man and death the *Danse Macabre* reminds both reader and viewer of the Last Judgement when God will determine eternal death and eternal life for all as He weighs justice against mercy, as symbolised by the figures 10 (justice) and 7 (mercy).

Editorial note

The editors would like to thank Sally Badham, Jon Bayliss, Mary Woodcock-Kroble, and the student-assistants at the University of Düsseldorf for their help with preparing images for this volume, and especially Tony Carr for meticulously compiling such a comprehensive index.

INTRODUCTION

SOPHIE OOSTERWIJK AND STEFANIE KNÖLL

In the beginning there was the author. All the evidence suggests that the now lost mural that was created in the cemetery of Les Saints Innocents in Paris in 1424-25 started with an image of the anonymous author who explained to the reader/viewer the nature of the work to follow: 'La dance macabre sappelle' (*the* Danse Macabre *it is called*). The Middle English poet John Lydgate went one step further in his *Dance of Death* by adding his own Preface to his adaptation of the French poem, referring to it as 'Macabrees daunce'.[1] Here it is the editors' task to introduce the theme.

The term 'macabre' is nowadays so familiar that it might seem to need no explanation; it is often used very loosely by the public and scholars alike without full understanding of its origins or meaning. The same applies to the *Danse Macabre*, a theme that most people *think* they know although they are likely to associate the *Danse* with much later interpretations of this medieval motif. There is the 1874 symphonic poem *La Danse Macabre* by the French composer Camille Saint-Saëns, which conjures up a vision of dancing skeletons fleeing back to their graves at the break of day, or Walt Disney's first Silly Symphony animation *The Skeleton Dance* of 1929, which presents a similar scene, albeit with different music. More recently still, there are the films of Tim Burton, while 'Gothic' culture has further increased interest in all things 'macabre'. Among medievalists the most familiar image may be the 'Imago Mortis' woodcut with its frolicking cadavers in Hartmann Schedel's *Nuremberg Chronicle* of 1493 (Fig. 1) – an image that is commonly used as an illustration in the literature on the subject. This woodcut has been deliberately chosen for the cover of this book, although it may not even be a 'true' *Danse Macabre* in that it does not include the living.[2] The fact that Saint-Saëns composed his

[1] Florence Warren (ed.), with introduction and notes by Beatrice White, *The Dance of Death, edited from MSS. Ellesmere 26/A.13 and B.M. Lansdowne 699, collated with the other extant MSS.*, EETS, o.s. 181 (London, 1931, repr. Woodbridge, 2000), l. 24. The French quotations are from Guy Marchant's 1485 edition.

[2] See the essay by Sophie Oosterwijk in this volume.

musical interpretation nearly five hundred years after the first mention of the term underlines the enduring yet adaptable quality of the *Danse*.

From relative neglect – at least by anglophone scholars – the *Danse Macabre* is rapidly becoming a fashionable topic of research among scholars from different disciplines. However, it is precisely because of the many transformations over time that the original meaning and reception of the theme in its different manifestations are often misunderstood. Too narrow an approach – be it historical, art-historical or literary – is likely to result in an incomplete or biassed view, quite apart from the fact that one also ought to consider examples of the *Danse* not just in isolation but in both a wider and an international context. Yet the literature has grown so vast that such an approach would now be not just ambitious but almost foolhardy, especially as the bulk of studies on the subject is written in languages other than English.[3]

It was especially the problem of language and inaccessibility that called for a new study in English with essays by international experts in this field. This book not only offers examples of the latest research, but also brings together a variety of approaches to different aspects of the *Danse Macabre* itself and its many parallels. For there were other forms of the 'macabre' in medieval culture that influenced the genesis and character of the *Danse* or were inspired by it in turn. As the authors in this volume demonstrate, there are many comparisons and cross-references between the *Danse* and the Legend of the Three Living and the Three Dead, tomb iconography, the imagery in the Office of the Dead in books of hours, and the presentation of death or Death personified in other contexts.

Part of the problem when studying the *Danse Macabre* is the fact that it is hard to define because it is so many things: a literary text as well as a visual motif – sometimes in combination, but not always – with moreover performative potential, even if it has never been proved conclusively that the theme originated in some type of performance. There is also the possibility of folklore influence about revenants haunting the living, although this likewise remains supposition.[4] A broad contextual approach is needed for a proper understanding of the *Danse*. All too often, the focus among historians is on its *memento mori* message, to the exclusion of its satirical character that literary scholars have long been aware of. Inter-

[3] James Clark's 1950 monograph *The Dance of Death in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance* may be flawed and outdated in many respects, but few would dare attempt a similarly succinct new study of the *Danse* across Europe.

[4] Nancy Caciola, 'Wraiths, Revenants and Ritual in Medieval Culture', *Past and Present*, 152 (1996), 3-45, esp. 40-44.

preting the *Danse* as a religious theme – or as 'church art'[5] – can result in a supposed 'discovery' of its profane character and create a false paradox.

Any attempt to distinguish between religious and secular is fraught with danger as medieval morality happily combined both aspects. Even the underlying Christian way of thinking or the occurrence of church representatives in the *Danse* do not make it a religious theme. After all, Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* can hardly be termed a religious poem despite its pilgrimage motif and the inclusion of a monk, a priest, a pardoner, a friar, a nun and prioress – in fact, far from it! Likewise, the church setting in which the *Danse* frequently occurred needs to be understood properly: there is a vast difference between the more public religious spaces, such as the nave or the cemetery, and the liturgical enclosure of the choir, even though profane imagery can often be found in the choir stalls. Cemeteries likewise had a more public character. The Dutch historian Johan Huizinga painted a vivid – if not wholly accurate – picture of the cemetery of Les Innocents in Paris where the painted *Danse* acted as a backdrop to scenes of trade and prostitution as well as to sermons, processions and festivities.[6] Miniatures of burial scenes in late-medieval books of hours frequently depict similar charnel houses with visible piles of skulls and bones in their roof spaces (Pl. 1), thereby illustrating how contemporaries were confronted almost daily with the prospect of their own mortality and the inevitable decomposition of their remains: *sic transit gloria*. In real life these stark reminders must have been even more poignant – and pungent – than any painting or poem, but they only encouraged artists and authors to conjure up ever more horrifying spectres of death and decay.

It is in some ways futile to debate whether the *Danse* began as a text or as an image, a superstition, a rite or enactment, when in the course of its long recorded history from the fourteenth century to the present day it diversified yet further. It is this diversity that the present volume aims to highlight – the mixing of motifs and metaphors that characterise the *Danse* itself and 'the macabre' at large, both in the medieval period and beyond.

The volume has been divided into five sections but the essays contain many cross-references that are intended to draw attention to parallels and comparisons elsewhere. The first section on Duality and Allegory addresses questions about the nature of the dead protagonists in the *Danse*

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[5] Cf. Rolf Paul Dreier, *Der Totentanz – ein Motiv der kirchlichen Kunst als Projektionsfläche für profane Botschaften (1425-1650)*, PhD thesis (Rotterdam: Erasmus University/Leiden: Brill, 2010).

[6] Johan Huizinga, 'The Vision of Death': chapter 11 in *The Autumn of the Middle Ages*, transl. Rodney J. Payton and Ulrich Mammitzsch (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 170.

Macabre – whether Death personified or the dead as mirror images of the living. In some cases, as Sophie Oosterwijk suggests, the question of identity must be taken even further when real-life portraits are integrated into the *Danse* and supposedly stereotypical protagonists are presented instead as historical figures, thereby strengthening the *vanitas* warning. Mirroring is also evident in the postures and movements of the dead dancers, especially in the woodcuts in the earliest French printed edition of 1485 by Guy Marchant, as discussed by Frances Eustace in her essay written in collaboration with Pamela King. Dance and the musical aspects of the *Danse* are addressed by Susanne Warda. Referring mainly to the German tradition, she stresses the aggressive and chaotic tones, as well as the reversal of the natural order displayed in the *Danse*. Maike Christadler explores the erotic potential of the *Danse* in the early modern period, especially in relation to the allegorical meaning of the female body.

The focus of the second section is on Macabre Parallels with first of all the Three Living and the Three Dead, which was a widespread motif across medieval Europe from the later thirteenth century onwards. The juxtaposition of the two groups of living and dead figures has obvious parallels with the *Danse*, although this does not mean that the older theme directly inspired the latter. Christine Kralik's essay takes the depiction of this moralising tale in medieval manuscript illumination as its starting point to discuss the elements of dialogue and violence that are also important elements in the *Danse*, while Marco Piccat discusses the iconographic variations of the same motif and related imagery (Pl. 9a) in mural paintings in medieval Italy. A very different motif is analysed by Sylvie Bethmont-Gallerand, *viz.* Death riding a bovine mount instead of the more traditional horse. The author traces this enigmatic iconography from its earliest known occurrence in the margins of a French missal of 1325 to much later interpretations and variations in literature and art.

Death in all its forms was furthermore an inspiration to authors and playwrights in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Kenneth Rooney examines the role of the dead in two Middle English romances, their nature, and their impact on the living protagonists. Lenke Kovács deals with the performative aspects of the motif in Spanish examples. While the Spanish *Dança general de la Muerte* may be the oldest extant text of the *Danse* – older by perhaps thirty years than the French poem we know from the mural in Paris – the focus of her essay is on a sixteenth-century dramatic adaptation from Majorca. In this play Death summons a range of social representatives, each displaying a different reaction to Death. A special relationship to Death is discussed by Jean Wilson. She deals with the explicit eroticism that can be found in early modern English literature,

drama, and in tomb iconography, where sex and violence are closely associated. Death is often presented as a lover, and metaphors of flowers, marriage and death are mixed as in the words of Paris in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* as he scatters flowers on the tomb of his seemingly dead bride Juliet: 'Sweet flower, with flowers the bridal bed I strew'.

The fourth section focusses on spatial contexts, first of all on choir stalls where profane imagery can be found alongside carvings of a more serious, death-related nature, as discussed by Kristiane Lemé-Hébuterne. The mixing of metaphors is also evident in the two medieval Istrian frescoes examined by Tomislav Vignjević. Here the *Danse Macabre* is juxtaposed with the Wheel of Fortune and the Tree of Knowledge with Adam and Eve – the Fall of Man that brought sin and death to mankind. The latter subject was found in combination with the theme of the old man and Death in a virtually unknown mural that Jutta Schuchard encountered in the wooden church at Bierdzany-Bierdzańska Śmierć in Silesia (Poland), dating to the early eighteenth century.

The art of printing played a crucial role in the later dissemination of the *Danse*, culminating in the famous *Images of Death* woodcut series by Hans Holbein the Younger, first published in 1538. Caroline Zöhl examines the unusual picture cycle of eleven engravings that accompanies the Office of the Dead in a book of hours printed in Paris in 1509 and includes the Tale of the Three Living and the Three Dead alongside images of the Expulsion, Souls in Purgatory, a deathbed scene, Job on the dung heap, and the Three Enemies of Man. The last two contributions deal with the reception of Hans Holbein's macabre series of prints. The focus of Winfried Schwab's essay is Holbein's *Danse Macabre* alphabet and variations on these fascinating initials by followers of the artist. Stefanie Knöll re-examines the importance of Huldrich Fröhlich's *Danse Macabre* editions, which mix motifs from Holbein's *Images of Death* with elements from the Basel *Danse*.

The use of metaphors was very fashionable in the late medieval and early modern period. Lydgate often combined several in one sentence, as in his description of how 'cruel dethe that ben so wyse and sage' slays his victims 'by stroke of pestilence' (ll. 6-7). Throughout this volume a yet wider variety of images and metaphors appear: dance, music, violence, inversion, sin, sex, the Fall, the Wheel of Fortune, the Three Living and the Three Dead. All these fascinating variations allowed authors and artists to remind their contemporaries of the ultimate truth: everything must pass and all men must die. For this is how the author in Marchant's final *Danse Macabre* woodcut (Fig. 14) sums it up with yet another metaphor, 'Cest tout vent: chose transitoire' (*All is but wind, something transient*).