

Dancing with the Dance of the Dead: Cemetery of the Innocents and the
Ramifications of the Macabre

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Abstract

The following thesis discusses the very first depiction of the *Danse Macabre* (Dance of the Dead) at the Paris cemetery of the Holy Innocents. The mural, now known only through prints and literary descriptions, was painted in 1424-5 on the cloister wall of this prominent medieval burial ground, and depicted fifteen pairs of dancing partners arranged according to their station in late medieval secular or ecclesiastic society. The pairs, composed of one dead and one living partner, are framed by a scholarly figure, known as the Author, who introduces and concludes the dance. The mural was accompanied by written verses – a captivating and often humorous dialogue between the living and the dead – which were placed below each figure, further animating the image.

Many medievalists have recognized the significance and influence of this first visual rendition of the *Danse Macabre*, as its verses and composition, although often modified, served as a model for many fifteenth century illustrations of the Dance of the Dead not just in France, but elsewhere in Western Europe. While it is probably true that the taste for the macabre within a broader public must in some way have been conditioned by the calamitous events of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, I argue that are very particular historical conditions that produced the *Danse Macabre* in Paris.

Specifically, the first two decades of the fifteenth century were characterized by a renewed war with England and a series of assassinations and counter-assassinations of pretenders for the French Crown. I argue that the mural, whose verse originated in the theological circles of the University of Paris, had a twofold didactic purpose: on the one hand the mural emphasized the transitory nature of earthly life and promoted the religious message of piety and repentance by evoking a horrid image of the decomposing cadaver, and on the other it functioned as a social critique. Employing the language of allegory, the University, itself profoundly invested in the political situation of the time, used the *Danse Macabre*, with its theme of death as the ultimate equalizer to contest the political machinations over kingship and establish its own position as society's dominant rationalizing authority.

Table of Contents

Abstract ii

Table of Contents iii

List of Plates iv-vi

Acknowledgments vii

Introduction 1

Chapter One 10
(Pre)History of the Macabre

Chapter Two 23
Proliferation of Images

Chapter Three 33
Cemetery of the Innocents and the *Danse Macabre*

Chapter Four 56
The Dance of Death, the Dance of Life

Epilogue 82

Bibliography 84

Plates 91

List of Plates

1. *The Three Living and the Three Dead*, Psalter of Robert de Lisle, c. 1310, Arundel Collection, London, British Library.
2. The Author, *Danse Macabre* (Paris: Guyot Marchant, 1485), Grenoble, Bibliothèque Municipale.
3. The Pope and the Emperor, *Danse Macabre* (Paris: Guyot Marchant, 1485), Grenoble, Bibliothèque Municipale.
4. The Cardinal and the King, *Danse Macabre* (Paris: Guyot Marchant, 1485), Grenoble, Bibliothèque Municipale.
5. The Patriarch and the Constable, *Danse Macabre* (Paris: Guyot Marchant, 1485), Grenoble, Bibliothèque Municipale.
6. The Archbishop and the Knight, (Paris: Guyot Marchant, 1485), Grenoble, Bibliothèque Municipale.
7. The Bishop and the Squire, *Danse Macabre* (Paris: Guyot Marchant, 1485), Grenoble, Bibliothèque Municipale.
8. The Abbot and the Bailiff, *Danse Macabre* (Paris: Guyot Marchant, 1485), Grenoble, Bibliothèque Municipale.
9. The Astrologer and the Citizen, *Danse Macabre* (Paris: Guyot Marchant, 1485), Grenoble, Bibliothèque Municipale.
10. The Canon and the Merchant, *Danse Macabre* (Paris: Guyot Marchant, 1485), Grenoble, Bibliothèque Municipale.
11. The Carthusian Monk and the Sergeant, *Danse Macabre* (Paris: Guyot Marchant, 1485), Grenoble, Bibliothèque Municipale.
12. The Monk and the Usurer with the Poor Man, *Danse Macabre* (Paris: Guyot Marchant, 1485), Grenoble, Bibliothèque Municipale.
13. The Doctor and the Lover, *Danse Macabre* (Paris: Guyot Marchant, 1485), Grenoble, Bibliothèque Municipale.
14. The Lawyer and the Minstrel, *Danse Macabre* (Paris: Guyot Marchant, 1485), Grenoble, Bibliothèque Municipale.

15. The Parish Priest and the Peasant, *Danse Macabre* (Paris: Guyot Marchant, 1485), Grenoble, Bibliothèque Municipale.
16. The Grey Friar and the Infant, *Danse Macabre* (Paris: Guyot Marchant, 1485), Grenoble, Bibliothèque Municipale.
17. The Cleric and the Hermit, *Danse Macabre* (Paris: Guyot Marchant, 1485), Grenoble, Bibliothèque Municipale.
18. The Author with the Dead King, *Danse Macabre* (Paris: Guyot Marchant, 1485), Grenoble, Bibliothèque Municipale.
19. *The Triumph of Death*, Camposanto, Pisa, c. 1340.
20. *The Triumph of Death*, detail showing the legend of the Three Living and the Three Dead, Camposanto, Pisa, c. 1340.
21. *The Wheel of the Twelve Attributes of Human Existence*, Psalter of Robert de Lisle, c. 1310, Arundel Collection, London, British Library.
22. Cemetery of the Holy Innocents, *Turgot, Plan de Paris*, detail, c. 1739.
23. Plan of Fifteenth-Century Paris, *A Parisian Journal 1405-1449*, trans. Janet Shirley (1881. Oxford: Clarendon, 1968), pages 386-387.
24. *Cemetery of the Holy Innocents*, Jacob Grimer, c.1580.
25. *The Dance of Death*, Bernt Notke, 1463, Lübeck, detail.
26. *Deathbed*, by the Master of Catherine of Cleves, from the *Hours of Catherine of Cleves*, The Netherlands, Utrecht, c.1440, New York, Pierpont Morgan Library.
27. *Requiem Mass: Processing to the Paten*, border: *Last Communion, Procession from Home to Church, Angels Bear the Offertory Gifts to God, and Burial*, by the Master of the Harley Froissart, from an Hours (altered) for Rome use. France, Paris?, C. 1450s, Baltimore, Walters Art Gallery.
28. *Burial Scene*, Master of Morgan 453, France, Paris, c.1425-1430, New York, Pierpont Morgan Library.
28. *Bal des Ardents*, from Froissart's *Chornicles*, Louis de Bruges copy, c.1460.
30. *The Justification of the Duke of Burgundy*, Jean Petit, 1408, France, Chantilly, Musée Condé.
31. *Monk (Author)*, by Guillaume de Digulleville, *Pelerinage de L'Ame*, c. 1400s, London, Lambeth Palace Library.

32. Gerson Preaching at the Church of St. Bernard, *Sermons sur la Passion*, Baudoin de Lannoy, c. 1480.
33. Fountain of the Innocents, Paris, c. 1800s.
34. Fountain of the Innocents, Paris, c. 1880s.
35. *Le Marché des Innocents*, Léop Flameng, etching, Paris, c. 1800.

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Introduction

Glaring at us from the pages of illuminated manuscripts, royal sepulchers, and frescoes of Late Medieval churches and cemeteries, macabre cadavers, with their gaping, vermin-infested torsos, emaciated bodies, and grimacing faces, shock and repel. Proliferating in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, such horrid images of corporeal decay became one of the defining elements of the visual culture of the Late Middle Ages. Although the word 'macabre,' is most commonly used to define and categorize these medieval images of death, it is important to note that this term and its meanings are not always clearly delineated. Originating in the late fourteenth century, the term macabre, at its most basic level, refers to visual and textual images that focus on the gruesome aspects of death and physical decay of the dead body.

The miniature from the Psalter of Robert De Lisle (c. 1310) is one of the earliest visual representations of the macabre poem of *The Three Living and the Three Dead* (henceforth *The Three Living*); it juxtaposes the plump, young bodies of the three princes with the specters of three grimacing cadavers, each in a different stage of putrefaction (Plate 1).¹ Capturing the organic and gradual process of decomposition in a systematic, almost scientific manner, the miniature forces the viewer to witness the repulsiveness of corporeal decay, which is contrasted to the richly clad and youthful bodies of the princely figures. A cluster of white worms are shown consuming the body of the first king, while the last cadaver, its emptied, hollow abdomen completely eaten and decomposed, is stripped to its spine.

¹ In the Psalter of Robert de Lisle, the miniature was accompanied by the poem which was placed below the image itself. I will discuss both the miniature and Psalter in greater detail in the second chapter.

A similar interest in exhibiting the putrid details of decay is also present in images depicting another popular macabre theme, the so-called *Danse Macabre*, or the Dance of the Dead. Portraying nude or semi-nude cadavers dancing next to a hierarchical procession of clothed representatives of medieval secular and ecclesiastic society, the *Danse Macabre* focuses, in part, on captivating, if paradoxical, representations of decomposing bodies in motion. In the series of *Danse Macabre* prints published by Guyot Marchant in the 1480s, the viewer is presented with cadavers in different poses and in various stages of decomposition, each taking away a living member of medieval society (Plates. 2-18). Like the miniature of the *Three Living*, the *Danse Macabre* prints show cadavers in full front, with their abdominal cavities open and swarming with worms and vermin. But we also see them in profile, their bodies twisting and turning, or even lifting their scrawny legs in order to expose other ghastly sores and openings on their emaciated frames. Immersed in the deadly dance, the corpses occasionally turn their bodies backwards, which while concealing the repulsive image of their open torsos, reveals the equally disturbing sight of their skeletal backs and angular buttocks.

Undoubtedly, such an appalling, detailed spectacle of corporeal decay must have shocked and terrified its medieval audience. Such instigation of fear and dismay had a specific purpose. Embedded in the Christian doctrine of piety and repentance, the macabre images, both visual and textual, were meant to be stark moralizing lessons that propagate the notion of the inevitability of death and emphasize the folly of admiring earthly life. Describing the vanity and worthlessness of material possessions, of social status, or even of youth, the macabre utilizes the gruesome image of the cadaver in order to demonstrate the transitory nature of worldly existence. Almost always accompanied by the written text that further elaborates their didactic religious message, macabre images are found in places associated with religious contemplation and devotion such as medieval prayer books, Christian churches, and sometimes cemeteries.

However, the intense interest in the physicality of the body in the macabre, although edifying, actually tends to overwhelm and lessen the macabre's religious and moralistic implications. The potential to slip away from its intended Christian message is perhaps best seen when the macabre image is compared with another equally didactic, but quite different Christian image of death, namely the *Last Judgment*. Commonly depicted on the entrances of Christian churches in France, the *Last Judgment* represents the dramatic scene of the Second Coming of Christ at the end of time when the resurrected bodies, finally judged, are sent to Heaven or Hell. Although they first developed during the Romanesque period, two centuries prior to the advent of the macabre, the *Last Judgment* scenes were still prominent elements of late medieval churches and cathedrals at the time the macabre made its first appearance.

Portraying the end of time, the *Last Judgment* scenes nearly always include striking images of the dead rising from their graves. For instance, the west tympanum of the Bourges Cathedral (c.1270) depicts in its lowest register, a gripping scene of the dead opening their coffins and emerging from the tombs. Yet, the dead in the *Last Judgment* are not decomposing corpses, but rather healthy-looking human beings whose bodies are unmarked by signs of corporeal decay. They are the resurrected, once again united with their flesh, whose ultimate destiny is decided in the portal's second register: the angel with the scales will weigh their souls and send them either to the Heaven depicted on the right or to the cauldron of Hell on the far left of the image.² And while their fate is visually illustrated in the second register, references to it are already given in the scene below it. As they rise from their graves, the figures on the left, the damned, with nude bodies that twist and turn in postures resembling antique statues, are lined up in a disorderly fashion and proudly flaunt their nakedness.³ As Michael Camille explains, in this scene "classical corporeality

² Michael Camille. *Gothic Art: Glorious Visions*. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1996) 89.

³ Ibid. 89.

is the sign of the fallen flesh.”⁴ In contrast, the blessed on the right emerge solemnly out from the tombs holding their hands in the gesture of prayer and retaining their earthly status and attributes. The image therefore clearly demonstrates to the viewer its moralizing, religious message — that Judgment day is imminent and more importantly, that only virtue and piety can shield from Hell.

But in the macabre such a didactic message is far more ambiguous and difficult to ascertain. While the text that accompanies the macabre imagery emphasizes the importance of piety and repentance, occasionally even referencing the *Last Judgment*, the images themselves do not necessarily reflect those same ideas.⁵ For example, even though Christianity is based on the belief that the dead will rise again, the notion so clearly depicted in the *Last Judgment* scene, in the macabre such promise is never given. What the viewer is faced with instead is a disturbing reminder of the physical death and bodily decomposition that awaits us all. What’s more, the macabre images omit any tangible references either to salvation or damnation, making it difficult for the viewer to comprehend their actual Christian moral. In the *Danse Macabre*, for instance, the pious hermit who spent his entire life in prayer and devotion is dragged to his death by decomposing cadavers in much the same manner as the wicked usurer for whom “gold, silver and treasure” were all that mattered.⁶ And while the verses do acknowledge the obvious differences in integrity between these two characters, and even hint at the usurer’s ultimate fate, the image does not clearly convey such a message.⁷ By not insisting on an obvious, visual separation between the damned and the blessed and lacking a reference to salvation, the macabre images therefore focus

⁴ Ibid. 89.

⁵ For example in the poem that accompanied the *Danse Macabre* mural at the cemetery of the Holy Innocents, the closing verses allude to the Last Judgment at the end of time: “O mortal man and reasonable being! If, after death, you do not wish to be damned you must, at least once a day, think of your loathsome end so that you may have a long life and die well.” Quoted in Edward F. Chaney, *La Danse Macabre des Charniers des Saints Innocents à Paris* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1945) 65.

⁶ Ibid. 56.

⁷ When the dead man approaches the usurer he says “So blinded are you by usury that you burn to make money. But you will be quite consumed by it. For if God, who is wonderful, has no pity for you, you lose all. It is dangerous to stake all on one throw,” implying therefore that the usurer did in fact jeopardize his chances of reaching Heaven by depending so much on money and material goods. Quoted in Chaney, 56.

solely on the horrid spectacle of death epitomized in the body of the decomposing cadaver — all of which if taken outside its didactic text, does not retain a particularly Christian character. As art historian Paul Binski has argued, “Christianity placed a death at the centre of its drama of salvation, that of Christ who redeemed the world on the Cross and subsequently rose from the dead.”⁸ For believing Christians, physical death should not constitute an absolute end but rather it signifies (or at least it should signify) a promise of a future salvation, at least for the righteous. But in the macabre the fixation is placed on the physical death of the body without any clear reference to the fate of the soul.

A second paradox within the macabre is worth considering. The *Last Judgment* scenes, while certainly daunting, take place in an unspecified moment in a distant future; the macabre on the other hand portrays the tangible horrors that are awaiting the living in a much more imminent future. In addition, what made the macabre imagery especially relevant is the fact that it mirrored almost precisely the calamitous historical circumstances in which it emerged. Between the fourteenth and sixteenth century, roughly the time period during which the macabre developed, Western (and specifically Northwestern) Europe confronted the Great Famine (1317), the Hundred Years War (1337-1453), and numerous plague epidemics,⁹ all of which caused demographic disasters and shrouded Europe in death and devastation. Reflecting on the transience of life as implied in the macabre, at a moment when thousands were dying from starvation, horrendous wounds or worse yet, a mysterious illness, made these images and their message all the more relevant to their medieval audiences. At the same time, because it so accurately captured the desperate climate of its time, the intense focus on death in the macabre was perhaps too overwhelming. Displaying rotting cadavers, which were in essence a future mirror image of the

⁸ Binski 9.

⁹ The first outbreak of the plague in Europe occurred between the years 1347-1351 (dates vary according to the region). In France the plague first appeared in 1348. From then until the 1430s the epidemic reappeared in the following years: 1360, 1373, 1382, 1412, 1418, and 1421.

audience, the macabre demanded its viewers to not only contemplate their mortality, but also come to terms with their ghastly ending. Given the social circumstances, however, such insistence on the gruesome aspects of death ran the risk of turning the audience away from the macabre and its moralizing lessons, and even fueling an intensely passionate interest in life instead.¹⁰ In other words, if death is so horrendous why bother contemplating it? And if life is indeed so short, why not hasten to enjoy it while it lasts?

Such questions and ambiguities that characterize the nature of the macabre images have been, at least to an extent, recognized and discussed by many medievalists — from Alberto Tenenti who first put forward the theory that the intense physicality of the macabre encourages the passion for life, to Paul Binski who analyzed the ambivalences of the macabre.¹¹ As one of the defining elements of the visual culture of the Late Middle Ages, the macabre has been a topic of intense scholarly attention and debate since at least the 1920s.¹² In general, the discourse has thus far been focused on two specific sets of issues both of which relate to the emergence of the macabre. First, macabre imagery is seen as a cultural reaction to the difficult conditions that marked the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Second, the intense physicality of macabre

¹⁰ Delumeau 113.

¹¹ See Alberto Tenenti, *La Vie et la mort à travers l'art du XV siècle*. Paris: Colin, 1952. Tenenti argues that the macabre of the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries was an overthrow of Christian notions of death and mortality which saw death as a passage to afterlife. According to Tenenti, in the macabre death is no longer a passage, but an ending, an ultimate decomposition. At the same time, the insistence on physical death unleashed passion for life. In his study on the representation of Hell in France and Italy, Jérôme Baschet challenged Tenenti's arguments especially in relation to the Triumph of Death image at Camposanto in Pisa. See Jérôme Baschet, *Les Justices de l'au-delà : les représentations de l'enfer en France et en Italie, XIIe-XVe siècle* (Rome : Ecole française de Rome ; Paris : Diffusion De Boccard, 1993) esp. pp. 295-349. See also Paul Binski, *Medieval Death: Ritual and Representation* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1996) especially the third chapter "The Macabre" pp.123-163.

¹² See Johan Huizinga, *The Autumn of the Middle Ages* trans. Rodney J. Payton and Ulrich Mammitzsch. (1921. Chicago: Chicago UP, 1996); Émil Mâle, *Religious Art from Twelfth to the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Pantheon, 1949); Edelgard, DuBruck, *The Theme of Death in French Poetry of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance* (Brussels: Mouton, 1964); Joël Saugnieux, *Les Danses Macabres de France et d'Espagne et leurs prolongements littéraires*, (Lyons: Emmanuel Vitte, 1972); T.S.R. Boase, *Death in the Middle Ages: Mortality, Judgment, Remembrance* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1972); Leonard P. Kurtz, *The Dance of Death and the Macabre Spirit in European Literature* (New York: Gordon Press, 1975); Florence Whyte, *The Dance of Death in Spain and Catalonia* (New York: Arno Press, 1977); Philippe Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death*, trans. Helen Weaver (New York: Knopf, 1981); Jean Delumeau, *Sin and Fear: The Emergence of Western Guilt Culture 13th- 18th Centuries*, trans. Eric Nicholson (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1983); Jane H.M. Taylor ed., *Dies Illa: Death in the Middle Ages*, (Manchester: Francis and Taylor, 1984); Michael Camille, *The Master of Death: The Lifeless Art of Pierre Remiet Illuminator* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1994); Ann Tukey Harrison ed. *The Danse Macabre of Women* (Kent, Ohio: The Kent State UP, 1994); and Edelgard E. DuBruck and Barbara I. Gusick ed., *Death and Dying in the Middle Ages* (New York: Peter Lang, 1999).

imagery is also discussed in relation to larger cultural processes such as shifting notions of mortality, emergence of individualism, and even the materialistic mentality of Late Medieval Europeans. While these inquiries have generated fascinating research and placed the macabre at the forefront of Medieval Studies, they often fail to consider the specificities of macabre imagery. The persistent practice has been to consider the macabre as a cohesive phenomenon paying little or no attention to the immediate social and political conditions from which specific examples emerged, and disregarding the obvious differences that exist in reception and circulation of mediums as diverse as illuminated manuscripts, frescoes, or prints.

Considering these hitherto unacknowledged issues, my thesis examines the very first depiction of the *Danse Macabre* at the Paris cemetery of the Holy Innocents (henceforth Innocents). The mural, now known only through prints and literary descriptions, was painted in 1424-5 on the cloister wall of this prominent medieval burial ground and depicted fifteen pairs of dancing partners arranged according to their station in late medieval social hierarchies. The pairs, composed of one dead and one living partner, are framed by a scholarly figure, known as the Author, who opens and concludes the dance. In addition, the mural was accompanied by the written verses — a captivating and often humorous dialogue between the living and the dead — which were placed below each figure, further animating the image.

Many medievalists have recognized the significance and influence of this first visual rendition of the *Danse Macabre* as its verses and composition although often modified, served as a model for many fifteenth century illustrations of the Dance of the Dead not just in France, but elsewhere in Western Europe.¹³ Furthermore, its importance lies in the fact that unlike the earlier

¹³ Almost every study on the macabre which I consulted discusses or at the very least, mentions the *Danse Macabre* from the Innocents. See for example Binski, 153; Camille, 158-59; Delumeau 79-80; DuBruck and Gusick, 299; Harrison, 8-10; Huizinga, 164-65; Kurtz, esp. pp. 25-77; Taylor, 29-43; and Whyte, 27-39. However, apart from two studies published in late nineteenth and early twentieth century, very few sources actually deal with the mural itself. See Valentin Dufour, *La Danse Macabre des Saints Innocents de Paris d'après l'édition de 1484, precede d'une étude sur le cimetière, le charnier et la fresque peinte en 1425* (Paris: Léon Willem, 1874); Pierre Champion ed., *La Danse Macabre de Guy Marchant* (Paris: Editions des

macabre imagery which was, at least in France, most often restricted to Psalters and Books of Hours, the *Danse Macabre* was a considerably large public image, stretching some fourteen yards along the cloister wall and located in a popular parish cemetery in the centre of medieval Paris. Its audience far exceeded the usual connoisseurs of macabre images, which up until the early fifteenth century included, for the most part, only members of the medieval secular elite.

But why such interest in the macabre in the first place? Where did this fixation on the decaying body come from? And most importantly, what prompted the creation of the large mural in the public space of the cemetery? In order to answer these questions, my thesis examines two specific sets of issues. First, I consider the literary origins of the macabre which are rooted in the twelfth-century monastic tradition of the *contemptus mundi*, or contempt for the world. Such literature, which emphasized the transitory nature of earthly life, hatred of the human body and repulsiveness of putrefaction, greatly influenced the culture of the macabre. The personified figure of Death, which came to exemplify the macabre, first appeared in the monastic poetry associated with the *contemptus mundi* tradition. Although such writings were limited to medieval monastic circles, during the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries the central treatises of the *contemptus mundi* were embraced by secular writers from academics to poets who translated them into vernaculars and used them as the basis for their own writings on death and mortality. Also, the existence of *contemptus mundi* literature shows that long before the emergence of the plague which, being the pivotal disaster of the Late Middle Ages, is often seen as the principal instigator of the macabre, certain segments of medieval cultures were already exhibiting a morose fascination with death and decay. In establishing the link between the macabre and *contemptus mundi* literature, my key point is to emphasize that although the images often deliver an ambivalent or paradoxical

Quatre Chemins, 1925); Catherine Reynolds, "Les Anglois, de leur droicte nature, veuillent touzjours guerree": Evidence for Painting in Paris and Normandy c.1420-1450," *Power, Culture, and Religion in France c.1350-c.1550* ed. Christopher Allmand (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1989); Jane H.M. Taylor, "Un Miroir Salulaire," *Dies Illa: Death in the Middle Ages* ed. Jane H.M. Taylor (Liverpool: Francis Cairns, 1984):29-43; and Jane H.M. Taylor, "Danse Macabre and Bande Desinée: A Question of Reading," *Forum for Modern Language Studies* XXV.4 (1989):356-369.

message, the macabre did emerge from these monastic, religious writings and its mediating and spiritual intentions were in fact quite essential.

Second, contrary to previous studies of the *Danse Macabre* mural which commonly situate it solely within the tradition of the macabre representations, paying little or no attention to historical circumstances save for the mandatory reference to the plague, I wish to examine the mural through the complex social and political situation in which it emerged. Specifically, the image was painted in the centre of Paris at the moment when the city was in the hands of the foreign invaders and when the French internal political situation was fraught with conflicts. And while the mural with its macabre imagery certainly originated from a prolonged development of the *contemptus mundi* tradition, the *Danse Macabre* was nevertheless immersed in its historical context, and what's more, as I hope to show, was continuously implicated in political struggles even years after it was created.

In merging these two seemingly disparate issues, namely monastic writings and social contexts, I will demonstrate the ways in which the *Danse Macabre* served a twofold didactic purpose: on the one hand the mural emphasized the transitory nature of earthly life and promoted the religious message of piety and repentance by evoking the horrid image of the decomposing cadaver, and on the other it functioned as social critique.

Chapter One:

(Pre)History of the Macabre

The macabre was first and foremost a literary phenomenon that was influenced by certain aspects of twelfth century Western monastic literature. Any serious investigation into the origin of the macabre therefore requires a discussion of medieval religious discourses on death and mortality.

Particularly important is the complex literature of the *contemptus mundi*. Although its origins are difficult to estimate, it is safe to say that from the late eleventh century to the seventeenth century, by which time the influence of this tradition was beginning to wane, the *contemptus mundi* was one of the more popular and prolific religious subjects.¹⁴ While it encompasses a broad spectrum of themes, the *contemptus mundi* tradition reflects three main ideas: hatred of the body and the world; the pervasiveness of sin; and the acute awareness of fleeting time.¹⁵ During the eleventh and the twelfth centuries, when the *contemptus mundi* was being incorporated into mainstream medieval monastic thought, the subject attracted the interest of well-known medieval writers and theologians such as Peter Damian (d.1072), Anselm of Canterbury (d.1109) and Hugh of St. Victor (d.1142).¹⁶

¹⁴ Robert E. Lewis, "Introduction," *De Miseria Conditionis Humane*, Lotario dei Segni, ed. Robert E. Lewis (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1978) 1-91, 2. Although Lewis does not mention this, I do not believe that it is coincidental that both the macabre and the *contemptus mundi* traditions were losing their appeal after the seventeenth century. In fact, I suggest that this argument implies two specific points: that these two traditions were fundamentally linked, and more importantly that shifts occurred in European culture after the seventeenth century which made it impossible for these traditions to remain popular.

¹⁵ Delumeau 16.

¹⁶ Lewis 3.

Yet, this literature first developed from a particular type of Christian theology pioneered by Saint Gregory the Great (d.604) in the sixth century.¹⁷ His vision of Christian life, which became a model for monastic existence, is characterized by two central issues: detachment from the world and an intense love for God.¹⁸ At the core of St. Gregory's concept of Christian life is the importance of acknowledging the misery and wretchedness of the human condition.¹⁹

Summarizing St. Gregory's arguments on the misery of man, the historian of monastic culture, Jean Leclercq explains:

Man's wretchedness comes from his physical nature, from Original Sin, from the egoism which harries each one of us, which is always on the watch, and which tends to vitiate all our actions, even good ones. It must be put to rout constantly: not only at the outset of our actions, by purifying our intentions, but also during our actions, and again at the end, for it is always a menace to us.²⁰

The inherent despair of the human condition, which cannot be eliminated, must therefore be constrained through contemplation and a constant awareness of its presence and working. St. Gregory describes this condition as a weight which pulls us to the earth and corrupts us with sin.²¹ It is this grave weight that causes agitation, instability and nervousness, all of which are in direct opposition with his vision of tranquil and peaceful Christian existence. In fact, for St. Gregory, death represents "the last manifestation of this mutability, the ultimate change."²² For my discussion of the macabre, this point is of a particular importance. Contrary to contemporary times

¹⁷ St. Gregory was a Pope and a prolific writer. His treatises offer an elaborate theology of Christian experience, and a doctrine of Christian life and prayer. St. Gregory's writings are important because they bridge the gap between the patristic age and the monastic culture of the Middle Ages. See Jean Leclercq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God: A Study of Monastic Culture*, trans. Catharine Misrahi (New York: Fordham UP, 1961) esp. pp 31-44.; Robert Markus A., *Gregory the Great and His World*, (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997); and Carole Ellen Straw, *Gregory the Great: Perfection in Imperfection*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

¹⁸ Leclercq 36.

¹⁹ Ibid.36.

²⁰ Ibid.37.

²¹ Ibid.37.

²² Ibid.37.

when death is often described as the final rest, St. Gregory's argument reveals that for the early Christian writers, death symbolized the ultimate instability, a horrifying transgression, which poignantly exposed the magnitude of human misery. For the Christian monks, who adopted St. Gregory's ideas, fixation on death and ghastly details of physical decomposition was an important spiritual exercise through which they validated their detachment from the world and reminded themselves of their need for God.²³

It is St. Gregory's direction to meditate on the physicality and corruption of material existence in order to restrain it that informed much of the *contemptus mundi* literature.²⁴ For example, in the early twelfth century, the Benedictine monk, Robert de Deutz (d.1124) wrote a treatise entitled *Meditation on Death* in which he suggests that the misery of man can best be learned from the horrid spectacle of decomposing cadavers:

Whoever you may be, go to the sepulchers of the dead...and they themselves will answer you. They will speak to your eyes until you have seen enough, and if they are recent bodies with a bit of sap still left in them, they will speak to your nostrils until you have smelled enough, and until you can stand it no longer.²⁵

Similarly, Anselm of Canterbury describes the processes of putrefaction as a mere consequence of Original Sin, while his contemplation of the inevitability of death creates a striking image of the cyclical procession of time and life:

Speak, mortal flesh. Speak, worm of decomposition. Wretched creature, why do you act so foolishly? What good is the glory of the flesh? Speak, man. Speak dust. Decay, whence comes your pride?...Do you not know the law that rules the condition

²³ Ibid.37.

²⁴ Throughout the Middle the writings of St. Gregory were often cited and widely read. As Leclercq points out, prominent medieval writers such as Isidore of Seville (d.636), Bede (d.735), Jean de Fécamp (d.1078), St. Bernard (d.1153), all relied on St. Gregory's teachings. See Leclercq 32.

²⁵ Quoted in Delumeau 43.

of man? The body comes from the earth, the seed comes from the body, blood comes from the seed, the body from blood. Just as man's body is formed in the womb, so it will rot in bosom of the earth. The body engenders corruption, corruption engenders worms, worms create ashes, and ashes make earth. Thus the mother of the human body is the earth, and to the earth it shall return.²⁶

However, the most significant piece of religious literature of the *contemptus mundi* doctrine, and the one that ultimately succeeded in introducing it to a broader audience, is *De Miseria Condicionis Humane* (henceforth *De Miseria*) written in 1195 by Lotario dei Segni, the Cistercian monk who later became Pope Innocent III.²⁷

In the original version the work is divided into three parts called books. The first concerns the wretchedness of human conception, the disgusting physical aspects of humans, especially the older ones, and the various mysteries that man must endure in his life.²⁸ The second book deals with the three goals for which man strives — riches, pleasures and honors — with examples and vivid descriptions illustrating each one.²⁹ The third describes the putrefaction of the body, the pains of Hell and the Second Coming of God on Judgment Day.³⁰ The primary source of *De Miseria* is the Bible, though it is clear that in compiling this treatise Pope Innocent consulted, most importantly, the writings of St. Gregory as well a number of other medieval and classical writers.³¹

The treatise opens with a passage entitled "The Misery of Man," which exemplifies St. Gregory's model of meditation:

Man is indeed formed from earth, conceived in sin, born to pain...He becomes fuel for the fire, food for worms, a mass of

²⁶ Quoted in Delumeau 43.

²⁷ Throughout the Middle Ages, this treatise was known simply as *De Contemptus Mundi*, suggesting therefore that this text amply summarized the main points of the *contemptus mundi* tradition. Lotario dei Segni became the Pope in 1198.

²⁸ Lewis 2.

²⁹ Ibid.2.

³⁰ Ibid.2.

³¹ Ibid.2. According to Lewis, Pope Innocent III was influenced by the writings of St. Gregory, Isidore of Seville, Peter Lombard, and John of Salisbury as well as Ovid, Horace, and Juvenal. For a detailed analysis of the text of *De Miseria* see: Donald R. Howard Ed. *On the Misery of the Human Condition/De Miseria Condicionis Humane*, trans. Margaret Mary Dietz (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1969).

putridness. I shall show this more clearly; I shall analyze more fully. Man is formed of dust, of clay, of ashes: what is more vile, from the filthiest sperm. He is conceived from the heat of desire, in the fervor of the flesh, in the stench of lust: what is worst in the blemish of sin. He is born to labor, fear, sorrow: what is more miserable, to death....He will become fuel for the inextinguishable fire that always flames and burns; food for the immortal worms that always eats and consumes; a mass of horrible putridness that always stinks and is filthy.³²

From this vivid (if pessimistic) passage it is clear that death is understood not just as a natural ending of life, but as the ultimate punishment for being born in sin. In particular, focusing on the disgusting details of the dead body in the process of decomposition was meant to recall the idea of the inherent sinfulness of the body, first instigated through Adam and Eve's Original Sin, and then reinstated in the act of conception.

For the development of the macabre, the third book of *De Miseria* is of a particular importance. A segment from this chapter, aptly entitled "On the Rottenness of Corpses," provides a vivid description of the abhorrent nature of physical decay:

Man is rottenness, and his son a worm....Alive, he brings forth lice and tapeworms; dead, he will beget worms and flies. Alive, he produces dung and vomit, dead, he produces rottenness and stench. Alive, he fattens one man; dead, he will fatten many worms. What, then, is more foul smelling than a human corpse? What more horrible than a dead man? He whose embrace was most pleasing in life will indeed be a disgusting sight in death. What good therefore are riches? They will not free from death, will not defend from the worm, will not take away from the stench.³³

The passage explicitly deals with the central theme of the macabre image of death, which, like Pope Innocent's text, is characterized by being simultaneously repelled and attracted to the sight of

³²Lotairo dei Segni, *De Miseria Conditionis Humane*, ed. Robert E. Lewis (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1978) 94.

³³Ibid. 206.

the abject. The body is described as a vile source of physical disintegration. It is equally repugnant in life, when all it produces are filthy fluids ("dung and vomit"), as it is in death when it becomes food for worms. The underlying implication of this passage is that the material, corporeal life is not worth relishing because it is our destiny to die. What's more, the notion that material goods will not shield us from death — the very idea that becomes central in the macabre, especially in the *Danse Macabre* — is used here to emphasize the inability of humans, even the richest ones, to escape the leveling effects of death.

Although the texts of Pope Innocent and those of the *contemptus mundi* influenced the macabre, it is important to acknowledge that there are significant differences between these two traditions. For one, until the fourteenth century the theological treatises of the *contemptus mundi* were limited to monastic circles and their main purpose was to guide and inform the spiritual life of Christian monks and not to edify a general audience. Meditations on the putrefaction of the dead body was deemed salutary, because contemplating on this would help monks quell physical and worldly desires. In fact, the ultimate goals demanded from such a literature, the detachment from life and absolute devotion to God, were not attainable by the secular populace, who, regardless of their individual degrees of piety and devotion, could never benefit from the type of spiritual and physical isolation from the material world that was available to the monks. In addition, although *contemptus mundi* texts dwell on the repulsive nature of death and decay, the pivotal feature of the macabre, the figure of Death personified, is conspicuously absent from most of the *contemptus mundi* treatises.

Such a figure of Death is, however, found in other twelfth century monastic poetry that relies heavily on the *contemptus mundi* tradition. The precursor of such poetry was Hélinant of Froidmont, a troubadour and nobleman turned Cistercian monk, who in 1190 wrote the poem entitled *Vers de la Mort*. Wanting to inspire his contemporaries and especially his aristocratic

friends with a stark vision of death, Hélinant wrote a poem that already describes a type of a *Danse Macabre*.³⁴ Creating, for the first time, the figure of Death personified, Hélinant sends his dark emissary to visit his friends, then various princes, and then even the cardinals of Rome. Like the authors of the *Danse Macabre* who will follow him, Hélinant structured his poem to mirror the order of earthly hierarchies so as to better point out the equality of all before death:³⁵

Death, you knock down with one stroke
The king in his tower, as well as
The poor man in his hut:
You go around without rest
To summon everyone in his turn
To render to God immediately
What you owe him.³⁶

Equating the ultimate destiny of the king and the pauper, Hélinant's poem emphasizes the dichotomy between the power of death and the transitory nature of mankind that later exemplified the *Danse Macabre* verses. Widely successful in the monastic circles, *Vers de la Mort* inspired the creation of many similar poems. Towards the middle of the thirteenth century, Robert Le Clerc wrote a poem with the same title as Hélinant's, *Li Vers de la Mort*, which also greatly resembled, both in its theme and its structure, Hélinant's verses. In his poem, Le Clerc first sends Death to the city of Arras, where it visits people from all classes and lectures them on death and mortality. The journey then takes Death to Rome, where it urges both the king and the pope to repent.³⁷

One of the most poignant characteristics of the *Danse Macabre*, the inclusion of living representatives from all walks of life, appears even more clearly in a series of thirteenth century poems known as the *Vado Mori*. Each strophe in these poems begins and ends with a dramatic affirmation, "I am going to die," pronounced by various individuals arranged according to the

³⁴ Ibid. 77.

³⁵ Ibid. 77.

³⁶ Quoted in Dubruck 297.

³⁷ Ibid. 77.

order of medieval hierarchy. Yet unlike the *Danse Macabre* poems, the verses of the *Vado Mori* do not include dialogues between the living and the dead. And while those about to die in the *Vado Mori* lament their fate in the fashion of the *Danse Macabre* victims, there are no skeletons who reply and there is no dance. But the note of irony and dark humor which was to become so prevalent in the *Danse Macabre* is already present here: no potion can save the doctor, the philosopher's thoughts come to no conclusions since death concludes him, the lover realizes that lust does not lengthen life.³⁸

Yet, like the *contemptus mundi* treatises, these examples of the monastic poetry on death had, for the most part, a very limited audience. This changes by the mid fourteenth century when the monastic writings become adopted by a broader segment of society.³⁹ While it is probably true, as scholars have suggested, that calamitous historical circumstances conditioned a morose fascination with death within the broader public, there are specific groups who must be acknowledged for the role they played in disseminating the *contemptus mundi* literature and hence contributing to the development of the macabre.

First, the orders of Mendicant friars that appeared in the early years of the thirteenth century made a radical departure from the earlier monastic traditions by abandoning the seclusion of the cloister in order to engage in an active preaching mission to lay society at large, rich and poor.⁴⁰ These religious orders, which consisted of Mendicant, Franciscan, Dominican and Augustinian friars, adopted a rule of corporal poverty and refused endowments and property owning.⁴¹ Supporting themselves through begging, the Mendicants, unlike traditional monks,

³⁸ Delumeau 77.

³⁹ It is important to note that even when *contemptus mundi* literature gained a wider audience outside monastic circles, it was still limited to the educated elite.

⁴⁰ Clifford. H. Lawrence, *Medieval Monasticism: Forms of Religious Life in Western Europe in the Middle Ages* (1984. Harlow, England: Longman, 2001) 238.

⁴¹ For a history of religious orders see Larissa Taylor, *Soldiers of Christ: Preaching in Late Medieval and Reformation France* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1992); Clifford H. Lawrence, *The Friars: The Impact of the Early Mendicant Movements on Western Society*

embraced a mobile lifestyle and moved from city to city in order to preach to the urban populace. Although their sermons and the message they emphasized varied, a thread of commonality can be distinguished. Through dramatic sermons, using examples of their own life in poverty, the Mendicants demonstrated that it was possible for a committed Christian to "live in the world of men, yet not be of that world."⁴² Relying heavily on the *contemptus mundi* literature, whose scorn for earthly life and material goods illustrated their own beliefs, the Mendicants often preached on the importance of piety and repentance by emphasizing the inevitability of death.⁴³ In fact, as Émil Mâle's influential study on the macabre points out, the monastic tradition of *contemptus mundi* entered the urban spaces of medieval cities precisely through the striking sermons delivered by the Mendicants "who first terrorized the crowds by speaking to them of death."⁴⁴

But as frightening as the Mendicant sermons might have been, I would argue that their more significant contribution in spreading the doctrine of *contemptus mundi* lies in their belief that to sanctify one's life it is not necessary to live in isolation, away from the bustle of human activity as practiced by the spiritual elite, but that the same goals can be achieved by people of all stations if they are willing to repent and come to terms with the transience of life. Such beliefs, which directly challenged the monastic (Gregorian) principle of stability and detachment, revolutionized medieval monasticism but also generated much opposition. Frequently accused of heresy, especially in their formative years, and rejected by the conservative proponents of the earlier model of monasticism, the Mendicant friars were often forced into political struggle in order to validate (or establish) their position within the ecclesiastical hierarchy. They often relied on

(London and New York: Longman, 1994); and Susan C. Karant-Nunn, *Varieties of Devotion in the Middle Ages and Renaissance* (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2003).

⁴² Ibid. 238.

⁴³ As a side point it is worth noting that it was Pope Innocent III, writer of the *De Miseria*, who in 1209 met with St. Francis of Assisi, the founder of the religious order of the Franciscans, and gave qualifying approval to their activities. Although, as Clifford Lawrence points out, at that time Pope Innocent did not formulate any specific organizational plan, it was nevertheless the first (and very crucial) step in the creation of this religious order. See Lawrence, *Medieval Monasticism* 250.

⁴⁴ Mâle 354.

support from secular rulers and depended on their popularity amongst the townsfolk, as I will further demonstrate later in the text through a specific example.

The second segment of the population whose activities popularized the *contemptus mundi* literature were the fourteenth- and fifteenth-century scholars and theologians. Because of their avid interest in the *contemptus mundi*, central treatises of this tradition were enthusiastically copied and circulated more consistently than when originally produced. The majority of the 672 known medieval manuscripts of Pope Innocent's lugubrious *De Miseria* were published by fifteenth-century scholars.⁴⁵ Far surpassing the popularity of its own time, during the 1400s *De Miseria* became one of the most coveted and influential books among the scholarly elite.⁴⁶

For the history of the French macabre it is particularly important to acknowledge the activities of Jean Gerson (d. 1429), the Chancellor of the University of Paris, and the members of his circle, since they were the most likely authors of the verses that accompanied the mural of *Danse Macabre* at the Cemetery of the Innocents.⁴⁷ Gerson, whose writings were influenced by St. Gregory⁴⁸ and the *contemptus mundi* literature, also wrote an elaborate theological treatise entitled *Opusculum tripartitum* circa 1409. And while Gerson's text was not intended for a general audience, it nevertheless later served as one of the primary sources for the text of the illustrated *Ars Moriendi* (The Art of Dying) that became popular after the 1450s.⁴⁹ Linked to the culture of the macabre, though not necessarily a part of it, the *Ars Moriendi* was a treatise meant to provide advice and techniques for ensuring a good Christian death. Depicting deathbed scenes, the *Ars Moriendi*

⁴⁵ Delumeau 21. Besides these 672 known manuscripts, another 47 printed editions of Pope Innocent III's text were published toward the end of the fifteenth century following the invention of the printing press.

⁴⁶ Ibid. 21.

⁴⁷ For Gerson's biography and contribution to medieval theology see Louis B. Pascoe, *Jean Gerson: Principles of Church Reform* (Leiden: Brill, 1977). One of the most important associates of Gerson was Nicolas de Clamanges (1363-1437), who was first a rector of the University and then Secretary to Pope Benedict XIII in Avignon.

⁴⁸ Leclercq 33.

⁴⁹ Delumeau 57. The *Ars Moriendi* was one of the most popular books in the Late Middle Ages. Following the invention of the printing press, the popularity of this text (and images) only increased.

featured the dying person surrounded with demons and angels fighting for his/hers soul and included a series of instructions on how to act during those final hours.⁵⁰

Discussing the role of intellectuals during the Middle Ages, Jacques Le Goff argues that Gerson's interest in *contemptus mundi* is, at least in part, a reaction against the medieval scholarly writings informed by Aristotle and his rationalist philosophies.⁵¹ According to Le Goff, the negative stance toward Aristotelian philosophy, surfacing from the rationalistic vs. anti-intellectual debate of the late middle ages forced "rational knowledge [to bow] its head before an affective piety of which the pious sermons and opuscles of Gerson and Ailly were the expression."⁵²

Finally, from the late fourteenth century on, a number of secular poets began to incorporate elements of *contemptus mundi* literature into their verses on death and mortality. In 1383 the French poet Eustache Dechamps translated *De Miseria* and compiled the translated text and the accompanying illustrations into a small twenty-four-folio manuscript entitled *Lay de la fragilité humaine*.⁵³ Although the *Lay* was not the first French translation of *De Miseria*⁵⁴, Dechamps' book was important because it delivered intense and poetic meditations on the central themes from the original treatise.⁵⁵ Dechamps' interest in the text of *De Miseria* stems from his own poetical aspirations. During the late fourteenth century, Dechamps was an influential court poet who, in addition to writing political and satirical *ballades*, composed 105 poems on the subjects of death and

⁵⁰ The text of the *Ars Moriendi* included the following sections: advice on how to die well, the temptations facing the dying person during the final hours, what questions to ask a dying person, the prayers he or she should say, how the others should behave and what prayers should they recite. See Delumeau 57.

⁵¹ Jacques Le Goff, *Intellectuals in the Middle Ages*, trans. Teresa Lavender Fagan (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Blackwell, 1993) 138. Le Goff goes on to quote Peter of Ailly, Gerson's close colleague at the University of Paris, who renouncing the teachings of Aristotle explained: "There are no, or few, evidently demonstrative arguments in philosophy or in the teaching of Aristotle. Also, it follows that the philosophy or teaching of Aristotle ought rather to be called opinion than knowledge. And therefore those who cling too tenaciously to the authority of Aristotle are very reprehensible. The reaction was aimed at the logical and scientific works of Robert Grosseteste, William Heybtesbury, Jean Buridan, Nicholas d'Autercourt and others. See Le Goff 136-7.

⁵² Ibid. 138.

⁵³ For an intriguing analysis of the images in this manuscript see Michael Camille, *Master of Death: The Lifeless Art of Pierre Remet Illuminator* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1994) esp. pp.58-95.

⁵⁴ According to Camille, the first French translation of *De Miseria* was the manuscript entitled *Livre de la misere de l'omme* completed in 1372, 60.

⁵⁵ Camille, *Master Of Death*, 60.

old age.⁵⁶ These poems, along with Dechamps' translation of *De Miseria*, in turn inspired the fifteenth-century macabre poetry of Pierre de Nesson, François Villon and Jean Meschinot.⁵⁷

For the history of the *Danse Macabre*, the most significant amongst these lyricists is Jean Le Fèvre, procurer of the Parliament of Paris, who in 1376 wrote a poem entitled *Respit de la Mort*.⁵⁸ Inspired by Pope Innocent's *De Miseria* and his own brush with a serious illness, Le Fèvre's poem is a philosophical contemplation on mortality and the scornfulness of the human condition. The poem is significant because it features the first reference to the word "macabre" in the following verses:

I have done the Dance of Macabre then,
Which leads all people in his dance,
And brings them to the grave.⁵⁹

Because of the first stanza, which in French reads *Je fis de Macabre la danse*, Le Fèvre is often erroneously cited as the original creator of the *Danse Macabre* genre. While Le Fèvre did not invent the *Danse Macabre* as such — it developed from poems such as Hélinant's *Vers de la Mort* and from the *Vado Mori* tradition — he did in fact introduce the peculiar word "macabre" to his audience.

Among macabre scholars, the etymology of this word represents a highly contested issue.⁶⁰ Some evidence suggests that it relates to the Biblical figure of Judas Maccabee, leader of the Jewish revolt against those who wished to defile the Temple in Jerusalem, who begged the Jews to pray for the souls of the dead. During the period in which the Latin Church was promoting the belief in Purgatory, from roughly the eleventh century on, the figure of Judas Maccabee was a focus of

⁵⁶ Ibid. 60.

⁵⁷ For an analysis of the writings of these fifteenth-century poets see: Eldegrad DuBruck, *The Theme of Death in the French Poetry of the Middle Ages and Renaissance* (The Hague: Mouton, 1964); Edelgard DuBruck, "Death: Poetic Perception and Imagination (Continental Europe)," *Death and Dying in the Middle Ages* ed. Edelgard DuBruck and Barbara I. Gusick (New York: Peter Lange, 1999):295-309.; and François Villon, *Complete Poems* ed. and trans. Barbara N. Sargent-Baur (Toronto: Toronto UP, 1994).

⁵⁸ The word *respit* in the title refers to an official letter of deferral obtained from the royal chancellery and which allowed the applicant to defer his/her debts until an extended due date. Le Fèvre, who became very ill in October of 1376, saw his miraculous recovery in terms of his own legal world: God had granted him an extended loan on life. See Camille 158.

⁵⁹ Quoted in Delumeau 77.

⁶⁰ For a thorough discussion on the etymology on the word 'macabre' see Kurtz, esp. pp.21- 24.

intense clerical propaganda, which explains how his name came into contemporary language.⁶¹ Meanwhile, some scholars have suggested that the word 'macabre' refers to the last name of the figure of the Authority who opens and closes every *Danse Macabre*.⁶² The term has also been connected with the Arabic word *maqābir* (plural of *maqbara*) meaning grave.⁶³ Finally, there is a French slang word *machabéé*, which means corpse and the Hebrew word *Macabé* that, according to Leonard Kurtz, refers to decomposition and more specifically means "the flesh leaves the bones."⁶⁴

Regardless where the word 'macabre' originated or how it became incorporated into the existing language, the presence of secular poems such as the ones written by Le Fèvre suggests that in this period, at the end of the fourteenth century, a collective sensibility actively sought to express in both textual and visual form the theme of Death as the Great Leveler that had already been in existence in the monastic writings of earlier centuries.

⁶¹ Delumeau 73.

⁶² Kurtz 23.

⁶³ Ibid. 22.

⁶⁴ Ibid. 22.

Chapter Two:

Proliferation of Images

While monastic poems on Death and *contemptus mundi* literature had circulated, albeit amongst a limited audience, since the twelfth century, the first visual images that incorporated these elements did not appear until the late thirteenth century. In discussing the spread of the macabre genre, Jean Delumeau has rightly pointed out that the majority of medieval macabre images appeared in churches, Psalters, Books of Hours, and cemeteries, which is to say, in places associated with prayer and religious contemplation.⁶⁵ Before discussing the *Danse Macabre* mural in detail, acknowledging some of the earlier examples of the macabre will reveal the visual context from which the mural emerged and will make the implications of this singular image more obvious.

One of the first branches of the genre to emerge was the legend of *Three Living and the Three Dead* (henceforth *Three Living*). The legend centers on a story of three living princes, commonly depicted mounted on horses and busy hunting, who encounter three cadavers, each in a different stage of decomposition, that remind the living of the inevitability of death and the transience of earthly life. The living, usually dressed in beautiful clothing and adorned with jewels, are generally of different ages, representing different stages of human life.

Like most other macabre themes, the *Three Living* first appeared as a written text and only later developed as a pictorial representation often accompanied by the poem. In fact, the origins of the legend precede the Middle Ages and stem from a Byzantine hagiographic novel *Barlaam and*

⁶⁵ Delumeau 70.

Josaphat, which itself is an adaptation of an earlier Buddhist legend.⁶⁶ The *Three Living* was translated into vernacular in the thirteenth century and then included in the popular medieval collection of hagiographies and fables, *The Golden Legend*, by Jacobus de Voragine.

Geographically, visual depictions of the *Three Living* were widespread in the Mediterranean, especially in Italy, where it seems to have been the only significant macabre theme.⁶⁷ As Delumeau claims, the oldest representations of this dramatic tale can be found in several churches in southern Italy and in the area around Rome.⁶⁸ A fresco dating from the first third of the thirteenth century, in the church of Santa Margherita de Melfi near Foggia, depicts an encounter between three young hunters and three skeletons.⁶⁹ A similar scene is also depicted in the church of Poggio Mirteto, in the Monte Sabini region, although in this fresco only one king is depicted stopping in horror as he encounters the gruesome sight of three crowned corpses.⁷⁰

But the most significant, and for our discussion of the *Danse Macabre*, the most relevant depiction of the *Three Living* theme is found in the large fresco painting entitled *The Triumph of Death* at the Dominican cemetery of the Camposanto in Pisa from around the 1340s (Plate 19). The fresco, which is unfortunately badly damaged, depicts on the left hand side a group of noblemen and ladies mounted on horses and proceeding through a narrow valley. They are returning from a chase with their servants, one of whom has a dog on a leash while another carries the game (Plate 20). Suddenly the riders stop when they encounter on the ground before them, three open coffins containing dead bodies. In the first coffin is a skeleton, with a body emaciated to the point that his

⁶⁶ Ibid. 67. *Barlaam and Josaphat* recounts a story in which astrologer tells the King of India that his Josaphat will convert to Christianity. In order to prevent this act, the King locks his son up in a marvelous palace and offers to him all earthly goods. Josaphat gets bored, however, and leaves the palace. While hunting one day, he meets a leper, a blind man, and later an old man who teaches him the vanity of the world the benefits of meditation. Sometime later, Barlaam, a Christian hermit disguised as a merchant manages to reach Josaphat and convert him to Christianity. Several elements of this story are reminiscent of the legend of Buddha, as the young prince Siddhartha.

⁶⁷ Binski 135.

⁶⁸ Delumeau 70.

⁶⁹ Ibid. 70. Unfortunately, Delumeau does not reproduce this fresco in his text and I have unable to find any other reproduction of that image.

⁷⁰ Ibid. 70. This image dated from the second half of the thirteenth century.

entire rib cage is visible, who turns his grinning skull toward the viewer and places his left hand below his chin as if he were proudly presenting to us all the horridness of his decay. Placed in the second coffin is the clothed body of a prince with his head resting on a crown and turned away from the viewer, while in the third is the body of the nobleman, hideously bloated, just beginning to decompose. Large snakes coil around the dead bodies in all three coffins.

Faced with this ghastly, unexpected sight, the nobles react in horror. As Paul Binski has pointed out, what is "so telling in the language and construction of [this] image is the way it charts response."⁷¹ Every reaction, from disgust and fear to curiosity and even fascination, is captured in the scene. The noble lady on the far left places her hand on her chest in shock, the horseman next to her points at the coffins as he presents the scene to the figure beside him, who in turn puts his hand on his chin and looks downward; meanwhile, another member of the hunting party holds his nose, overwhelmed by the stench of death. Even the animals are shown reacting. The horses recoil at the sight and smell of the decomposing flesh, while the small hunting dogs sniff vigorously as they approach the source of the vile odor.

This rendition of the *Three Living* varies significantly from most other depictions in two specific ways. First, the dead are shown in their coffins instead of standing upright and addressing the living. Second, a figure of a hermit is depicted standing on a cliff on the far left of the image between the living and the dead. Unfolding a scroll and pointing to it, the hermit assumes a double role.⁷² Besides being present in his own right, he acts as a spokesman for the silent dead.⁷³ According to James Clark, who has written extensively on the macabre, the scroll the hermit holds in his hand contains a warning to his listener "against pride and boastfulness."⁷⁴ He is awarded this role because as a hermit he has already renounced life, earthly pleasure and material goods.

⁷¹ Binski 137.

⁷² Clark 56.

⁷³ Ibid. 56.

⁷⁴ Ibid. 56.

The hermit therefore represents the ideal, though almost unattainable, model of Christian life.

Delumeau suggests that the hermit is probably Saint Macarius since, as his hagiography in *The Golden Legend* points out, he was the saint most associated with cadavers.⁷⁵

While this scene is the only obvious macabre image in the *Trimuph of Death*, the rest of the fresco consists of interesting and relevant elements that are worth acknowledging. The winding road above the depiction of the *Three Living* turns and twist as it leads to a chapel around which a small community of hermits is shown reading, meditating and even milking a goat. Birds and animals rest peacefully around them (Plate 19).⁷⁶ Contrasting this idyllic scene, the top of the neighboring mountain is burning with the flames of hell, while winged devils are shown thrusting the souls of the damned into the fire. On the right hand side of the fresco another tranquil scene is illustrated.

Seated in an orange grove, lords and ladies are enjoying themselves as they listen to music and converse cheerfully. Flying above them are cupids with lighted torches. But unbeknownst to the joyous living, the gigantic figure of Death personified brandishing its huge scythe is about to approach them. Unlike the more common depictions of Death personified as a genderless emaciated cadaver, in this fresco Death is shown as an old woman with long flowing white hair, talons instead of hands and feet and huge, bat-like wings.⁷⁷ As she flies toward the orange grove she stares at the living with a face that expresses fierce anger and determination.

In the middle of the image to the left of Death, a group of wretched, suffering crippled men with their arms stretching out call upon Death to come and save them from their terrible anguish.⁷⁸

⁷⁵ Delumeau 96. Delumeau recounts the story of Saint Macarius' from *The Golden Legend*, according to which he entered a cave in order to sleep. In the cave were buried the bodies of pagans. When he used one of them as his pillow, demons appeared to frighten him and animate the cadavers; St. Macarius did not get scared, instead he started beating the corpses and saying "Get up and go if you can."

⁷⁶ Clark 56.

⁷⁷ Ibid. 56.

⁷⁸ Ibid. 57.

Deaf to their cries, Death turns away attacking wealth rather than poverty.⁷⁹ Amassed in a heap below Death are the dead. Still dressed according to their earthly occupation, a pope, an emperor, prelates, nobles, nuns and monks are shown parting with their souls; the souls are shown as naked babies coming out of their mouth.⁸⁰ Once released from the body, the soul is claimed either by the angels on the right or the devils on the left. Behind Death, in the upper right section of the image, armies of light and darkness are battling for the souls of the dying.⁸¹

Located within a cloistered cemetery, *The Triumph of Death* is an image that contains the figure of Death personified, gruesome depictions of decomposing cadavers, obvious visual reminders of the transience of life and importance of penance — all of which exemplify the culture of the macabre. But the image is also set within a specific religious framework. The next frescoes in the gallery represent the scenes of the *Last Judgment* and *Hell*, which form the continuation of the *Triumph of Death*. As Delumeu argues, “the judgment that then follows death gives meaning to all other elements of the composition.”⁸² The value and importance of piety is clearly demonstrated by the serene figures of the hermits, located in the *Triumph of Death* chapel on the left. Living their peaceful and devout life, the hermits dedicate their life to prayer, meditation and manual labor.⁸³ Not only are they not afraid of dying, but Death itself, aware of their piety, is completely turned away from them and turns toward the cheerful young nobles.⁸⁴ The didactic implication of this composition is clear: positioned diagonally from the hermits who conduct their earthly life in a Christian manner, it is the ignorant young aristocrats who will be punished by Death.

Furthermore, Death distinguishes not only between pious and irreverent, but also between rich and poor. In the *Triumph of Death*, it is the rich who are the object of any cautionary lessons.

⁷⁹ Ibid. 57.

⁸⁰ Ibid. 57.

⁸¹ Ibid. 57. See also Baschet 333.

⁸² Delumeau 70.

⁸³ Ibid. 70.

⁸⁴ Ibid. 70.

The nobles on horses, decked out in rich clothing and accompanied by servants, are the ones who encounter the gruesome image of the three dead cadavers. It is for them, and not for the monks in the image above, that the hermit is displaying the open scroll, reminding them of their frivolous existence. Ignoring the cries of the wretched, for these already know the misery of life, the figure of Death also turns to the rich and is about to deliver its deadly blow.

But the most significant moral lesson, and the one that differentiates this fresco from other macabre images, is its clear visual reference to the damnation and salvation of Christian souls. While it depicts cadavers decomposing, their bodies bloated or devoured by snakes, demonstrating the transience of life, the image also points out, through the battle of demons and angels and through the scene of the *Last Judgment*, that ultimately it is the *soul* that is worth protecting. Additionally, like the *Danse Macabre* mural that will follow, the *Triumph of Death* represents, in the scene below the figure of Death, the dead dressed according to their station in earthly life. We see prelates and nobles, priests and an emperor, but these figures, unlike the ones in the *Danse Macabre*, are not placed in a hierarchical arrangement. Depicting the concrete, equalizing power of death, the fresco shows the various members of society all grouped in one equal mass. They are no longer differentiated by their position in society or the richness of their clothing, but by the ultimate destiny of their souls being divided by devils and angels.

Although scholars have debated the meaning of the fresco and some have even pointed out its secularizing tendencies, it seems that the image is primarily didactic in nature. Throughout the image angels hold scrolls that, according to Baschet, are filled with moralizing texts about the importance of penance and devotion.⁸⁵ And while there are ways in which some of the scenes in the fresco can be seen as having a twofold meaning, its location in a Dominican church and its

⁸⁵ Jérôme Baschet, *Les Justices de l'au-delà : les représentations de l'enfer en France et en Italie, XIIe-XVe siècle* (Rome : Ecole française de Rome ; Paris : Diffusion De Boccard, 1993) 333.

placement right next to the *Last Judgment* scene point to the specifically religious implications of the image.

The Triumph of Death also demonstrates important ways in which friars of the mendicant orders contributed to the spread of monastic doctrines of *contemptus mundi* and macabre imagery. There is another rendition of the *Three Living* also related to mendicant friars, though not situated within such an elaborate religious framework, that is worth considering as it will demonstrate the ways in which the ambiguity of the macabre increases when its context is not as clearly demarcated.

This is the miniature from the Psalter of Robert de Lisle dating from circa 1310 (Plate 1).⁸⁶ Created in England in a Franciscan monastery, for a secular noble patron Robert de Lisle, the miniature is divided into two segments and made to resemble a diptych, and is accompanied by verses of the poem.⁸⁷ Separating the living and the dead into two panels, such a composition emphasizes the temporal, spatial and corporeal differences that divide one group from another. Dressed in lavish fabrics and wrapped in luxurious furs, the three crowned princes are placed on the left hand side of the image. Positioned against an austere background which only further emphasizes the opulence of their attire, the princes stand on the grass-covered ground. This subtle allusion to their exterior setting, along with the falcon held by one of the princes, refers to the theme of hunting which, as we have seen, is one of the legend's typical elements.

The contrast between the living and the dead, which became even more pronounced in the *Danse Macabre*, is already present in this miniature. The plump faces and luscious, curly hair of the

⁸⁶ See Lucy Freeman Sandler, *The Psalter of Robert de Lisle in the British Library* (Oxford UP, 1983). The Psalter has been in the Arundel Collection of the British Library since the nineteenth century. It is now a fragment of the original since it no longer contains the text that once followed the cycle of miniatures. The bifolia have been cut in part so that in its present state the manuscript consists of a group of single leaves, which have been bound out of order in a number of cases. It is presently bound with another fragmented English manuscript of approximately the same period known as the *Howard Psalter Hours*.

⁸⁷ Binski 135. According to Binski, in c.1302-3, Amadeus V, Count of Savoy, purchased two panels resembling a type of diptych which depicted the legend of the *Three Living*. The panels were bought in London and seem to have influenced a number of English and French representations of this theme.

living are juxtaposed with the hollow eyes, grimacing mouth and skulls of the dead. Furthermore, the luxurious furs, embroidered clothes and jeweled crowns of the living are set against the tattered rags of the cadavers. The clothed and protected bodies of the princes are contrasted to the gaping and semi-nude emaciated bodies of the dead. The miniature also exhibits a form of the uncanny humor that is typical for macabre imagery in the way in which the dead mimic the living in their body postures; also, the falcon, symbol of hunting and nobility, held by the first prince, suggests that the living went out to hunt yet themselves became the hunted.

Interrupted and shocked by the sight of the decomposing cadavers, the postures of the living register degrees of dismay and apprehension. Shielding both his body and his sight from the repulsive spectacle, the second prince gazes downward as he hides behind his seemingly more courageous living partner. Holding the frightened prince's limp right hand in a gesture of protection, the figure with the falcon is the only living representative that actually faces the three dead kings. Yet despite his bravery, he too becomes the prey of the dead and is forced to accept their terrible warnings that the earthly life is a fleeting one and that death is fast approaching. Coming to terms with his foolish beliefs, though seemingly not quite ready to abandon them, the prince with the falcon even laments the injustice of God:

Said, why was man made so lowly
That he must receive such an end;
This was too evident a folly.
God would never perpetuate this madness
So brief a joy and such great pleasures.⁸⁸

Such verses demonstrate the ambiguity of the macabre, which can be seen as lament about loss of the earthly, pleasurable life rather than provoking feelings of piety and devotion.

Made for Robert de Lisle, an English nobleman who joined a Franciscan monastery prior to his death in 1314, this Psalter is characterized by a number of unusual didactic theological

⁸⁸ Quoted in Binski, 136.

diagrams that reflect some of the key teachings of mendicant spirituality. During the Middle Ages, Psalters, and later Books of Hours, were the illuminated prayer books of the nobility, featuring beautifully illustrated miniatures that accompanied the text.⁸⁹ The uniqueness of de Lisle's Psalter lies in the fact that, save for the miniature of the *Three Living*, all other illustrations include complex diagrams that depict the themes of mortality, sinfulness and the efforts one has to make through penance and good conduct to achieve one's place in Heaven (Plate 21). With its diagrams, constructed as columnar tables, concentric or radial circles, trees and towers, all reiterating the importance of penance, the *Three Living* miniature is a striking pictorial representation that exemplifies and validates the diagrams' central arguments.

But if viewed on its own, outside its strict religious framework, the miniature's moralizing implications are in fact quite ambivalent. Unlike the *Triumph of Death* where the legend is surrounded by visual references to the Last Judgment and the battle for souls, in this miniature all we see is a disturbing encounter between the living and the dead. The viewer is forced to face only the horrendous realization of the inevitability of death, amply represented in the bodies of decomposing cadavers that are, in a sense, a future mirror image of the viewer. In other words, the cadavers represent what the viewer will become. And while the miniature is a moralizing lesson that emphasizes spirituality over material goods, it is also a lament over the body that will inevitably decompose and dissolve, which is especially evident in the verses uttered by the prince with the falcon. In addition, while the material goods may be criticized in the miniature, they are also valued as markers of one's identity and class in the same manner in which de Lisle's Psalter, although attempting to propagate strict Christian teaching is, in its luxurious representation

⁸⁹ Psalters developed first and were originally structured on the reading of all hundred and fifty Psalms of David, which were suppose to be recited during a course of a single day. However, since that proved impractical, the sequence of reading was restructured to encompass a full week. From the fourteenth century on, as the Books of Hours gained prominence, the Psalter was adopted as an inclusion to their main segment.

inevitably a commodified object itself. Such a luxurious manuscript implied a certain rank in the society that its owner must have taken pride in.

However, despite its ambivalences, the miniature of the *Three Living* was placed within a religious Psalter whose didactic diagrams instructed the reading of the image. In addition, its audience was limited and consisted of Robert de Lisle and members of his immediate family.

Having considered these earlier examples of macabre imagery, I will now proceed with the discussion of the *Danse Macabre* mural at the cemetery of the Innocents, which unlike the Psalter of Robert de Lisle had a fairly large and quite varied audience. And while it was, like the *Triumph of Death*, a public image, it featured no references to salvation, resurrection or the Last Judgment and thus no sense of a clear (Christian) resolution.

Chapter Three

Cemetery of the Innocents and the Danse Macabre

By the early fifteenth century, the theme of the *Three Living* was so widespread in France that it was found not just in Psalters and Books of Hours, but also on everyday objects such as street signs.⁹⁰ One of the most prominent, certainly the most unusual, visual renditions of this macabre legend was carved on the portal of the Paris Church of the Holy Innocents in c.1405.⁹¹ Commissioned by the Duke of Berry (d.1416), a known art connoisseur and promoter of the macabre⁹², the image was one of the first large-size public sculptural depictions of this theme anywhere in France.⁹³ Precisely why the Duke of Berry chose the Church of the Holy Innocents for his commission is not known, though it is likely that it was one of the means through which he

⁹⁰ Camille, *Master of Death*, 29. Addresses in medieval Paris were identified by visual images that were either carved or painted on doorways or exterior walls of houses. These signs gave each house its own name. According to Camille there was house in late fourteenth-century Paris named the *Maison des Trois Morts et des Trois Vifs* (The House of the Three Living and the Three Dead).

⁹¹ I say unusual because it seems to be the only known rendition of the legend that was done as a sculpture. All other examples are either paintings or miniatures from illuminated manuscripts. Unfortunately, this image along with the portal on which it was carved no longer exists. It was destroyed in 1786 when the cemetery of the Innocents, together with the church, was dismantled and removed from the city of Paris. As far as I know, there is no surviving evidence to suggest what this sculpture looked like, though it is possible that Guyot Marchant's *Danse Macabre* print series from the 1480s, which include the print of the *Three Living*, was based on the portal. Moreover, it is also unusual that such a legendary story be depicted on a church portal, a space usually reserved for biblical depictions or images of saints. Yet at the same time it is also a theme quite appropriate for the church located in a celebrated cemetery.

⁹² The portal sculpture at the Innocents was not the only macabre theme commissioned by the Duke. His famous Book of Hours *Très Riches Heures*, illustrated by the Limbourg brothers between 1413 and 1416, also contains an image of the *Three Living* as well as several figures of Death personified in the margins of F.86v.

⁹³ I am unaware of any other example of a public rendition of the theme in France that predates the portal sculpture from the Innocents. In France, unlike in Italy, macabre images were first incorporated into the public spaces of churches and cemeteries only in the fifteenth century. Discussing the spread of the macabre, Delumeau mentions that in the town of Metz, in the Church of Notre-Dame de Clairvaux, there was a small painting dating from the early fourteenth century which portrayed "an encounter between the living and the dead." See Delumeau 70. However, Delumeau does not provide additional information other than to say that this painting no longer exists. Regrettably, I was unable to locate any other reference to this image and can only assume, based on Delumeau's brief description, that it depicted some version of the *Three Living* theme.

earned the right to be buried inside the holy precincts of this church.⁹⁴ Following the Duke's commission in 1424-5, the *Danse Macabre* mural was painted on the interior cloister wall of the cemetery of the Innocents below the charnel houses placed along the *Rue de la Ferronnerie* (Plate 22).⁹⁵ With the addition of this first visual rendition of the *Danse Macabre* theme, the cemetery of the Innocents was transformed from a prominent Paris burial ground into a spectacle of the macabre. In effect, the integration of the culture of the macabre into the Innocents continued into the sixteenth century with the addition of an alabaster stone sculpture depicting the figure of Death personified, created by Germain Pilon. Displaying its desiccated body and its gaping torso, the figure of Death is shown holding an escutcheon with an epitaph that reads "No mortal can escape me: all are destined to become food for worms."⁹⁶ Similar examples of macabre images were found in other medieval cemeteries, but no other burial ground (or church for that matter) featured as many references to the macabre as the cemetery of the Innocents. In fact, the Innocents was undoubtedly the ideal site for such imagery of death because the cemetery itself through its arrangement, location and various contradictions epitomized the macabre sensibility.⁹⁷

Located in the first *arrondissement* of Paris next to the main marketplace of *Les Halles*, the Innocents was one of the city's oldest and most popular burial grounds (Plate 23). First built in the Early Middle Ages, the cemetery and its accompanying church were dedicated to the Holy

⁹⁴ Only secular and ecclesiastic nobility had rights to be buried in the sacred areas within Christian churches. The Duke of Berry earned that right because he was a member of the royal family (he was King Charles VI's uncle) and also because he commissioned the sculpture.

⁹⁵ During the fifteenth century this street was known as *Rue de la Charronnerie*.

⁹⁶ Richard A. Etlin, *The Architecture of Death: The Transformation of the Cemetery in Eighteenth-Century Paris* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1984) 6. This sculpture is the only material evidence that survived the 1786 destruction of the cemetery. Nowadays it is located at the Louvre museum.

⁹⁷ The Innocents' association with the macabre was so profound that it persisted for well over four centuries. For example, it figured largely during many eighteenth-century debates over the need to demolish this medieval cemetery. See Etlin 4-36. And even when the Innocents and its accompanying church were finally removed from the city of Paris, the mythic association between cemetery and macabre continued: in the 1832 novella by Paul Lacroix entitled *La Danse Macabre*, a mysterious violinist named Macabre plays his instrument nightly at the cemetery of the Innocents in fifteen-century plague-stricken Paris. Lacroix's novella, which was illustrated by Tony Johannot, was written in response to the cholera epidemic that struck Paris between May and October of 1832. The existence of this novella suggests that even some fifty years after it was demolished, for many Parisians the Innocents still represented the most vivid spectacle of death. See Paul Lacroix, *La Danse Macabre: Histoire Fantastique du XV siècle* (Paris: Reunel, 1832).

Innocents, the martyred infants killed by Herod in Bethlehem.⁹⁸ Although the cult of the Holy Innocents was practised at the cemetery, exemplified by a large statue of the Holy Innocent encased in gold and silver and kept in the church, from the fifteenth century on, the fascination with this cult was matched and probably even exceeded by the newly found interest in the macabre.

Like most other medieval burial grounds, the Innocents was a parish cemetery. However, while most cemeteries commonly served only one church, the Innocents served eighteen parishes and a hospital.⁹⁹ As the map from the eighteenth century shows, the actual cemetery consisted of three general areas: the church of the Holy Innocents flanked by two lateral chapels; the open central courtyard; and the wall, or the arcade, which contained charnel houses, places where dried bones were stored in open galleries, and surrounded the entire space of the cemetery (Plate 22). Uninterrupted by the linear arrangement of individual graves common to modern cemeteries, the open graveyard at the Innocents featured only a few marked tombs and some specifically medieval funerary monuments such as open pulpits, Calvary crosses and the "lanterns for the dead."¹⁰⁰ Serving either a religious or folkloric purpose, these monuments amply summarized the medieval perceptions of cemeteries as places not of somber contemplation but of bustling religious activity.¹⁰¹

⁹⁸ Kurtz 74. Not much is known about the history of this cemetery prior to the eleventh century. First historical records regarding the Innocents appear in 1086 when the cemetery was walled and separated from the nearby marketplace. Kurtz mentions that in 1082 a certain Philippe August bought an area of land called *champeaux* near the church of the Holy Innocents and made it into a public market. Attempting to secure his newly bought land and separate it from the adjacent cemetery, August built the enclosure in 1186.

⁹⁹ Etlin 10.

¹⁰⁰ Ariès, *Images of Man and Death*, 18. Open pulpits were used mostly during the summer when outdoor sermons were preformed often. On the other hand, "lanterns for the dead," are unusual and not well-researched medieval funerary monuments that point to an important connection between medieval attitudes towards death and the belief in ghosts. Consisting of a reading desk with a tower on top, "lanterns for the dead" were used during the night when the lights were lit in the tower in order to keep away the ghost of the recently departed. According to medieval beliefs, the ghosts (or the unquiet dead as they were commonly referred to) roamed the cemeteries at night together with devils or possessed spirits of those dead individuals whose souls had not been confined to Purgatory.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.* 18.

However, because of its proximity to the city's main marketplace, the space of the Innocents was also perpetually invaded by the living. Expanding the marketplace, merchants and produce sellers placed their stands in front of the Innocents and sometimes even within the cemetery's consecrated ground. Shady characters roamed there at night selling and trading amidst the open graves. Even scribes and notaries often gathered at the Innocents and offered their services to the illiterate populace, using tombstones as their writing desks. In addition, the most remote area of the cemetery's land belonged to the hospital of the *Hôtel-Dieu*, which interred the poor who died at the hospital in charity burials.¹⁰² Since the *Hôtel-Dieu* was a charitable hospital located near the Innocents, both the hospital and the cemetery attracted many beggars and vagabonds. What's more, the Innocents was a known meeting place for prostitutes and lovers who met under the cemetery's arcades. Thus as Philippe Ariès explains, the Innocents was a place for both the living and the dead, where the presence of the dead eventually became quite discrete.¹⁰³

Prior to the emergence of the macabre images, the Innocents' most spectacular feature was its mysterious soil, believed to be sacred. Allegedly, it was brought from the Holy Land and had the power to decompose the buried bodies within a period of only nine days.¹⁰⁴ Since in the Middle Ages burial practices favored quick corporeal decomposition, a point which I will elaborate later, this remarkable characteristic of the Innocents significantly contributed to its popularity. In fact, the peculiar soil is responsible for the cemetery's well-known medieval epithet, the *mange-chair* or the "flesh eater."¹⁰⁵ It is this aspect of the Innocents that made it into one of the preferred burial grounds of Paris. The soil was so revered that the Bishop of Paris, Louis Beaumont de la Forrest

¹⁰² Ibid.10. Already by the Middle Ages, the *Hôtel-Dieu* was associated with poverty since only the most destitute members of society were treated at this hospital.

¹⁰³ Ariès, *Images of Death and Man*, 19.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid. 101.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid. 101.

(d.c.1400), when he could not be buried at the Innocents, requested in his will that some earth from the cemetery be placed in his tomb in order to help accelerate the process of decomposition.¹⁰⁶

Without question, the Innocents' most famous attribute was its large mural painting of the *Danse Macabre*. We can be fairly certain of the date when the *Danse Macabre* was painted because its creation is recorded in the *Parisian Journal*, a book of memoirs from the fifteenth century, which clearly states the following:

In this year 1424 the *Danse Macabre* was made at the Innocents.
It was began about August and finished in the following Lent
[in 1425].¹⁰⁷

It seems that at the time when it was created the mural was already known as the *Danse Macabre*. Precisely how the image was given this name is not known, but it is important to emphasize that the *Danse Macabre* genre most likely originated with the example from the Innocents. I am unfamiliar with any other medieval poem that either bares the name *Danse Macabre* or includes figures of Death dancing with the living that predates the one from the Innocents.¹⁰⁸ Finding the initial *Danse Macabre* is of secondary importance. Further research may point out some other, hitherto unknown or unmentioned example that might challenge or precede the poem from the Innocents. What is important to highlight is that the structures and ideas expressed in the *Danse Macabre* poem from the Innocents reveal that its author was an individual familiar with

¹⁰⁶ James M. Clark, *The Dance of Death in the Middle Ages and Renaissance* (Glasgow: Jackson, Son & Co., 1950) 22.

¹⁰⁷ *A Parisian Journal 1405-1449*, trans. Janet Shirely (1881.Oxford: Clarendon, 1968) 204. In French the passage reads: lan mil cccc xxiii fut faicte la Danse Macabre aux Innocents, et fut comencée le moys d'aoust et achevée au karesme ensuivant.

¹⁰⁸ Certainly, the *Vado Mori* poems seem to resemble the *Danse Macabre* the most, but as I implied earlier, no dancing is mentioned in these poems and there are no cadavers, see page 8. In his section on the macabre, Jean Delumeau recounts an argument proposed by Hellmut Rosenfeld in his *Der Mittelalterliche Totentanz. Entstehung, Entwicklung, Bedeutung*. (Köln Böhlau, 1968) in which he argues that a certain *Danse Macabre* poem found in a mid fifteenth century manuscript currently held in Heidelberg was actually written at the Dominican convent of Würzburg in 1350 and thus precedes the one from the Innocents. According to Rosenfeld, this *Danse Macabre*, which was also illustrated, contains a series of Latin monologues uttered by different characters (pope, cardinal, king, etc.) who are obliged to enter a deadly dance. See Delumeau 78.

medieval monastic poetry and literature well enough to be able to combine elements from the *contemptus mundi*, the *Vado Mori* and monastic poetry on death into one cohesive text.¹⁰⁹

Placed on the interior cloister wall of the arcades on the southern side of the Innocents, the mural, along with the arcades on which it was painted, was destroyed in 1669 supposedly in order to widen the *Rue de la Ferronnerie*. Fortunately, in 1485 the Parisian printer Guyot Marchant made a copy of the mural and published it as a series of woodblock prints.¹¹⁰ The poem as well has been recorded in two manuscripts now located in the *Bibliothèque Nationale* in Paris.¹¹¹ While Marchant's prints, and especially his first edition, are a fairly accurate reproduction of the original mural there are some important differences. For example, Marchant updated the costumes of the living representatives so that the clothing would correspond with the fashion of the 1480s. He also grouped the characters in fours: one cleric and one layman, each with its own *mort*.¹¹² He set each group within its own arcade while carved pillars separated one section from another.¹¹³ Because of the format of the printed book, we can only view two pages at a time, while at the Innocents the line was continuous, "the chain of figures stretch[ed] before the spectator as a unity."¹¹⁴ Of course, the mural was divided into compartments by means of the arches of the vault, but this did not really interrupt the line as a whole.¹¹⁵ In his attempt to reproduce the image precisely, Marchant did include the ornamented arches in the upper portion of the prints; however, the impact of the prints is nevertheless weakened because they cannot be viewed as a unit.¹¹⁶

The way the mural was situated in the space of the cemetery can be grasped from a sixteenth-century painting of the Innocents attributed to an artist appropriately named Jacob Grimer (Plate

¹⁰⁹ I will elaborate on this point in the subsequent chapter.

¹¹⁰ For a complete chronological list of Marchant's print series see Kurtz esp. pp. 25-70.

¹¹¹ These two manuscripts contained a dialogue described as "Les vers de la danse macabre, tels qu'ils sont au cimetière des Innocents." MS B.N.LAT.14904 and MS B.N. FR.25550

¹¹² Clark 24.

¹¹³ Ibid. 25.

¹¹⁴ Ibid. 25.

¹¹⁵ Ibid. 25.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.25.

24). Painted circa 1580, the image captures the inner view of the Innocents and highlights the contrast between the open central courtyard, dotted with a few tombs and monuments, and the arcades around the periphery. Also depicting the famous arcades along the *Rue de la Ferronnerie* on the right hand side of the image, Grimer portrays with meticulous detail the tightly packed open galleries of the charnel houses. Moreover, a row of skeletal and human figures can be made out on a cloister wall below the charnel house and behind the arched walkway. This barely visible detail is in fact a reference to the *Danse Macabre* mural. And while we cannot see the mural itself, save for a few figures, Grimer's painting poignantly captures the fitting setting for the *Danse Macabre*, whose theme of death as leveler is aptly represented (and confirmed) in the myriad of skulls and bones packed in the charnel houses above.

Although Marchant's prints, especially his later ones, included additional figures, we know from the *Danse Macabre* poem that the original mural consisted of fifteen pairs of dancing partners arranged according to their status in medieval secular and ecclesiastic society. The sequence of the figures was as follows: a pope, an emperor, a cardinal, a king, a patriarch (of Constantinople), a constable, an archbishop, a knight, a bishop, a squire, an abbot, a bailiff, an astrologer (also known as a man of learning), a citizen, a canon, a merchant, a Carthusian monk, a sergeant, a monk, a usurer with a poor man, a physician, a lover, a lawyer, a minstrel, a parish priest, a peasant (laborer), a Grey Friar (Franciscan), an infant, a cleric and a hermit (Plates 2-18).¹¹⁷ The mural therefore acknowledges, but also orders hierarchically, the growing complexity of medieval society.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁷ The following figures were added in Marchant's 1486 edition: a legate and a duke (between a king and a patriarch); a schoolmaster and a man-at-arms (between a merchant and a Carthusian monk); a proctor and a jailer (between a peasant and a Grey Friar). Also, Marchant included the figures of a halberdier and a fool after the hermit, prolonging the dance sequence. See Chaney 9.

¹¹⁸ By illustrating such complexity of medieval secular and ecclesiastic society, the mural challenges the earlier model of a tripartite society that existed in the Early Middle Ages and consisted of those who pray, those who fight and those who work. See Georges Duby, *The Three Orders: Feudal Society Imagined* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1986).

The dancing partners are framed by the figure of the Author (L'Acteur, also known as the Authority) who delivers the opening and closing speech and is therefore depicted twice. In the first image, he is shown sitting at a desk, looking at the viewer and pointing at an open book (Plate 2). In the upper right corner an angel is shown holding an open scroll with text that reads: "*Hec pictura decus pompam luxumque relegate inque choris linquere festa monet.*"¹¹⁹ Surrounded by a shelf and at least two desks, each containing heavy, leather-bound books and some writing tools, the Author appears to be spatially, and perhaps even temporally, separated from the rest of the figures. However, the foliage on the ground, the pillars on either side and the arch above the image, all of which appear in every segment of the *Danse Macabre*, suggest that the Author also occupies the same space as the rest of the figures. The curious juxtaposition of shrubs and grass with heavily ornate, wooden furniture makes the reading of the space occupied by the Author quite perplexing. What is this furniture so obviously intended for reading and writing, activities which in the Middle Ages would certainly be taking place indoors, doing outside? Where is the figure of the Author located? Perhaps by merging these two entirely opposing spaces, reading room and exterior locale, the image implies that the Author is somehow simultaneously occupying both. In other words, he seems to be at once observing the dance, and reading or narrating it.

In the second image, which is also the *Danse Macabre's* closing scene, the Author is once again shown sitting on an elaborate, throne-like chair next to a desk covered with books, one of which, presumably the one he was reading from in the first scene, still lays open (Plate 18). Furthermore, the angel is now shown in the top left corner holding a much larger scroll that takes up almost the entire mid-section of the image and is also held by the Author. The bookstand that in the first scene was placed in front of the Author is now replaced by a rather unusual image. Prostrated on its back and still holding a staff, a grinning cadaver lies next to his toppled crown. This is the figure of the

¹¹⁹ Quoted in Kurtz 26.

Dead King (*Le Roy Mort*) whose horizontal position signifies the final ending of the deathly dance. No longer looking at the viewer, the Author turns his head toward the fallen king with a facial expression that registers a note of sadness or melancholy.

Situated between the two representations of the seated Author are the dancing partners. Each living representative, save for the figure of the poor man, is accompanied by his own *mort* (Plate 12). Interestingly, besides the Author, the poor man is the only other character in the *Danse Macabre* who does not die or is not already dead. His role in the image is to illustrate the profound levels of the usurer's ignorance who, even in death is still concerned with profits and money. Even though his *mort* is attempting to pull him into the dance, the usurer turns his body in the opposite direction, places his left hand in his purse, and is shown lending the money to the almost kneeling poor man.

The figures are placed in an unspecified exterior locale and set against a barren background. This was not the case with the original mural, which most likely depicted an elaborate landscape in the background, further contributing to the intricacy of the image.¹²⁰ But even with the missing background, the *Danse Macabre* encompasses an impressive variety of figures, postures and dialogue all of which animate the image and help entice the attention of the viewer.

At first glance, all the cadavers in the image appear to be more or less the same. Yet a closer observation reveals that significant differences exist in the body coverings, postures and degrees of decomposition that help distinguish and individualize each dancing cadaver. The most obvious difference relates to the presence or absence of shrouds and loin cloths. Some cadavers, like the ones in the scene with the bishop and the squire (Plate 8), are completely nude. Others cover themselves in different ways: one drapes the shroud over its entire body exposing only the rib cage

¹²⁰ Clark 26. It also seems likely that the *Danse Macabre* featured an elaborate background because most other paintings of the Dance of the Dead that were based or influenced by mural had background images. For example the mural depicting Dance of Death from Lübeck dating from c.1463 features townscape in the background, see plate 25. For a discussion of the significance of background townscape in a mural similar to the one in Lübeck see Elina Gertsman, "The Dance of Death on Reval (Tallinn): The Preacher and his Audience," *Gesta* XLII/2 (2003):143-159.

and parts of the gaping torso (Plate 4), another wraps the loin cloth over the genitals it no longer has (Plate 5), and one even drapes the cloth over its shoulder and ties it in an elaborate knot (Plate 17). Many carry various tools or weapons that signify death, dying OR BURIAL such as scythes, shovels, spades, coffins or darts (Plates 3,4,9,12,and 13). Aside from these external attributes, the cadavers are also differentiated by the degree of bodily decomposition. Some are emaciated to their bones (Plates 5 and 7), while the bodies of others, not fully decomposed, are shown with gaping cavities that are in some cases filled with tiny white worms (Plates 4,10,11,and 17). Yet despite their emaciated frames the cadavers adamantly pull the living into the dance. These gestures vary: one cadaver nonchalantly pulls the bishop's cloak, while the other slips its hand under the squire's arm (Plate 7); one holds the pope's hand (Plate 3), the other comically grabs part of the lawyer's headdress (Plate 14).

Like their dead counterparts, the mortals are distinguished by their clothing and their bodily postures but also by their position within the social hierarchy. Many carry a distinctive attribute of their rank or profession: the physician holds aloft the wide-mouthed urine flask (Plate 13), the usurer carries the money bag (Plate 12), the minstrel's lute is on the ground next to him (Plate 14), the hermit holds a rosary and an open book (Plate 17) and a number of the high ranking ecclesiastics hold embellished staffs and crosses (Plates 3,5,6,7,and 8). Meanwhile, certain characters are revealed by their physiognomy and bearing; representatives of the lower classes are hunched over and have rough, wrinkly visages, while members of the upper classes stand straighter (and more proudly) with faces that are smoother and more refined. The dialogue between the living and the dead, which in the original mural was strategically placed below each pair, provides additional, usually mocking commentary on the living representatives, especially the ones from the upper classes. For example, the abbot is teased for being "fat and plump," the

legate finds himself "arrested" by Death, and the emperor is robbed of all his earthly attributes and left only "with pick, shovel and a shroud."¹²¹

Although the *Danse Macabre* individualizes and contrasts all the figures in the dance, the mural's most striking juxtaposition takes place between the living and the dead. The clothed and embellished bodies of the living are compared to the nakedness of the dead; exposed are not just their skin but also their open cavities. The contrast between the living and the dead is further underlined by the differences in their body postures. In the tableau depicting the bishop and the squire (Plate 7), the postures of the corpses, especially the one in the middle, suggest a certain naturalness and fluidity of movement, while those of the bishop and the squire indicate immobility, and even, in the case of the squire, a marked attitude of resistance. By raising one hand in a gesture of refusal, pointing his feet in the opposite direction from those of the corpse, and leaning slightly away from his dancing partner, the squire's body language expresses an attempt at escape. Other living, as well, act in resistance: the cardinal raises his arms and turns his head away from the *mort* (Plate 4), the grey friar recoils in fear (Plate 16), while the Carthusian monk raises his left hand in rejection (Plate 12). Some even put their professional knowledge to use in an attempt to avoid death; the merchant, true to his occupation, prepares to negotiate by placing his hand on the bony arm of the cadaver (Plate 10), and the doctor points to the urine specimen in the flask, which in the Middle Ages was most often used to determine the state of one's health, as if to suggest that according to science it is still not his turn to die (Plate 13, Plates 26 and 27¹²²).

¹²¹ Bringing the abbot into the dance, the dead man says "Commend to God the abbey which has kept you fat and plump. Soon you will be rotting helplessly. The fattest rot first." Approaching the legate, the cadaver proclaims "Legate, you are arrested. You shall not go forth, I swear. Hold yourself firm and ready for death. I assure you that to-day death challenges you." And saddened by his death, the emperor laments "I know not to whom I can appeal against death which takes me off like this. I must arm myself with pick, arm and a shroud. This hurts me very much. I have had earthly greatness over all and must die nevertheless." All quoted in Chaney 52, 48 and 47.

¹²² Plate 26 depicts a miniature from c.1440, in which a dying person is surrounded by various individuals including a doctor, in the far left of the image, who opens a single pane of the window to better examine the urine flask that he hold in his left hand. Similarly, plate 27 shows, in the bottom right corner, a deathbed scene. A doctor, dressed in black, examines a urine specimen against an open window, while the woman behind him nervously squeezes her hands as she awaits the final prognosis. For similar images of death and dying see Roger S. Wieck, "The Death Desired: Books of Hours

Yet in the same moment that it imposes stark contrasts between the living and the dead, the *Danse Macabre* blurs and challenges, the very boundaries it establishes. Although the image portrays a dance, it is not the living but paradoxically the dead who are dancing. Moving vigorously, the cadavers are depicted leaping, hopping and balancing their scrawny bodies with rhythm, joy and vitality. Conversely, the living seem petrified, bodies appearing stiff or immobile. Even facial expressions are contrasted; in the faces of the living we register degrees of alarm, apprehension, dismay and denial, while the faces of the dead grin with mirth, mockery and amusement. The dead are more alive than the living.

The *Danse Macabre's* principal implication, the equality of all in death, is suggested by the social diversity of the living representatives. As Jean Delumeau has pointed out, such a structure imposes a specific moralizing message while at the same time flirting with a humor and irony which can, if taken outside of the mural's religious framework, subvert any didactic intentions:

The black humor that characterizes the dances of the dead (or death) can be explained by the double lesson that they wish to convey. The final hour arrives suddenly — hence the comic element of surprise. It strikes equally both young and old; rich and poor — hence the ridicule aimed at those who believed themselves protected by age, rank, or fortune.¹²³

Because, as we have seen, the image and the text tease kings, emperors and high ecclesiasts for their reliance on wealth and material possessions, it seems probable to assume that the *Danse Macabre's* less fortunate audience gained a certain pleasure from the way the mural ridiculed such follies of the upper classes.¹²⁴

and the Medieval Funeral," *Death and Dying in the Middle Ages* Edelgard E. DuBruck and Barbara I. Gusick ed. (New York: Peter Lange, 1999):431-476., Roger S. Wieck. *Time Sanctified: The Book of Hours in Medieval Art and Life* (New York: George Braziller, 1988).

¹²³ Delumeau 86.

¹²⁴ In its verses, the mural acknowledges that death is more devastating to the wealthy and prosperous than to the impoverished members of society. The pope, the emperor, the king and the cardinal all lament death and express their desires to avoid it. But when Death approaches the peasant it proclaims, "You [ploughman] ought to be pleased with death because it sets you free from great anxiety." And while even the Peasant does not really embrace death, the verses

Yet even as the verses caution against them, the image openly displays material possessions for the viewer to admire. Luxurious furs, jewels, embroidery — particularly evident in the tableaux depicting pope and emperor (Plate 3), cardinal and king (Plate 4) — are all fetishized objects produced and consumed in the construction of the individual subjectivity of their late medieval owners. In the image, strict social hierarchy is not critiqued, rather it is reasserted. In other words, while the material goods might be criticized in the image, they are nevertheless essential status symbols and makers of an individual's social identity. In this, the mural's central theme is subverted; the *Danse Macabre* offers a promise of future equality in death, yet ironically, it still maintains the existing social hierarchies while ordering people and classes accordingly.¹²⁵

Interestingly, a similar paradox is also evident from the ways in which the space of the cemetery of the Innocents was socially demarcated. Although once decomposed, the bodies were removed from their graves and relocated to the surrounding charnel houses, the burial ground was still carefully segregated. The most desirable places for burials were the two side chapels, the *Chapelle d'Orgement* and the *Chapelle de Villeroy*, as well as the interior of the church of the Holy Innocents itself.¹²⁶ The so-called *petit charnier*, located closest to the church and containing both the Chapel of the Virgin and later Pilon's sculpture, contained the most exclusive charnel houses.¹²⁷ Ossuaries located elsewhere in the cemetery commanded slightly lower fees.¹²⁸ The interest in being buried close to the main church or chapels was prompted by the belief that the dead will benefit from the proximity to these sacred structures and from the religious activities taking place

still suggest that for him dying will indeed be a great relief. On the theme of death, labor and social satire see Barbara I. Gusik, "The Ultimate Nothing: Death and the End of Work in Late-Medieval English Lyrics," *Death and Dying in the Middle Ages* ed. Edelgard E. DuBruck and Barbara I. Gusik (New York: Peter Lange, 1999): 315-330.

¹²⁵ Delumeau 136.

¹²⁶ Etlin 10. Burying the dead inside the church was a common medieval practice. However, the only individuals allowed to be buried in churches were members of the ecclesiastic and secular elite. The Duke of Berry was buried inside the church of the Holy Innocents when he died in 1416. He earned the right to be buried there because he was a member of the royal family (uncle to King Charles VI) and because he commissioned the portal sculpture of the *Three Living and the Three Dead*.

¹²⁷ Ibid. 10.

¹²⁸ Ibid. 10.

within them. Moreover, with the creation of the *Danse Macabre*, the burial ground around the mural as well as the charnel houses above increased in exclusivity. Within the open graveyard, those who could afford an individual grave also crowded the areas surrounding the church, while the populace was buried cheaply in the remainder of the cemetery in large mass graves.¹²⁹

The Innocents, then, through its burial hierarchy, presented a visual class portrait.¹³⁰ Not only were the members of the upper classes separated from the commoners, but they were also afforded a greater degree of identity through the specific locations of their tombs, as well as through the epitaphs or heraldic seals placed near their graves and charnel houses. Such distinct separation of social classes was in direct opposition to the *Danse Macabre*'s maxim that in death all are equal. As art historian Paul Binski has argued, the carefully demarcated layouts of medieval cemeteries mirrored and reinforced the precise and sharp social distinctions which were already established among the living.¹³¹

Moreover, since only baptized Christians were buried within the walls of parish cemeteries the inclusion — but more importantly the exclusion of various groups from the cemetery — only further mapped out social divisions and inequalities. The burial of those spiritually or socially marginalized (heretics, Jews, lepers, victims of suicide or the unbaptized) in the consecrated grounds of Christian cemeteries was strictly forbidden.¹³² All these groups were in a sense spiritually and socially already dead, and the cultural prejudices that existed in their lives extended and haunted them in death.¹³³

One of the *Danse Macabre*'s most striking features is the disconcerting manner in which the image disrupts the temporal, spatial and physical boundaries that otherwise separate the living from the dead. By animating the dead and bringing them back into the world of the living, the

¹²⁹ Ibid. 10.

¹³⁰ Ibid. 10.

¹³¹ Binski 57.

¹³² Binski 56.

¹³³ Ibid. 56.

mural represents an image in which the animate and the inanimate not only occupy the same space, but are also physically connected with one another in a dance. Certainly other macabre images, like the *Three Living* from the Psalter of Robert de Lisle (Plate 1), also depict a disruption of boundaries, but I would argue that in the *Danse Macabre* such transgression is more obvious and far more disturbing. In the miniature, the encounter of the living princes with the decomposing cadavers, although alarming, is a *temporary* breach, a moment of instability that passes once the conversation is completed and the princes learn their moralizing lesson. The princes do not actually die, they are simply *warned*. The miniature therefore represents a moralistic lesson in which the living, embellished in jewels and lavish furs, learn (or at the very least are given the chance to learn) to mend their lives and repent their sins. But the living in the *Danse Macabre* are never given such an opportunity and their encounter with the dead is not a temporary one. No matter the resistance or apprehension, their inclusion into the dance is also the moment of their death.

The image thus forced the viewer to face the ghastly sight of a decomposing cadaver which, especially in the context of late medieval culture, violated a set of social and religious norms. As Julia Kristeva explains, discussing biblical taboos, a decaying corpse represents the most obscene abomination:

A decaying body, lifeless, completely turned into dejection, blurred between the inanimate and inorganic, a transitional swarming, inseparable lining of a human nature whose life is undistinguishable from the symbolic — the corpse represents fundamental pollution. A body without soul, a non-body, disquieting matter, it is to be excluded from God's territory as it is from its *speech*. Without always being impure, the corpse is "accursed of God" (Deuteronomy 21:23): it must not be displayed but immediately buried so as not to pollute the divine earth.¹³⁴

¹³⁴ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia UP, 1982) 109. The fear of the decomposing cadaver and the notion that the dead body is the epitome of transgression, for it is neither alive

Kristeva's passage, which inadvertently describes a type of macabre body, emphasizes the problematic and ambivalent position that the dead occupied within religious discourse. The dead body is a soulless body. As such it inhabits a liminal space, one that stands outside of religion and is hence untouched by God. The corpse is therefore waste, transitional matter, it "is above all the opposite of the spiritual, and of the divine law."¹³⁵ Quick burial becomes therefore a means of purification, a process through which the vile nature of human decay is purged from the world of the living.

However, the cadaver is also in a way a unique kind of image; it no longer belongs to the world of the living but neither is it entirely absent from it.¹³⁶ Undoubtedly, the corpse (but not the macabre corpse) is dead, it does not breathe or move, yet at the same time it is also alive with vermin, and crawling with worms and toads.¹³⁷ By simultaneously decomposing its own matter and breeding more parasites, the corpse is paradoxically the site of both production and destruction. As Michael Camille explains,

Such instability made the corpse the antithesis of the aesthetic object, which in the Middle Ages tended to be seen in terms of stillness, permanence, and wholeness. The chaos of the squirming and collapsing cavities only assumed such a permanent state when it became bones.¹³⁸

nor truly dead, has been a subject of many theoretical and anthropological debates. See: Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982) esp. pp. 200-260.; Piero Camporesi, *The Incorruptible Flesh*, trans. Tania Croft-Murray (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1988); Jacques Derrida, *Aporias: Dying – Awaiting (One Another at) the "Limits of Truth,"* trans. Thomas Dutoit (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1993); Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concept of Pollution and Taboo* (1966, London and New York: Routledge, 2002); Michael de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: UP, 1984) esp. pp.190-198.

¹³⁵ Ibid. 109.

¹³⁶ Camille 175.

¹³⁷ Ibid. 175.

¹³⁸ Ibid. 175.

So it is only when the flesh was fully stripped from the bones, when individuality no longer adhered to its flesh, that a cadaver slipped into skeletal anonymity and reached the point of stillness and permanence described in the passage above.¹³⁹

What this paragraph also reveals is the medieval cultural distinction that separated flesh and bone. While flesh, especially the rotting flesh, was deemed dangerous and corruptive, the bones were considered clean and pure.¹⁴⁰ Stemming equally from religious and cultural sources, such attitudes informed medieval burial practices and in particular prompted the development of charnel houses. Typical of medieval cemeteries, the charnel house (from *carni* — flesh) or ossuary is an open gallery placed on top of the arcade and features piles of gleaming white bones. Originally, these burial monuments developed for practical reasons. Since most parish cemeteries occupied a rather limited area of land, the number of burials per cemetery was therefore fairly restricted. As cities grew their population expanded as well, which meant that more burial spaces were needed in order to secure a proper burial for every (Christian) citizen. This dilemma was solved with the invention of charnel houses that contained (and visually displayed) bones and skulls of individuals whose bodies had decomposed in the graves of that cemetery. The bodies therefore remained in the soil only until they de-fleshed, after which point they were relocated to the charnel houses in order to make room for the newly dead. Eventually, by the fifteenth century, the practice of exhuming the bones and piling them in the open galleries of the charnel houses resulted in a remarkably theatrical décor. Yet the seemingly haphazard arrangement of various parts of human skeletons, resulting in a cornucopia of death, was actually carefully orchestrated. Following the rules of medical science, the bones in charnel houses were grouped according to their *anatomical* origins, skulls on one side, tibiae and fibulae in the other.¹⁴¹

¹³⁹ Ibid. 176.

¹⁴⁰ Camille, *Master of Death*, 195.

¹⁴¹ Ibid. 23.

The phases of medieval interment practices, from death to charnel house, are distinctly outlined in a miniature entitled *Burial Scene* created in Paris circa 1425-30 (Plate 28). Quite possibly illustrating the cemetery of the Innocents, the miniature is divided into the main image, placed in the centre, and three vignettes in the margins. In the first one, on the top left corner, the dying individual is shown receiving the Last Rites from the priest dressed in red, in the second vignette the dead body, ritually cleansed, is placed in a *sudarum* or white burial cloth, while the third vignette shows a family member, probably the dead person's wife, giving alms to the poor in front of the church.¹⁴² All these ritualized steps were necessary in order to prepare the body (and the soul) for the proper Christian burial depicted in the central image. The coffin, used in the Middle Ages *only* to transport the body from the church to the cemetery, and the shovel, both common attributes of macabre cadavers, are placed in the foreground next to shrubs and foliage in a setting that is reminiscent of the one in the *Danse Macabre*. Attending the funeral is the group of priests as well as some mourners dressed in hooded black cloaks and located on the right hand side of the image. The body of the dead is captured at the moment of entombment and is shown still wrapped in the *sudarum*. Placed in the background and juxtaposing the burial is a row of charnel houses, the white bones and skulls of which are clearly visible in the image and which emulate the whiteness of the *sudarum* and signify the dead body's final resting place.

As these burial customs clearly demonstrate, every effort was made to conceal the sight of the dead body, especially that of the decaying body, from the living spectators. As historical records point out, interment followed quickly after death, usually the same day.¹⁴³ The rapidity of burials was instigated for essentially two reasons: the fear of contagion by the corpse, which proved sensible during many plague epidemics, and the deeply rooted anxiety of witnessing the spectacle

¹⁴² For a summarized, yet detailed analysis of burial practices in the Middle Ages see Wieck, "The Death Desired."

¹⁴³ Camille, *Master of Death*, 175.

of decomposition.¹⁴⁴ The fear of seeing a decaying cadaver was especially prevalent in Northern Europe.¹⁴⁵ Believing that corpses remained active and sensitive even after their death, the Northern Europeans placed special attention to protecting and containing cadavers. Such attitudes related to the belief that corpses actually died twice. The “first death” was marked by the extinction of living breath, while the “second death” involved mineralization of the corpse to its hard remains — teeth and bones.¹⁴⁶

This brings us back to the problematic portrayal of the macabre corpse, whose animated yet decomposing body essentially challenged most, if not all, cultural and religious taboos outlined in the passages above. The macabre body, while certainly cadaverous, is not actually dead. As the *Danse Macabre* so vividly demonstrates, these emaciated corpses not only dance with vigor and enthusiasm, but also talk back and mock the living. In fact, save for the figure of the Dead King, no other cadaver in the mural assumes the horizontal, immobile position typical of dead bodies. Yet by depicting the cadavers in motion, the macabre actually emphasizes those deeply seated cultural fears that the dead bodies undergoing their “second death” are active and dangerous. What’s more, the macabre forces the viewer to observe not the gleaming white skeletons stripped of their corruptive flesh, but the putrefying corpse whose body still exhibits all signs of corporal decay, from blackened, rotting tissue to repulsive worms. At the Innocents, such ghastly images of decay were placed right below the charnel houses therefore portraying precisely that which the cemetery through its burial practices was attempting to conceal.

Witnessing the *Danse Macabre*’s horrid spectacle of decay must have been a disturbing experience. Contrary to what we might think today with our notions of the plague-stricken, death-

¹⁴⁴ Ibid. 175.

¹⁴⁵ See Katherine Park, “The Sensitive Corpse: Body and Self in Renaissance Medicine,” *Fenway Courty*, 1990-1991 (Boston, 1992):77-87; and Katherine Park, “The Life of Corpse: Division and Dissection in Late Medieval Europe,” *Journal of the History of Medicine* 50.1 (1994): 111-32. See also Nancy Ciciola, “Wraiths, Revenants and Ritual in Medieval Culture,” *Past and Present* 152 (1996): 4-45.

¹⁴⁶ Camille 172.

filled Middle Ages, seeing a corpse decomposing was actually quite rare.¹⁴⁷ At the Innocents, whose soil was revered for its decomposing abilities, corporal disintegration was supposed to have been accelerated significantly. In fact, reducing the length of decay, or even avoiding it altogether, became in the Middle Ages something of an obsession. Purchasing costly perfumes and exotic balms to mummify their dead, the wealthiest members of medieval society perpetually sought to bypass the danger of corporeal decay.¹⁴⁸ One of the most famous (and certainly the most controversial) methods of circumventing putrefaction was the practice of boiling the body. Limited to secular and ecclesiastic nobility, the practice assured a swift separation of flesh from bones and avoided decomposition entirely.¹⁴⁹

Challenging both the cultural anxieties around decomposition and also the notion of the cemetery's legendary, flesh-eating soil, the *Danse Macabre* portrays decaying bodies that are forever fixed in a state of transgression. Yet at the same time this inability of the macabre body to assume a point of stillness and permanence was mirrored in the space of the cemetery itself, which although intended to be a consecrated ground was perpetually invaded and corrupted.

Being buried in the parish cemetery, which by canon law was integrally a part of the church, essentially meant resting eternally within the consecrated precincts of the sacred place.¹⁵⁰ However, in order for that precinct to remain sacred, laws and regulations had to be instigated to prevent, at least in theory, behavior or individuals whose presence might challenge the sanctity of

¹⁴⁷ Camille 175.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid. 176.

¹⁴⁹ This practice required that the body be dismembered immediately after death and boiled in a mixture of water and wine. The tradition of boiling the body developed in roughly the eleventh century and was prompted by the difficulties in transporting the illustrious bodies of religious and secular notables who often died in foreign lands. Disgusted by such practice, in 1299 Pope Boniface VIII issued a papal bull officially prohibiting this custom. However, like the dancing in the cemeteries that was also often prohibited, the practice of boiling the bones continued well after Pope Boniface's proscription. On the boiling of the corpse see: Agostino Paravicini Bagliani, "The Corpse in the Middle Ages: The Problem of the Division of the Body," *The Medieval World* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001):327-341; Elisabeth A.R. Brown, "Death and the Human Body in the Later Middle Ages: The Legislation of Boniface VIII on the Division of the Corpse," *Viator* 12 (1981):221-70.; and Ronald S. Finucane, "Sacred Corpse, Profane Carrion: Social Ideals and Death Rituals in the Later Middle Ages," *Mirrors of Mortality: Studies in the Social History of Death*, ed. Joachim Whaley (London: Europa Publications, 1981):40-60.

¹⁵⁰ Camille, *Master of Death*, 195.

the area. Dancing at cemeteries was strictly forbidden in part because the act of dancing was viewed as being potentially sensual and sexually liberating. Yet despite the repeated warnings by many parish priests, high church officials and even formal, written proclamations announced at three separate church councils, dancing at cemeteries was obviously still practiced.¹⁵¹ Because of this, it seems curious that the mural propagated the notion of dance even though that practice was opposed by the religious authorities. In addition, before it was formally established every cemetery had to be consecrated by the bishop, and it required re-consecration in the event of spilling of blood or semen.¹⁵²

Although such regulations were not always followed, the proximity of the Innocents to the city's main marketplace and its location in the centre of Paris made rules especially difficult (if not impossible) to enforce. The activities of prostitutes commonly conducted right underneath the charnel houses, almost certainly violated a number of church regulations and compromised the sanctity of the area. As Camille points out, by the late fourteenth century the illicit sexual behavior at the cemetery was further expanded with the selling of pornographic material in and around the Innocents.¹⁵³ This graveyard was therefore a site of contestation where the sacred beliefs and rituals of the church met the dynamic and profane nature of urban life.¹⁵⁴ An episode recounted in *A Parisian Journal* illustrates how the sacredness of the cemetery was jeopardized:

At this time, at the end of June [of 1436], a beggar struck a beggarwoman's child in the church of the Innocents. The mother raised her distaff and hit him with it, meaning to hit him on the head, but he jumped back and so got the blow on his

¹⁵¹ First, a thirteenth century council at Rouen initiated a formal proclamation that forbade dancing in the graveyards. The same prohibition was later repeated in Avignon where in 1394 Pope Clement IV prohibited dancing, but also prostitution and bouls-playing at cemeteries. Finally, the council of Basal in 1430 once again demanded that dancing at cemeteries be banished.

¹⁵² Binski 56.

¹⁵³ Camille, *Master of Death* 176. Camille argues that the late 14th and early 15th centuries saw the efflorescence of erotic and pornographic images. He quotes a public criticism of such practices made in the early 15th century by the Chancellor of the University of Paris, Jean Gerson. In particular, Gerson complained that trading nude images in and around the Christian consecrated areas, such as cemeteries and churches, defiles the sacredness of those spaces.

¹⁵⁴ Camille, *Master of Death* 195.

face — but it was only a very slight one, a tiny scratch that bled a very little. None the less they were in prison for twenty-two days over this and during these twenty-two days the Bishop of Paris refused to reconsecrate the church unless he were paid. These two poor people had not got that much in the world between them. And because the Bishop refused to do it unless he were paid to his liking there was no mass, matins, or vespers all these twenty-two days, no one buried in the cemetery, no divine service said at any time, no water blessed.¹⁵⁵

In his painting of the Innocents, Jacob Grimer makes a similar reference to the defiling practices of the urban crowd (Plate 24) and depicts the cemetery as an active place of diverse social interaction. At first glance it appears that the painting's principal subject might be the large funeral taking place in the foreground. Yet the significance and the centrality of this event are also challenged by other activities simultaneously occurring throughout the cemetery. Grimer positions the viewer right at the entrance to the cemetery, but looking slightly from above. The viewer's all-encompassing perspective of the Innocents, together with its Gothic-style church and neighbouring buildings only further diffuse the importance of the funeral in the foreground. More than attempting to capture just one single event, Grimer's painting emphasizes the nonchalant atmosphere at the cemetery that allows various and sometimes even contradictory activities to take place all at once. In the foreground, to the left of the funeral, a group of four barely clothed beggars is shown sifting through the open graves. Approaching them is a group of monks, dressed in dark cloaks, which seems to be leaving the aforementioned funeral. And although the monks are standing right next to the seated beggars, they seem oblivious to their presence and undisturbed by their exhuming activities. The beggars, as the image implies, are just the regular everyday inhabitants of the cemetery. The ordinary nature of their presence at the Innocents is further emphasized by another vagabond shown on the far right. Also seated and scarcely

¹⁵⁵ *A Parisian Journal 1405-1449* trans. Janet Shirley (Oxford: Clarendon, 1968) 310.

dressed, this lonely beggar is depicted receiving alms from a well-clad individual. The painting equates the beggars' unsettling existence to that of dogs, which just like beggars are shown roaming the cemetery and sifting through the open graves. In fact, dogs are everywhere in Grimer's painting; they are shown dragging bones, playing with children, and even defecating on the cemetery's consecrated soil.

The painting therefore emphasizes that the efforts of the church to establish a clear sense of boundaries between the sacred and the profane, the exterior and the interior and the animate and the inanimate proved futile, for the cemetery remained, just like the macabre bodies that it exhibited, an epitome of transgression.

Chapter Four:

The Dance of Death, the Dance of Life

From the abundant literature on the macabre it is evident that the *Danse Macabre* mural played a significant role in influencing the spread of this macabre genre.¹⁵⁶ Following the creation of the mural in 1424-5, the Dance of the Dead became the most represented macabre subject, surpassing even the prominence of the *Three Living and the Three Dead* theme.¹⁵⁷ Given these facts, it is surprising that more research pertaining to the immediate historical and social contexts from which the *Danse Macabre* mural emerged has not been conducted. In general, historical and art historical sources that discuss the *Danse Macabre* do so either in passing or focus solely on its macabre qualities.¹⁵⁸ Certainly, these writers acknowledge the difficult historical circumstances that affected France in the early decades of the fifteen century such as plagues, famines and the Hundred Years War, albeit in a general manner. But if these historical events were indeed influential for the development of the *Danse Macabre*, in what ways did they affect its creation, its subject matter and its message? In other words, is the historical situation in any way present in the image? And if it is, through what details is it precisely revealed?

As we have seen from previous chapters, the taste for the macabre in European culture had been developing since at least the early fourteenth century when the monastic literature of *contemptus mundi* became more widespread. In France, specifically, secular poets such as Eustache Dechamps and Jean Le Fèvre wrote verses influenced by Pope Innocent's *De Miseria* and

¹⁵⁶ See footnote 10.

¹⁵⁷ The *Danse Macabre* murals that followed the model from the Innocents are found in French churches like: Kermaria-en-Isquit, in Plouha (c.1460), monastic church at La Chaise-Dieu in Brittany, Mesley-le-Grenet in the Church of Sts. Blaise and Orien (before 1540). In addition a number of *Danse Macabre* images outside of France were also influenced by the mural from the Innocents. For example, London's Pardon Cemetery (belonging to the Old St. Paul's Cathedral) had an image of the *Danse Macabre* from c.1430, Marienkirche Church in Berlin (c. 1484) and Lübeck in Beichtkapelle (c.1463).

¹⁵⁸ See footnote 11.

introduced the secular reading public to aspects of this monastic tradition.¹⁵⁹ Theologians from the University of Paris were themselves influenced by *contemptus mundi* literature and produced treatises in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries which dwelled on the scornful vision of human life. However, these texts were for the most part limited to a small audience and the illiterate public was unfamiliar with them. Until 1405, when the Duke of Berry's sculpture representing the legend of the *Three Living* was carved on the portal of the church of the Holy Innocents, the majority of macabre images were limited to the pages of illuminated manuscripts owned and circulated by the French medieval elite.¹⁶⁰ When the *Danse Macabre* entered the civic space of the cemetery, the macabre audience thus shifted dramatically. No longer restricted solely to the reading public, the *Danse Macabre* theme now reached a much wider segment of the population. Paupers and peasants, lawyers and bishops — any one of these could, standing in front of the mural, relate to at least one of the figures in the dance even if they could not read the inscriptions.

Moreover, the *Danse Macabre*'s central thesis, the equalizing power of death, mirrored the dismal historical circumstances in which the image was painted, making it particularly relevant to its immediate audience. But, as I pointed out in the previous chapter, the *Danse Macabre* mural is also highly ambivalent. On the one hand it mocks the ruling classes, and on the other it depends on and reinscribes the existing social hierarchies. In order to emphasize its moralizing message, the *Danse Macabre* utilizes the ghastly image of the decomposing cadaver, whose representation is at odds with medieval cultural and religious customs. What's more, even though the *Danse Macabre* is religious and didactic in nature, the mural's Christian message is often difficult to ascertain

¹⁵⁹ See pages 13 and 14.

¹⁶⁰ For examples of the *Danse Macabre* in illuminated manuscripts see John Plummer, *The Last Flowering: French Painting in Manuscripts, 1420-1530, From American Collections* (New York: Pierpont Morgan Library, 1982).

because it focuses not on the salvation of souls, but on the physicality of bodies and their gruesome disintegration.

What then did this ambivalent image signify to its audience? What message about death, mortality or the human condition was it attempting to convey? And most importantly, how was it related to the historical context from which it emerged? In order to answer these questions, I will discuss the political situation in France in the first three decades of the fifteenth century, decades marked by internal political turmoil and renewed conflict with England. Focusing on the specificities of this complex political moment will help situate the *Danse Macabre's* underlying connotations. In addition, I will also analyze the creation of the mural, especially its origin and authorship. Finally, I will discuss the seditious nature of the *Danse Macabre's* ambivalent message which, from the moment the mural was created, allowed for it to be appropriated and appreciated in various and often highly politicized manners.

It is undoubtedly true, as most scholars of the macabre have pointed out, that the preference towards this type of ghastly imagery developed in part as a reaction to the devastating effects of the plague, the Black Death that first arrived in Europe in the middle of the fourteenth century. The magnitude and scope of this first epidemic, which by some estimates killed between one-third and one-fifth of Europe's population, cannot be taken lightly. The traumatic repercussions affected various aspects of medieval society, causing unprecedented shifts in social, cultural, religious, economic and political realms; meanwhile, the plague's recurring character continually intensified the confusion and anxiety over human mortality.

In the early decades of the fifteenth century, the city of Paris faced three separate plague epidemics in 1412, 1418 and 1421. The situation was so arduous that during the epidemic of 1418, the city's cemeteries, including the Innocents, could no longer properly accommodate the bodies of all the deceased:

The death rate in and around Paris this September [in 1418] was higher than it had been for three hundred years, so old man said. No one who was struck by the epidemic escaped, particularly young people and children. So many people died so fast towards the end of the month that they had to dig great pits in the cemeteries of Paris and lay thirty or forty in at once, in rows like sides of bacon, and then a bit of earth scattered over them. ... More than fifty thousand people died in Paris in less than five weeks.... All October and November people died as fast as ever. When it got so bad that no one could think where to bury them, huge pits were dug, five at Holy Innocents, four at the Trinity, at the other according to their capacity, and each pit held about six hundred people.¹⁶¹

The miserable conditions described in this passage from the *Parisian Journal* reflect the macabre's theme of the leveling power of death, and the emphasis on the triviality of human life better than any image could.¹⁶² Other maladies, fatal, but nevertheless still dangerous, affected Parisians in the years between the plague epidemics, further contributing to the general misery of the time. For our discussion of the macabre, one such malady is worth acknowledging. Known as *tac* or *horion*¹⁶³, this illness caused Parisians great distress in the spring of 1414:

And it pleased God that a foul corrupt air should fall upon the world, an air which reduced more than a hundred thousand people in Paris to such a state that they could neither eat, drink, nor sleep. They had very sharp attacks of fever two or three times each day, especially whenever they ate anything. Everything seemed very bitter to them, very rotten and stinking, and all the time, wherever they were, they shook and trembled. Even worse, besides all this, they lost all bodily strength so that no one who had this disease could bear to touch any part of his body, so wretchedly ill did he feel....As well as all the misery described above, people had with it such a fearful cough, catarrh, and hoarseness that nothing like a high mass could

¹⁶¹ *A Parisian Journal*, 131-132.

¹⁶² On the social effects of the plague see for example: Colin Jones, "Plague and Its Metaphors in Early Modern France," *Representations* 53 (Winter 1996):97-127; and Colin Platt, *King Death: The Black Death and its Aftermath in Late-Medieval England* (Toronto: Toronto UP, 1996).

¹⁶³ *Tac* is onomatopaeic like "click" or "clack"; while *horion* means "thump" or "blow."

be sung anywhere in Paris.¹⁶⁴

In listing the physical symptoms of *horion*, the author of *Parisian Journal* points out that those affected by the illness “shook and trembled” constantly. Probably caused by severe fever or some temporary neurological damage, the trembling effects of this illness perhaps resembled a grotesque dance.

To make matters worse, in 1417 famine reached the suburbs of the city. Though Paris was more often spared than the countryside, the famine of 1417 was prompted as much by poor climate as by a dire political situation, meaning that this time the city was especially targeted.¹⁶⁵ In 1417, Paris was at the centre of the intense political struggle that developed on two separate though interconnected fronts: the internal battle for the French Crown and a renewed confrontation with England.

From 1392 until his death in 1422, the King of France, Charles VI, was believed to be intermittently mad.¹⁶⁶ During the first few years of the fifteenth century the King’s uncle, Philippe le Hardi, Duke of Burgundy, and the King’s brother, Louis, Duke of Orléans, were the most powerful amongst several great magnates who sought to control the Crown, claiming that Charles VI was unfit to rule.¹⁶⁷ The two dukes contended against each other in every sphere both at home and abroad, in religious and in secular matters. The public generally preferred Burgundy to

¹⁶⁴ *A Parisian Journal*, 85.

¹⁶⁵ Not much is written about the 1417 famine in historical texts making it difficult to envision how devastating the situation was. However, after the Great Famine of 1317, France experienced numerous smaller famines impelled, in part, by the Hundred Years War (1337-1453) that repeatedly ravaged the countryside. For a study of famine and its social effects see John Walter and Roger Schofield ed. *Famine, Disease, and the Social Order in Early Modern Society* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge UP, 1989).

¹⁶⁶ King Charles VI suffered from a form of schizophrenia. For a discussion of the political situation in France in the fifteenth century see R.C. Famiglietti, *Royal Intrigue: Crisis at the Court of Charles VI 1392-1420* (New York: AMS Press, 1986); Anne D. Hedeman, *Of Counselors and Kings: The Three Versions of Pierre Salmon’s Dialogues* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001); Christopher Allmand ed. *Power, Culture, and Religion in France c.1350-c.1550* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1989); and P.S. Lewis, *Essays in Later Medieval French History* (London and Ronceverte: The Hambledon Press, 1985).

¹⁶⁷ It was Louis of Orléans who first tried to appropriate some of Burgundy’s territory thereby instigating the conflict. See Famiglietti, esp. p. 24.

Orléans, especially after the latter was implicated in numerous public scandals,¹⁶⁸ but the King himself, when sane, favored Orléans, thus making the political situation quite unstable. When in 1404 Philippe Le Hardi died and was succeeded by his son Jean Sans Peur as the new Duke of Burgundy, the rivalry between the two magnates became intensely personal and bitter. The situation escalated in November of 1407 when the Duke of Burgundy ordered the assassination of the Duke of Orléans in the streets of Paris.¹⁶⁹ Following the event, the Duke of Burgundy employed shrewd political tactics (including justifying the murder as a patriotic act and hiring Parisian illuminators to paint allegorical propaganda images excusing his violent action) in order to avoid the possibility of a public outcry.¹⁷⁰

The day after the murder, at the meeting in the King's Cabinet, the Duke of Burgundy confessed privately to the Duke of Berry that he had ordered the crime "at the instigation of the devil."¹⁷¹ Later on however, he changed his mind and promoted a vicious political campaign in which he accused his murdered cousin of plotting a *coup d'état* against the King.¹⁷² In presenting these allegations, the Duke of Burgundy claimed that his murderous act was proof of his courage and patriotism. Since the murder caused a great deal of distress amongst the French aristocrats, the Duke of Burgundy organized a public presentation (or justification) on March 8, 1408, at the great hall of Hôtel Saint-Pol in Paris before the Dauphin, members of the royal family, the deputies

¹⁶⁸ As an example, the Duke of Orléans was directly involved in one of the most infamous incidents of the late fourteenth century, later known as the *Bal des Ardents* (Plate 39). The unfortunate event occurred in 1394 at the Hôtel Saint Pol, the King's Right Bank residence, when during a masquerade the Duke's torch set ablaze the costumes of several young nobles eventually burning down the room and killing four aristocrats who were burned alive before the eyes of the whole court, and nearly murdering King Charles VI. Although the Duke tried to publicly repent by walking barefoot behind the King's horse in a special solemn procession to Notre Dame, the public continued to blame the Duke for the mishap. For an analysis of this episode see Barbara Wertheim Tuchman, *A Distant Mirror: the Calamitous Fourteenth Century* (New York: Knopf, 1978) esp. pp. 507-8; and Camille, *Master of Death* esp. pp. 69-70.

¹⁶⁹ This event is described in great detail in Famiglietti, esp. pp. 39-63; Camille, esp. pp. 129; and Hedeman esp. pp. 1-3. Louis was killed on November 23, 1407, when he was ambushed by Burgundy's men in the streets of Paris. Allegedly, the entire event was carefully plotted; Louis received a false summons to visit the King and after leaving his residence he was assaulted and miserably put to death by assassins.

¹⁷⁰ For an art historical analysis of the Duke of Burgundy's allegorical images see Carl Nordenfalk, "Hatred, Hunting, and Love: Three Themes Relative to Some Manuscripts of Jean sans Peur," *Studies in Late Medieval and Renaissance Paintings in Honor of Millard Meiss* ed. Irving Lavine and John Plummer (New York: New York UP, 1977): 324-341.

¹⁷¹ Nordenfalk 326.

¹⁷² Ibid. 326.

of the University and representatives of the city.¹⁷³ The speech was presented to the audience by Jean Petit, Doctor of Theology, and Duke of Burgundy's political partner.¹⁷⁴

Almost immediately after this presentation, the Duke decided to have it reproduced in four illustrated *de luxe* manuscripts, which were later copied and sold to different clients so that, as Carl Nordenfalk explains, "the document attained a fairly wide distribution."¹⁷⁵ The miniature from one of four manuscripts, nowadays at the Musée Condé, depicts the illustrated version of the *Justification of the Duke of Burgundy* (Plate 30). The miniature shows an exterior location bordered by a forest on the right and a cave on the left. In the centre of the image, a wolf, one of the armorial symbols of the Duke of Orléans, is portrayed trying to snatch a royal crown. But a roaring lion, the armorial symbol of Burgundy, emerging from the cave interrupts him and aims a deadly blow at the head of the wolf, which is shown bleeding. Above the two battling animals is a large golden *fleur-de-lis* that breaks as the crown falls.

While all four manuscripts featured slightly modified representations of this specific scene, their message is nevertheless the same. Employing the language of allegory, they emphasize the Duke of Burgundy's courage and determination to protect the French Crown, even if he has to resort to murder. As Nordenfalk suggests, the existence of these miniatures points to the fact that medieval manuscript illuminations were often used for political propaganda.¹⁷⁶ He argues that if the poster had been invented in those days, the Duke of Burgundy "would no doubt have made provisions for displaying the composition in the streets of Paris."¹⁷⁷

¹⁷³ Ibid. 326. The public talk was four hours long.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid. 326. As Nordenfalk points out, the justification presented was the final version of the text that the Duke of Burgundy originally drafted in the Netherlands before giving it over to "the venomous pen of Jean Petit to whip it into shape."

¹⁷⁵ Ibid. 327. The four *de luxe* copies were made for the Duke, his wife, his brother, the Duke of Barbant, and his young son, the future Philippe le Bon. Three of these manuscripts still exist and are nowadays in the following libraries: Vienna, Nationalbibliothek cod.2647, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, franc. France?, 5733, Chantilly, Musée Condé, 878(1197).

¹⁷⁶ Ibid. 338.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid. 338.

Despite the Duke's many efforts to justify his acts, the assassination of Louis of Orléans had devastating effects on the political situation in France causing great (and often bloody) disputes and divisions amongst the aristocrats. While the public generally tended to be on Burgundy's side, believing he was a wise reformer and a powerful leader, many princes and magnets, possibly fearing for their own lives, aligned against the Burgundian domination and in support of the new Duke of Orléans and his brothers.¹⁷⁸

In the following years the two sides fought constantly, further destabilizing the already difficult political circumstances. After one¹⁷⁹ of the many short-lived reconciliations, in 1413 the Burgundians, led by the skinner Simon Caboche, invaded Paris and massacred many Orléanists.¹⁸⁰ This violent act outraged not just the victimized party, but also many moderately minded individuals who, realizing the severity of the conflict, arranged the signing of yet another peace treaty, this time at Pontoise in July of 1413. But despite the apparent reconciliation, the fighting continued until August of the same year when, fearing almost certain retributions for the murder of Louis of Orléans, the Duke of Burgundy left Paris. Interestingly, following the Caboche revolts, the Duke's popularity plummeted so much that by early 1414 the copies of his *Justification* manuscripts, which still circulated in the public sphere, were "solemnly condemned, and owners of copies were ordered to burn them under pain of excommunication" — a point which further demonstrates that in the Middle Age, just as in any other historical period, images were heavily politicized.¹⁸¹

The conflicts that disturbed the French Court were carefully observed by the King of England,

¹⁷⁸Those belonging to this alliance were henceforth known as the Orléanists and sometimes also as the Armagnacs, after the powerful southern baron, Bernard Count of Armagnac joined the alliance in 1410.

¹⁷⁹ This was the so-called Treaty of Auxerre which was signed by both parties in 1412.

¹⁸⁰ See Famiglietti, esp. pp.111-132. The group led by Caboche (known as the Cabochiens) consisted predominately of butchers and flayers of Paris. The public was especially afraid of the Cabochiens believing they were very violent and rowdy.

¹⁸¹ Nordenfalk 327. Nordenfalk does not mention who ordered the burning of the copies, though it would be interesting to know where such orders came from. He does suggest that the Duke himself was obviously not shaken by these demands because while the cheaper copies did perish, those ordered by the Duke are still in existence.

Henry IV, who during the disputes helped both the Burgundians and the Orléanists respectively. While he occasionally assisted the warring sides, Henry IV was careful not to get deeply involved since his own political situation in England was quite unstable. In the early 1400s the diplomatic truce between England and France that helped pause the Hundred Years War (1337-1453) was coming to an end. In 1396, England's King at the time, Richard II (d.1400), and Charles VI had concluded a twenty-eight-year truce, having failed to successfully resolve the conflict over the disputed English duchy of Aquitaine and its relationship to the French Crown, the initial dispute that started the war.¹⁸² After deposing and arresting Richard II in September of 1399, the newly crowned Henry IV spent the next fourteen years trying to control and protect his shaky throne. When he died in 1413, Henry IV was replaced by King Henry V who, feeling more secure as a ruler than his predecessor, advocated a more aggressive foreign policy. Claiming legal rights to the French Crown, Henry V thus invaded France in the famous battle at Agincourt in August of 1415, officially resuming the Hundred Years War.

Jean, the Duke of Burgundy who despite many attempts to reinstate his position was still exiled from Paris, was almost certainly in some way involved in the English invasion of France.¹⁸³ While he did not directly assist the invasion by Henry V, he nevertheless posed no challenge to the English army; when they attacked France in 1415, the Duke of Burgundy stood aside and did nothing. Strategically, this probably seemed like a sound decision. By invading France and challenging Charles VI and his entourage, Henry V directly confronted the Orléanists who at this time held dominance in Paris and influenced the King's reign. The Duke of Burgundy hence

¹⁸² John Aberth, *From the Brink of the Apocalypse: Confronting Famine, War, Plague, and Death in the Later Middle Ages* (New York and London: Routledge, 2000) 97. The issue of the Hundred Years War, its causes and effects, has been analyzed by many scholars. For more recent discussion of the war see Anne Curry, *The Hundred Years War* (New York: Palgrave 2003); Clifford J. Rogers ed, *The Wars of Edward III: Sources and Interpretations* (Rochester, New York: Boydell Press, 1999); and Desmond Seward, *A Brief History of the Hundred Years War: the English in France, 1337-1453* (London: Robinson, 2003).

¹⁸³ Many princes and magnates in Paris could not forgive the Duke for his role in the Cabochien uprising. For the Duke's relationship with Paris in the years prior to the English invasion see Famiglietti, esp. pp.133-156.

believed that his discrete alliance with Henry V would inevitably help him prevail in his battle with the Orléanists and perhaps even allow him to eventually erase his murderous past.

These many turbulent events finally bring us to the famine of 1417. At the time, Paris was in the hands of both the Orléanists and the English invaders, which put the citizens of Paris in an extremely precarious position. The Duke of Burgundy and his followers were busy conquering small towns around the city; because of these Burgundian raids, the city's food supplies, which came predominantly from these invaded rural areas, were severely restricted. The conflicts within the city between the English and the Orléanists further affected the urban economy, causing increase in cost of essential food items. Recalling the difficult situation of 1417 the anonymous Bourgeois of Paris explains in his *Journal*:

Paris was now suffering extremely. No one dared leave the city to go and harvest the grapes anywhere on the Porte St. Jacques side....This was because the Burgundians hated the citizens of Paris and used to come foraging right up to the town's suburbs; anyone they found they captured and took away to their army. They had a lot of exiles from Paris with them who could find out who these prisoners were, by questions or otherwise, and if they were at all well known they would be cruelly treated and ransomed at as high a price as they could pay. If on the other hand they managed to escape and get to Paris, and this was known, they would be accused of having got themselves captured on purpose and would be put in prison.¹⁸⁴

As this passage describes, the citizens of Paris found themselves in the midst of a clashing political triangle which not only greatly restricted their mobility but also threatened their lives.

Unfortunately, conditions in Paris only deteriorated in the next few years.

In the summer of 1418, as the city was suffering from yet another plague epidemic, an army led by the butchers and the hangman Capeluche attacked Paris, bringing one of the worst

¹⁸⁴ *A Parisian Journal*, 105.

massacres the city had ever seen, killing over 1,600 men, women, and children.¹⁸⁵ Then, in September of 1419, the young Dauphin (future Charles VII) assassinated the Duke of Burgundy at a meeting in Montereau, further deepening the crisis between the Burgundians and the Orléanists. Although the Dauphin claimed the murder was in self-defense, the Duke's son, Philippe le Bon, swore vengeance on his father's murderers and in 1420 allied himself openly with Henry V in the Treaty of Troyes.¹⁸⁶

The person who benefited most from the constant tensions at the French Court was of course Henry V. In 1420, having assured himself the Burgundian support, Henry married the French King's daughter and was accepted by the King and Queen as the next heir to the French Crown. The Dauphin was declared a bastard and a murderer and was thus seen as being incapable of inheriting the Crown. However, only two years later, in 1422, both Henry V and then Charles VI died. The only male heir of the French royal line was now the Dauphin who was under control of the Orléanists. Even though the English attempted to claim the Crown for Henry V's son, they did not succeed and in 1429 the Dauphin was crowned King of France, Charles VII.¹⁸⁷

Undoubtedly, the political situation in France between 1400 and 1430 greatly affected the citizens of Paris who, by virtue of living in the capital city, were placed right at the centre of numerous tensions and controversies. Death, misery and the worthlessness of human life, exemplified by so many epidemics, invasions and battles overwhelmed the city of Paris and its

¹⁸⁵ Camille, *Master of Death* 109. The revolt seemed to have been originally provoked the citizens of Paris who, exhausted by the political turmoil and poor economic conditions, began their violent riot. Capeluche and his people eventually joined in. See *A Parisian Journal*, esp. pp. 125-129.

¹⁸⁶ The murder of the Duke of Burgundy is described in Famiglietti, esp. pp 191-202. Attempting to vindicate his henchman, on the day of the murder the Dauphin issued a letter in which he claimed that the Duke was killed because he spoke outrageously at that meeting and even put his hand to his sword. The very next day, the Dauphin went even further and told the people of Paris that the Duke had actually tried to attack him.

¹⁸⁷ The years between the death of Charles VI in 1422 and the crowing of the Dauphin in 1429 were actually quite tumultuous. Henry V's brother, the Duke of Bedford, tried to secure the crown for Henry's son, but he was also experiencing difficulties in England and was faced with financial struggles due to the prolonged war with France. The Burgundian alliance was also shaken by a scandal and in 1428, in the siege of Orléans, England lost one of its most powerful generals, Salisbury. This was also the period marked by controversy surrounding Jeanne d'Arc, who had a role to play in the crowning of the Dauphin.

inhabitants. Already by 1421, a few years before the *Danse Macabre* mural was painted at the Innocents, a French chronicler expressed the misery of his time in terms of a deadly dance:

Fourteen or fifteen years ago began this *wretched dance*;
and most of the nobility have died; by the sword or by
poison, or by other evil and unnatural death.¹⁸⁸
[italics mine]

When in 1425 the painting of the *Danse Macabre* was finally revealed to Parisians, its theme of Death as the Great Leveler who takes down kings as well as paupers, young as much as old, must have seemed quite appropriate and reflective of the age in which they all lived.

While we are certain of the date the mural was made, it is unclear who commissioned the image. In her discussion of the painting tradition in Paris in the first half of the fifteenth century, Catherine Reynolds explains that in historical records dating from 1597, the *Danse Macabre* is erroneously attributed to the generosity of King Charles V, which of course was not possible because he had died in 1380.¹⁸⁹ This mistaken ascription suggests that already by the end of the sixteenth century there existed no permanent or comprehensible records that could indicate the identity of a possible donor.¹⁹⁰ Reynolds concludes therefore that the necessary funds needed to complete such a sizeable commission would have been raised in some corporate ways by the wealthy citizens of Paris.¹⁹¹

While the identity of the *Danse Macabre* donor still needs further research, the origins of the poem that accompanied the painting have been thoroughly discussed. The elaborate verses of the *Danse Macabre* imply that their author was an educated individual and someone who belonged to

¹⁸⁸ Quoted in Kurtz 215.

¹⁸⁹ Reynolds 44.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid. 44.

¹⁹¹ Ibid. 44. Reynolds suggests that citizens like Guillaume Sanguin and his brother Jean, who founded a chapel of St. Michael in the church of the Innocents, and were buried there in 1441, could have been among the main contributors. However, Reynolds does not elaborate on this point nor does she provide any further information on the Sanguin brothers, so this assumption requires further research.

the upper echelons of society. Furthermore, it is clear from the poem that the author not only knew how to address prelates and princes, but was also well versed in theology, law and even medicine.¹⁹² The poem's opening and closing monologues, delivered by the figure of the Author, reveal that the person who wrote them was familiar with the *contemptus mundi* tradition and even able to loosely quote sentences from *De Miseria*.

Much of what we now know about the identity of the author of the *Danse Macabre* poem comes from a Catalan manuscript entitled *Dança de la Mort* compiled by the royal archivist Pedro Miguel de Carbonell circa 1480.¹⁹³ The manuscript contains Catalan translations of the *Dance Macabre* verses from the Innocents, along with Carbonell's inscription that attributes the original authorship of the poem to "a doctor and chancellor of Paris by the name of Joannes Climachus, sive Climages."¹⁹⁴ While interesting, this attribution is also confounding because as we know from historical records, no individual bearing the name of Joannes Climachus was ever appointed a position at the University of Paris in the fourteenth or fifteenth centuries.¹⁹⁵

However, another manuscript dating from 1429 and currently at the *Bibliothèque Nationale* in Paris contains *Danse Macabre* verses from the Innocents along with works by Jean Gerson (1363-1429), a Chancellor of the University of Paris, and by his colleague Nicolas de Clemanges (1360-1437), a Rector at the University and later a secretary to the Pope.¹⁹⁶ Because of the existence of this manuscript and the obvious similarity between the names 'Clemanges' and 'Climachus,' most

¹⁹² Clark 27.

¹⁹³ The full title of the Catalan manuscript is *Dança de la Mort e de aquelles persons qui mal llur grat ab aquella ballen e dançen*. Pedro Miguel de Carbonell (b. 1434) was the archivist of the Crown of Aragon in Barcelona from 1477 until his death in 1517. The most inquisitive analysis of Carbonell's connection to the *Danse Macabre* from the Innocents can be found in Florence Whyte, *The Dance of Death in Spain and Catalonia* (New York: Arno Press, 1977) esp. pp. 27-37. See also Delumeau, esp. p. 79; and Kurtz, esp. pp. 27-30.

¹⁹⁴ Quoted in Whyte 33. Originally Carbonell's attribution reads as follows: *Aquesta Dança de la Mort ha compost un sanct home doctor e Canceller de Paris en lengua francesa appellat Joannes Climachus, a pregaries de alguns devots religiosos francesos*.

¹⁹⁵ Whyte 34-35.

¹⁹⁶ Delumeau 79. The manuscript in question is MS 14904. Nicolas de Clemanges was closely associated with Gerson and also with Pierre d'Ailly, another noted theologian from the University. Clemanges obtained the degree of Bachelor of Theology and was elected Rector of the University in 1393. In the following year he became secretary of the newly elected Pope Benedict XIII. Clemanges taught at the University of Paris and in the College of Navarre. For further biographical information on Clemanges see Whyte, 35-37.

scholars believe that the *Danse Macabre* verses were written by an individual who was associated with the University of Paris and more specifically with Gerson's and Clemanges' theological circles.¹⁹⁷

If in fact the author of the *Danse Macabre* poem was a theologian or someone familiar with this discipline, it would explain the obvious presence of the *contemptus mundi* tradition in the text of the poem. References to the worm-eaten bodies, contempt for earthly life and the inevitability of death that characterize both the text and the image of the *Danse Macabre* suggest a clear influence of Pope Innocent's *De Miseria* and other similar *contemptus mundi* treatises. As I mentioned earlier, during the fifteenth century, the tradition of the *contemptus mundi* was experiencing a revival and *De Miseria* became one of the most popular and copied theological texts and was circulated at the University of Paris.¹⁹⁸ Moreover, the structure of the *Danse Macabre*, in which the figure of Death personified takes away representatives of many medieval social classes, is reminiscent of Hélinant's *Vers de la Mort* as well as of many *Vado Mori* poems.

But perhaps the strongest evidence that its creator was an academic comes from the image itself. The figure of the Author who opens and closes the *Danse Macabre* resembles the typical depiction of medieval scholars (Plate 2). In the opening scene, the Author is shown seated *ex cathedra* surrounded with books and writing tools, all of which emphasize his intellectual authority and his love of knowledge. Similarly, a fifteenth-century French illuminated manuscript entitled *Pelerinage de l'Ame*, contains a miniature that also depicts an image of a scholar (Plate 31). Like the Author in the *Danse Macabre*, the learned figure in the manuscript is shown seated in a canopied chair and is writing or reading from an open book placed on a desk in front of him. A two-tiered *cathedra*, almost identical to the one in the mural, stacked with heavy, leather-bound books, is shown

¹⁹⁷ See Delumeau 79; Clark 28-29; Whyte 37; and Kurtz 28-29. Whether either Gerson or Clemanges can be credited as the actual author of the verses, although quite possible, still requires further research.

¹⁹⁸ See page 13.

to the right of the Author. Moreover, an image dating approximately from the 1480s, shows Jean Gerson himself seated on a platform, once again in a canopied chair and preaching to a large audience at the Church of St. Bernard in Paris (Plate 32). While the image does not portray Gerson writing, his seated position and his elaborate chair are reminiscent of the Author in the *Danse Macabre*.

As mentioned earlier, the figure of the Author is given a special position within the *Danse Macabre*. Divided from the rest of the figures by his scholarly activities, the Author does not really participate in the dance in any way other than by introducing and concluding it. His monologues, especially the closing one, are longer and more complex than the verses spoken by any other individuals in the dance. In effect, unlike the other dancing figures, all of whom are engrossed in a dialogue, the Author does not converse, rather he *preaches*. Commencing the *Danse Macabre*, the Author warns,

O reasonable being, here you have notable teaching to put a
good ending to mortal life. It is called the macabre dance
which everyone learns to dance. To men and women alike it is
natural. Death spares neither great nor small.¹⁹⁹

Inviting the reader (and the viewer) to consider the *Danse Macabre* as a “notable teaching,” whose message will assure “a good ending to mortal life,” the figure of the Author seems to suggest that the *Danse Macabre* is not just a moralizing poem that contemplates the transience of life and the certainty of death, but also an illustrated theological lesson.²⁰⁰ And since the Author is the only figure in the dance, save for the poor man, who does not die or is not already dead, and given

¹⁹⁹ Quoted in Chaney 46.

²⁰⁰ The notion that the *Danse Macabre* should be read a sermon whose main purpose is didactic rather than aesthetic was first proposed by Jean Delumeau. See Delumeau 87. I would not go as far as claiming that a didactic lesson is the *Danse Macabre*'s absolute and only meaning; it probably is not, since the ambiguity of this image rests precisely in the fact that it is playing with binaries by simultaneously promoting and denying them, but I would agree that thinking about the *Danse Macabre* as a theological sermon is one interesting way to frame it.

his ambiguous spatial location, at once indoors and outdoors, it is possible to think of the *Danse Macabre* as a visual illustration of the preacher's, or the Author's sermon.

If the poem indeed originated at the University of Paris in the circles of Gerson and Clemanges, and if the *Danse Macabre* is a visual lesson, another important point must be considered. In France during the Late Middle Ages, the University of Paris and especially its theologians played an important role in the political and social life of both the city and the kingdom.²⁰¹ We have already seen that in 1408 the Duke of Burgundy's public justification for the murder of Louis of Orléans was written and delivered by Jean Petit, a noted theologian from the University of Paris. Like Petit, the other theologians were also politically affiliated with various fractions and individuals; as an example, during the political battles between the Orléanists and the Burgundians, the theologians were greatly involved. Initially backing the Duke of Burgundy, even after the murder of Louis of Orléans, they eventually withdrew their support following the Cabochien revolt of 1414 when a number of them, including Jean Gerson, were directly assaulted.²⁰² And while they disassociated themselves from the Burgundians from 1414 on, their relationship with the Orléanists, and later with King Charles VII was not much better. On several occasions in the early 1400s, Jean Gerson delivered passionate sermons in which he not only indirectly criticized the King's political decisions but also proposed his own version of kingship. In July of 1414, following the King's plea for financial support, the University of Paris flatly refused to provide any aid and virulently attacked the monarchy.²⁰³ Speaking on the University's behalf, Gerson, citing historical examples and using political allegory, argued that kings who oppress their

²⁰¹ For information on the development of medieval universities and the role the intellectuals played in society see for example Jacques Le Goff, *Intellectuals in the Middle Ages*, trans. Teresa Lavender Fagan (Cambridge, Massachusetts and Oxford: Blackwell, 1992); Lesley Smith and Benedicta Ward ed., *Intellectual Life in the Middle Ages* (London: Hambledon, 1992); Jacques Verger, *Man of Learning in Europe at the End of the Middle Ages*, trans. Lisa Neal and Steven Rendall (Notre Dame, Indiana: Notre Dame UP, 2000); and Gordon Leff, *The Dissolution of the Medieval Outlook: An Essay on Intellectual and Spiritual Change in the Fourteenth Century* (New York: New York UP, 1976).

²⁰² Famiglietti 136 and 56.

²⁰³ Famiglietti 96.

subjects with unjust taxes or other similar forms of tyranny were not worthy of their office and that the annals of history clearly demonstrated that such rulers were fit to be deposed.²⁰⁴ In addition, in February of 1418, the then Dauphin Charles reproached the University for having held assemblies to discuss the election of a new Pope, without previously consulting or even informing the king.²⁰⁵ Enforcing his position, the Dauphin, together with the royal lawyer, explained that “the king is emperor in his kingdom, which he holds from God alone, and no one should debate or contradict directly or indirectly his ordinances.”²⁰⁶

I find it curious therefore that in the midst of these conflicts a mural emerged in the centre of Paris that, framed by the figure of the Author, portrays the story in which kings and lawyers, popes and cardinals all suffer the same destiny. Ascertaining the equalizing power of death, the mural reminds the viewer that the riches and might of secular rulers are not without their limits. And while such a message reflects the main themes of *contemptus mundi* literature and macabre imagery, I wish to propose several divergent ways in which the *Danse Macabre* can also be read as a powerful social critique and shrewd political allegory.

On its most fundamental level, the mural can be interpreted as a call to reason in a time of great political turmoil. The Author’s opening line which proclaims “O reasonable being,” demands of its audience, in which many have acted quite unreasonably, plotting against and even murdering their political opponents, to realize the transitory nature of earthly life and secular

²⁰⁴ Ibid. 255. Following Gerson’s speech, the Chancellor of France and other lords accused Gerson of implying that King Charles VI should be overthrown. Doctors and canons of divine law were then called to examine Gerson’s address and eventually decided not to exonerate him, arguing that he was merely citing historical examples.

²⁰⁵ Ibid. 188.

²⁰⁶ Quoted in Famiglietti 188. Although this specific debate occurred between the Dauphin and a representative from the University whose name or position I was unable to determine, Gerson and his circle did clash with the King and his entourage on several more occasions. For example, in September of 1414, still recovering from the humiliation and hardship he suffered at the hands of the Cabochiens, Gerson spoke in front of the King, in somewhat obscure terms, about the danger involved when a King favored certain persons without punishing them. See Famiglietti 136.

power, and act accordingly.²⁰⁷ Renouncing the false beliefs in the importance of status and might and warning of the future punishment, the Author explains:

Many a man who is alive to-day will die to-morrow. For [as] there is nothing more real than death [so there is nothing] less stable than a man's life. You see it with your own eyes, and therefore it is not a fable. Only a fool does not believe until he receives. But some there are who care nought about it -as though paradise and hell did not exist. Alas! They will burn.²⁰⁸

But in calling attention to the foolish beliefs of secular and ecclesiastic rulers the University, through the Author as its representative, inevitably established itself as society's new dominant rationalizing authority. Assuming a position of neutrality and objectivity, conveniently overlooking the fact that its leaders were not only politically affiliated but also heavily polarized, the University ascertained its position as an institution of reason, knowledge and moral integrity. This is a subtle, yet important shift. The medieval Universities of the early fifteenth century saw a period of transformation wherein academics assumed a position of greater social and political visibility and emerged as a new and privileged class.²⁰⁹ Allegedly independent from the Church and secular rulers, the sole sources of power and influence in medieval society, the University was throughout the fifteenth century attempting to secure its own separate position within this hierarchy.

This was especially true for the University of Paris. It had been politically active both on secular and ecclesiastic fronts since at least the reign of Philip the Fair (1298-1314).²¹⁰ Its relationship with the French Crown was so strong that in the late fourteenth century Charles V

²⁰⁷ Quoted in Chaney 24.

²⁰⁸ Quoted in Chaney 64.

²⁰⁹ Le Goff 125. In his study of medieval academics, Le Goff points out that by the late fourteenth century the intellectuals managed to transform themselves into a new class by adopting an aristocratic mode of life.

²¹⁰ Ibid. 148

referred to the University as "the eldest daughter of the King."²¹¹ It was officially represented in the national councils of the Church of France and in the assemblies of the States Generals.²¹² But, as Jacques Le Goff points out, the University was so attached to the papacy that if it was "the eldest daughter of the king," "it was also 'the first school of the Church' and played an international role as arbiter in theological matters."²¹³

The Great Schism of the Western Church that occurred between 1378-1417, right at the time of political turmoil in France, upset the balance that the University maintained with the leaders of the Church and the State.²¹⁴ Initially, the University had supported the Pope in Avignon; later, pressured by the growing demands of the papacy and wanting to re-establish the unity of the Church, the University demanded the King of France to reject Pope Clement VII, to request the abdication of the rival pontiff and to put an end to the Schism.²¹⁵ These requirements were finally achieved by the Council of Constance held in 1418 when the professors of theology and canon law, Gerson including, managed to successfully argue for the end of the Schism.²¹⁶

Situating the *Danse Macabre* within the context of such intricate historical events helps to explain the dual hierarchy, secular and ecclesiastic, on which the image rests. While the secular rulers, kings, dukes and lawyers, foolishly depended on status and power, the ecclesiasts, who by virtue of their calling should have been more devout and sensible, also disregarded God and religion in their quest for supremacy. Neglecting their role as society's moral and religious leaders,

²¹¹ Quoted in Le Goff 148.

²¹² Ibid. 148.

²¹³ Ibid. 148.

²¹⁴ The Great Schism involved an incredibly complex political situation that I can only summarize here generally. Essentially, following the death of Pope Gregory XI (1370-1378), the College of Cardinals met in Rome to elect a new Pope. The citizens of Rome, fearful that the French majority would choose another Frenchman who would return the papacy to Avignon, threatened that the cardinals would not leave Rome alive unless an Italian pope was elected. Wisely, the terrified cardinals elected the Italian archbishop of Bari as Pope Urban VI (1378-1389). But once the French cardinals returned from Rome they issued a manifesto annulling Pope Urban's election. They then chose a Frenchman as their newly appointed pope, Clement VII, and returned to Avignon. Since Urban VI remained in Rome, there were now two popes, initiating the schism of the Church and causing forty years of great instability and dividing European kingdoms along political lines. For our discussion of France, it is important to acknowledge these ecclesiastical divisions were also reflected in the political situation, especially in the conflict with England since the English supported Pope Urban VI.

²¹⁵ Le Goff 148.

²¹⁶ Ibid. 149.

the heads of Church fought viciously with each other for earthly authority and eminence, goals which, according to Christian teachings, are transient and of inferior importance. Such a critique of Church leaders in the *Danse Macabre* is of course subtle. It had to be. The mural was created during an extremely unstable political moment and at a time when the University still greatly depended on support from the Church — factors all requiring a cautious approach.

But there is an image in the *Danse Macabre* that, I would argue, provides a direct and far more obvious critical commentary. The mural ends with a scene in which the seated Author observes the prostrated body of the Dead King, whose crown lays toppled on the ground beside him (Plate 18). It is probably safe to say that within the discipline of art history an image of a dead king, and one whose crown has been knocked to the ground, would demand a political reading. This has not been the case the figure of the Dead King in the *Danse Macabre*. In fact, not only is this image almost never discussed by scholars of the macabre, it is rarely even reproduced. Opposing this (baffling) scholarly silence, I wish to suggest at least two ways in which this scene can be read against the political situation from which it emerged.

The king, the symbol of the nation, lies flat on the ground. His death is emphasized not just by his physical decay, which is gruesome, but also by his horizontal position. Being placed on the ground, the dead king is given a unique place within the *Danse Macabre*. He is the only cadaver in the image whose body, no longer animated by the vigor of the dance, assumes the position of calmness and immobility typical of the dead. His crown, another symbol of the nation, is placed upside down and more importantly, no longer belongs to anyone. By implying that the kingdom is dead and rotting, the image poignantly captures France's desperate political circumstances. In 1425 when the mural was painted, France was indeed kingless. King Charles VI and his English successor King Henry V had both died three years earlier, leaving the Dauphin to battle with the

English for the rights to the Crown. The country itself was heavily divided; on the one hand it was occupied by the English, and on the other it was destroyed by its own internal turmoil.

Yet this image can also be read as a carefully constructed political allegory. While the physical death of the king is emphasized by his corporal decomposition, his political death is indicated by his crownless head. By losing the crown, the symbol of his authority, the king is therefore rendered politically dead. Given the situation of the time, such an image could be seen as a powerful visual reminder, a cautionary tale, representing the very tangible limits of kingship and royal power. The image therefore implies that the king, just like any other mortal, is subject to death and his power is not absolute.

One could say the scene with the dead king can be dismissed as nothing more than a poetic ending to the deadly dance in which the king of all cadavers himself finally dies. However, taking into account the period's predilection for political allegory, both visual and textual, it seems unlikely that this is the case. We have already seen, in the examples of the Duke of Burgundy's *Justifications*, another image that featured a toppled crown, and Gerson's loaded historical parables, that in the early 1500s resorting to allegory was a common and effective tool in waging fierce political battles.

Despite the political insinuations present at its first production, the significance of the *Danse Macabre* mural rests in its incredible adaptability, allowing it to be framed and appropriated in different ways by preachers, poets and even printmakers, each time shifting and altering the intended meaning of the original. For our discussion of the historical context of the mural, one such adaptation is of particular importance.

As Guillbert de Metz explains in his 1434 *Descriptions of Paris*, the primary function of the *Danse Macabre* was to encourage piety and contemplation.²¹⁷ Describing the cemetery of the

²¹⁷ Quoted in Reynolds 43.

Innocents with its houses full of bones, de Metz mentions the mural as “the noted painting of the Dance of the Dead [whose] inscriptions [were intended] to move people to devotion.”²¹⁸ The mural’s potential for stimulating faith and devotion, was also recognized by many friars and monks who often used the *Danse Macabre* image to illustrate their sermons on death.²¹⁹

The most famous such sermon was delivered in April of 1429 by the English Franciscan Friar Richard. Recounting Friar Richard’s visit to Paris and his ecstatic sermons, the anonymous writer of the *Parisian Journal* explains:

...About a week later a grey friar called Brother Richard arrived in Paris. He was a man of great judgment, wise in prayer, a sower of sound doctrine for his neighbor’s edification. He worked tremendously at this task; one could scarcely believe it without having seen it — all the time he was in Paris he preached every single day except one....He would begin to preach at about five o’clock in the morning and go on till between ten and eleven o’clock and there were always five or six thousand people listening to him. He preached from a high platform — it was nearly one and a half *toises* high — with his back to the charnel houses opposite the Charronnerie near the Danse Macabre.²²⁰

The dramatic mural proved an ideal background for Friar Richard’s powerful sermons for as we know from historical records, the sermons he delivered were about the apocalypse.²²¹ He announced the approaching coming of the Antichrist and the end of the world. Those who flocked to hear Friar Richard preach at the Innocents seem to have been so taken by his admonitions that, driven by religious fervor, they made bonfires in and around the cemetery and burned their material goods.²²²

²¹⁸ Ibid. 43.

²¹⁹ See footnote 57.

²²⁰ *A Parisian Journal* 230. By fifteenth century measurements *toise* equals six feet.

²²¹ See Clark 23.

²²² Ibid. 23.

The theme of Friar Richard's sermons is not surprising. Belonging to the order of the Franciscans, his sermons reflected their belief in piety, repentance and abandonment of worldly possessions. With their insistence on the inevitability of death and their apparent scorn for material goods, the macabre images were an ideal counterpart to Franciscan and Mendicant preaching. It is not startling therefore that when he visited the city of Paris, which was still recovering from epidemics, war and invasion, Friar Richard decided to deliver his sermons in front of the famous mural.

Even though his apocalyptic preaching at the Innocents is mentioned in almost every study on the *Danse Macabre*, the fact that he was implicated in the politics of the time is rarely discussed. The exact nature of Friar Richard's political affiliation is somewhat unclear, but it seems certain that his apocalyptic sermons were to some extent propagandist. Friar Richard was an Englishman preaching in the French capital during the English invasion. When he came to Paris in April of 1429, the battle for the French Crown was intensifying. Following their successful siege of Orléans in 1428, the Orléanists, helped by Jeanne d'Arc,²²³ were now not only gaining more political power but also getting ready to crown the Dauphin. Fearing that the Dauphin's enthronement would rid England of any chances of winning back the French Crown, the English attempted to turn the city against the Orléanists.

From the passages in the *Parisian Journal*, which seem to be our only historical source on Friar Richard, it appears that he was not working for the English, as would be logical, but for the Dauphin and the Orléanists. Describing the Orléanists' entry into Paris in the summer of 1429, the writer of the *Journal* points out that Friar Richard also accompanied them:

It was undoubtedly true that the grey friar who preached at

²²³ It seems that at least in part, Friar Richard's sermons were meant to ridicule and destroy the credibility of Jeanne d'Arc. He spoke against superstition and magic and used the mural at the Innocents to suggest that no potion or magic contraption could protect from death. According to the writer of the *Parisian Journal* this belief in the supernatural was due to "a Maid, as they called her, in the Loire country who claimed to be able to foretell the future and who used to say 'Such a thing will certainly happen.'" See *A Parisian Journal* 233.

the Innocents and drew together such crowds to hear him, as is said above, was riding with them [Orléanists]. As soon as the people of Paris were certain that this was so and that it was he who by his words was persuading the cities which had sworn faith to the Regent or to his representatives to abandon their allegiance, they cursed him by God and his saints What is worse, they took up again in contempt of him all those games which he had forbidden them, such as backgammon, bowls, dicing, and so on. They even left off wearing a tin medallion which he had got them to wear bearing the name of Jesus and they all wore a St. Andrew's cross instead.²²⁴

As this passage demonstrates, the mural's religious, moralizing message could be especially emphasized and reaffirmed when combined with a powerful sermon, such as the one delivered by Friar Richard. But at the same time, those lessons can be quickly forgotten, and even completely relegated when politics intervened. Although Friar Richard enjoyed a period of intense popularity and Parisians not only flocked to see him preached, but were willing to abandon their many sins and follow his religious warnings, once politics intervened his sermons and his eminence quickly tarnished. This is in part because most citizens of Paris, although occupied, seemed to favor the English rule and were at that time supportive of the Duke of Bedford, King Henry's cousin. When they learned that Friar Richard was "riding" with Duke of Bedford's opponents, they turned against him. However, precisely what role Friar Richard played in the Orléanist faction merits further research, but it appears that politics were eventually his downfall. According to Leonard Kurtz, Friar Richard was eventually arrested later that year and expelled from Paris for good.²²⁵

This episode testifies to the importance of the *Danse Macabre* mural in the social life of early fifteenth-century Paris. It certainly implies, as many macabre scholars have suggested,²²⁶ that the mural was used to inspire religious devotion and repentance, but it also suggests that its theme of

²²⁴ *A Parisian Journal* 238-39.

²²⁵ Kurtz 75.

²²⁶ Most of the sources on the *Danse Macabre* mural that I have consulted mention Friar Richard's preaching and often quote the passage on his apocalyptic sermons from the *Parisian Journal*. However, apart from Kurtz no other writer mentions Friar Richard's downfall even though the episode is described, in detail, only eight pages later. For the reference to Friar Richard's sermons see for example Binski 156, Camille 195, Clark 23, and Reynolds 43.

death and mortality could be subverted and used as a tool for political manipulations. The incident reveals that the Dominicans and the Franciscans, the religious orders most commonly associated with the spreading of the macabre and the *contemptus mundi* sensibilities, were also implicated in the politics of the time.

The mural was continually adapted throughout the fifteenth century, each time disassociating it from its religious origin and its didactic message. In the 1430s the English poet John Lydgate's translation of the *Danse Macabre* verses was used as the basis for a Dance of the Dead mural painted in the churchyard of the Old St. Paul's Cathedral in London. Meanwhile, some historical records show that in France, by the late 1440s, the *Danse Macabre* was even transformed into a theatrical performance which, taking advantage of the verses' humorous tone, became an effective vehicle for satire and social critique. Finally, the most significant modification to the *Danse Macabre* occurred in the 1480s with the publication of Marchant's prints. While his first edition, dated 1485, imitated the mural and its verses almost exactly, each subsequent version included additional figures, thereby expanding the dance and emphasizing the diversity of late medieval society. No longer entirely immersed in the macabre's didactic, religious framework, the prints demonstrated greater interest in the diversity of medieval society, its various trades and professions, and in social satire, rather than in a serious contemplation of death and mortality.

Such various examples that modified the main themes of the *Danse Macabre* mural, illustrate its significance in the history of the macabre imagery. The mural was the first known visual depiction of the *Danse Macabre* poem. Placed in a popular cemetery, the image also introduced a larger and more diverse audience to the culture of the macabre. Its religious message, which depicted the equalizing power of death and the transitory nature of earthly life, intended to promote feelings of piety and repentance. But at the same time such a representation was highly ambiguous and was easily adapted for political purposes. In fact, the intricacy of the *Danse*

Macabre's social and political contexts clearly demonstrate that the macabre, as one the defining elements of late medieval visual culture, exhibited not just a morose fascination with death and physical decay, but also a specific social lesson that needs to be studied in conjunction with the history from which it emerged.

Epilogue

It was a life without interruption. The tunic had to be seamless; but this did not make it the garment of happiness and pleasure. On the contrary, it was a work garment, cut out of rough cloth, designed for laborious jobs of long duration. This life in which death was removed to a prudent distance seems less living of things and people than the life in which death was the center.

Philippe Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death*, 1981.

The *Danse Macabre* mural along with the arcades on which it was painted was destroyed in 1669 in order to widen the road along the *Rue de la Ferronnerie*. While seldom considered as anything more than the evidence of the seventeenth century disinterest in medieval macabre, the destruction of the mural was perhaps motivated by more than just the city's changing infrastructure. Demolished during the reign of Louis XIV (1638-1715), the Sun King, at a time when absolutism was at its prime, a large mural depicting the king not just dancing with cadavers and mortals, but also lying dead and de-crowned in front of the figure of the Author might not have been the most flattering or desirable illustration of kingship. It is possible therefore to assume that the destruction of the mural was prompted not so much by the seventeenth-century disinterest in "picturesque relics of an earlier day" and the expansion of the city, as by the fact that the egalitarian image of society propagated by the *Danse Macabre*, even if, as the mural implied, such equality was achievable only in death, challenged the hierarchical society and the absolute rule favored by Louis XIV.²²⁷

Although the *Danse Macabre* was destroyed, the cemetery of the Innocents remained the most popular Paris burial ground until 1786 when, following decades of debates, the cemetery was

²²⁷ In discussing the destruction of the mural Clark explains that "The Age of Louis XIV took no interest in the picturesque relics of an earlier day. The road was being widened, and the wall was just an obstruction that had to be removed." See Clark 24.

demolished and removed from the city of Paris. Prompted by the Enlightenment and its interest in hygiene, health and cleanliness, the removal of the cemetery was seen as a necessary step in establishing clear boundaries between the living and the dead. The actual exhumation of the Innocents took place between 1786 and 1788 during which time "a layer of earth over ten feet thick infected with cadaverous debris was removed, some eighty vaults were opened, and over 20,000 bodies were exhumed."²²⁸ By removing the Innocents, the eighteenth-century city officials achieved what for centuries was all but impossible: they ordered and classified the unruly space of the cemetery. The bodies exhumed from the Innocents were relocated to the catacombs of Paris where they can still be seen today. The ground that the cemetery occupied was quickly paved and the Innocents was replaced by the city's first free standing fountain placed in the center of the newly built herb market (Plates 33 and 34).

As the nineteenth-century print demonstrates, the space of the cemetery, renamed *Le marché des Innocents*, still remained a popular urban site. Like in the Middle Ages, in the nineteenth century the townsfolk gathered there to sell and trade beneath the canopied arcades (Plate 35). And though the dead vacated the area, merchants, dwellers and even dogs still frequented the space. Indeed, the dead have finally given over to the living.

²²⁸ Ariès. 499.

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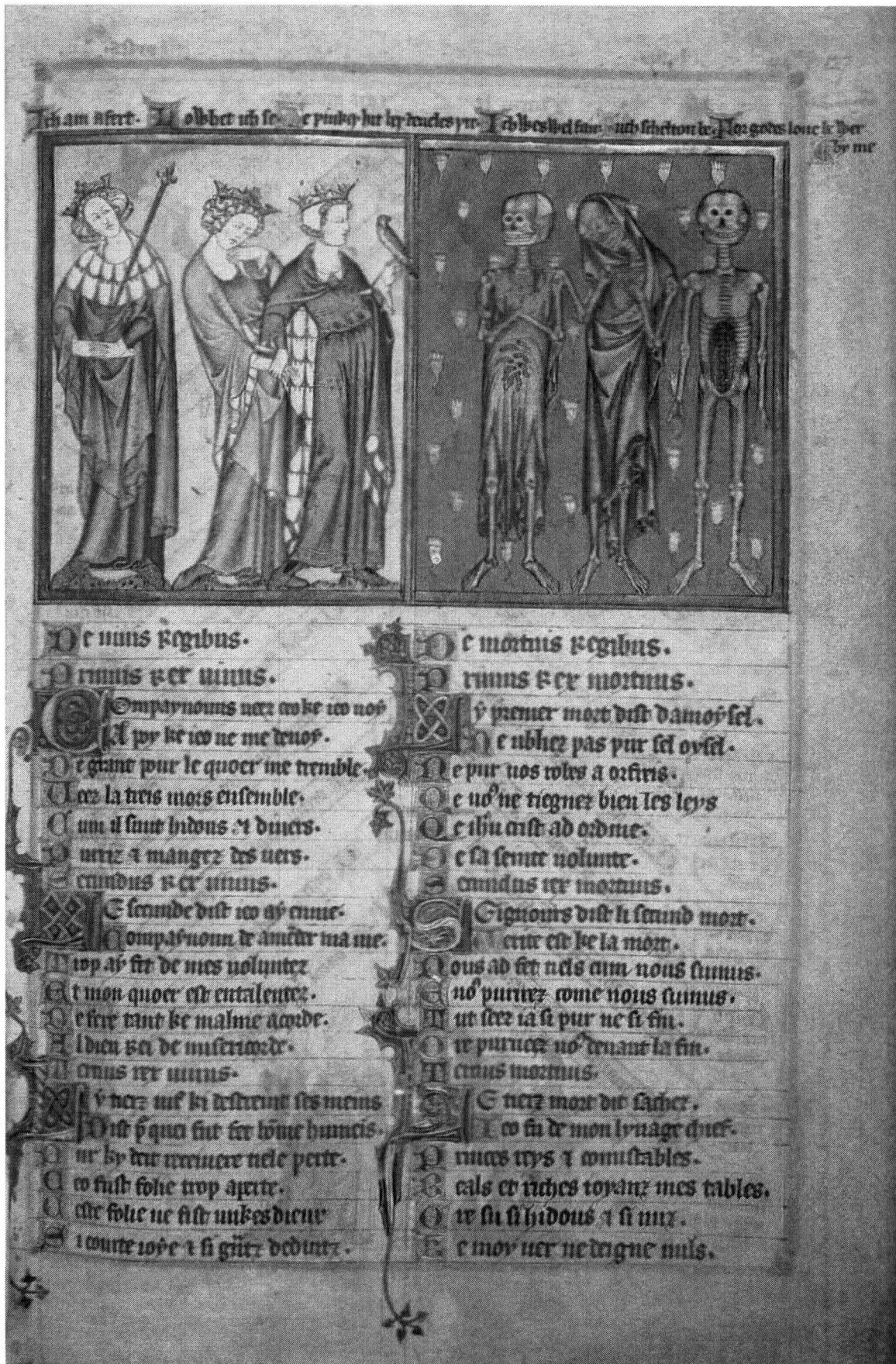


Plate 1: The Three Living and The Three Dead, c. 1310.



Plate 2: "The Author", *Danse Macabre*, 1485.

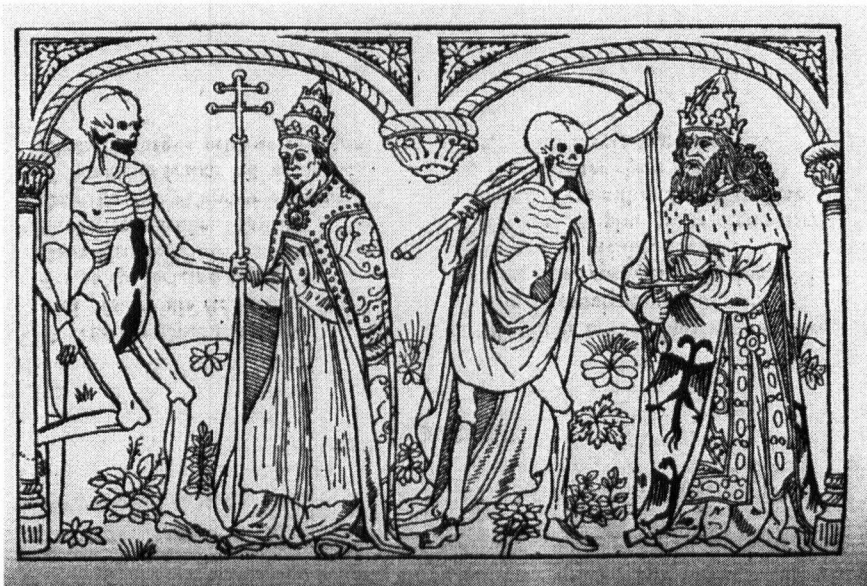


Plate 3: "The Pope and The Emperor," *Danse Macabre*, 1485

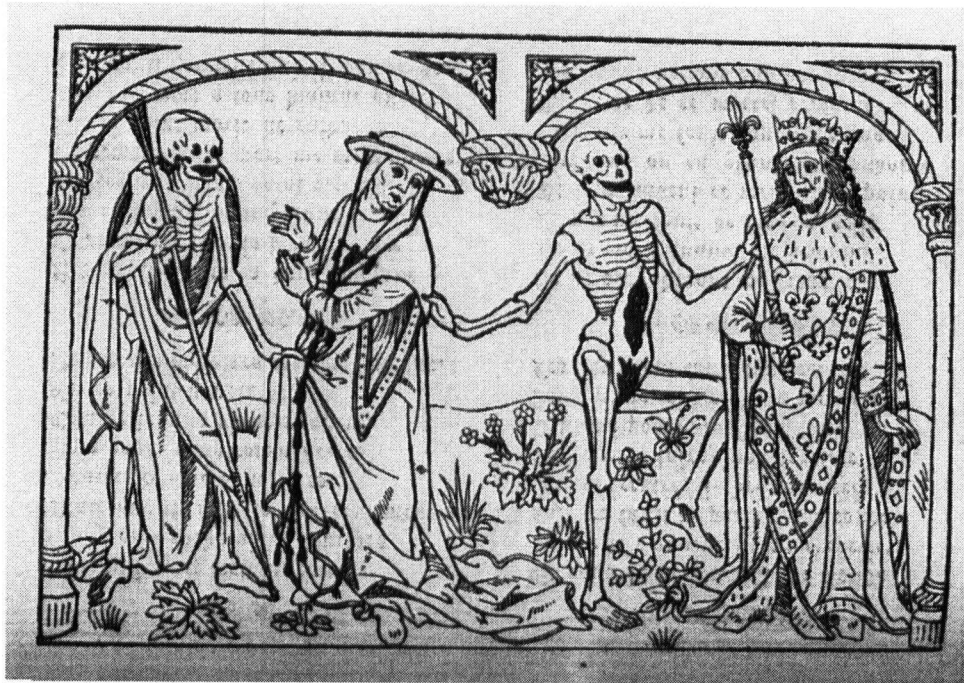


Plate 4: "The Cardinal and The King," *Danse Macabre*, 1485.

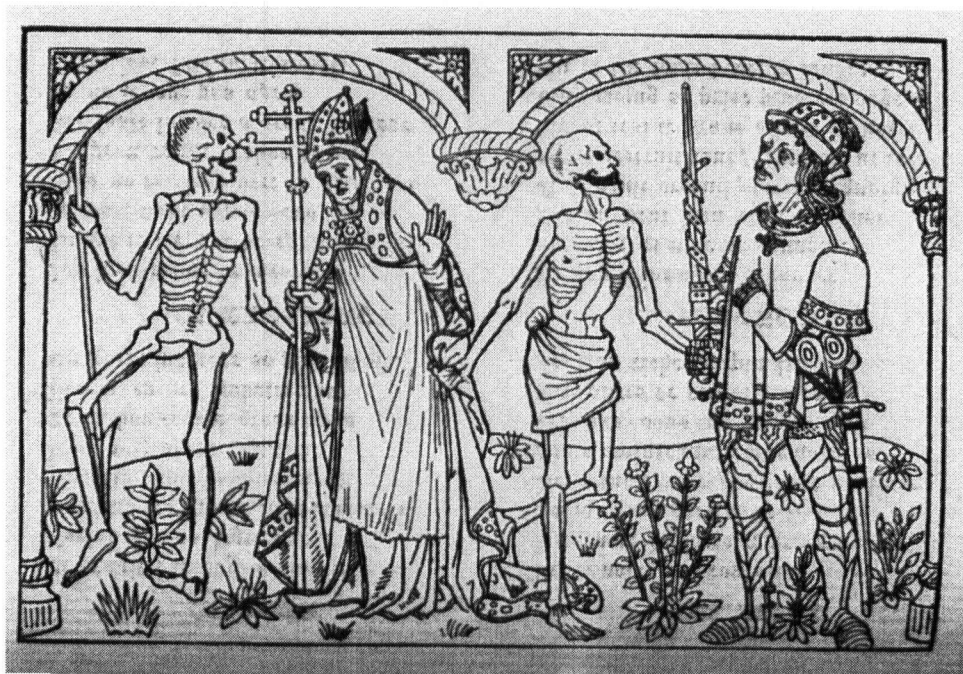


Plate 5: "The Patriarc and The Constable," *Danse Macabre*, 1485.



Plate 6: "The Archbishop and The Knight," *Danse Macabre*, 1485.



Plate 7: "The Abbot and the Bailiff," *Danse Macabre*, 1485.



Plate 8: "The Bishop and The Squire," *Danse Macabre*, 1485.

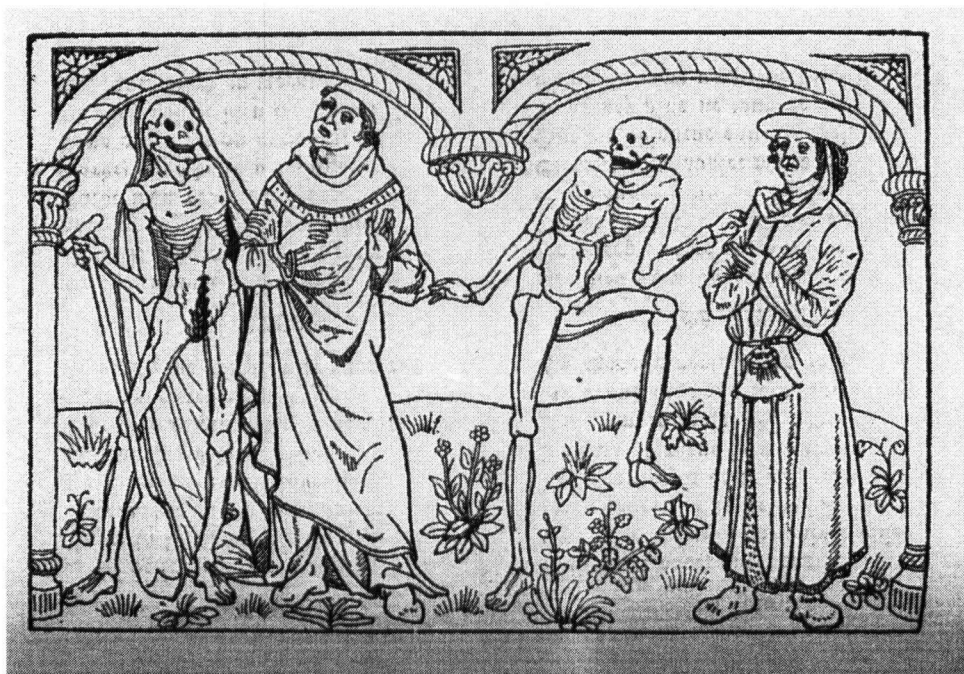


Plate 9: "The Astrologer and The Citizen," *Danse Macabre*, 1485.



Plate 10: "The Canon and The Merchant," *Danse Macabre*, 1485.

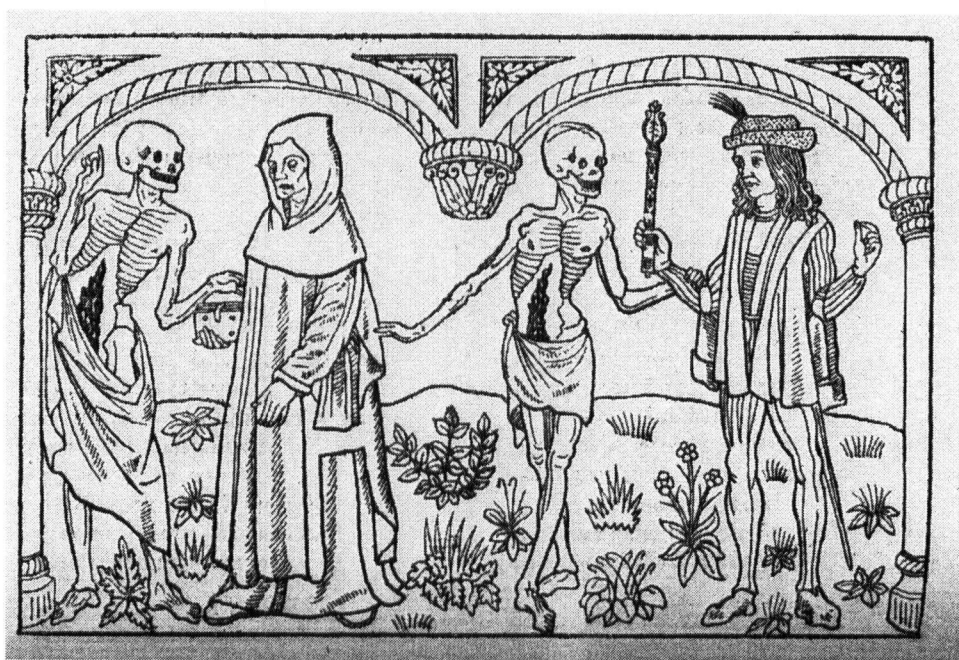


Plate 11: "The Carthusian Monk and The Sergeant," *Danse Macabre*, 1485.



Plate 12: "The Monk and The Usurer with The Poor Man," *Danse Macabre*, 1485.

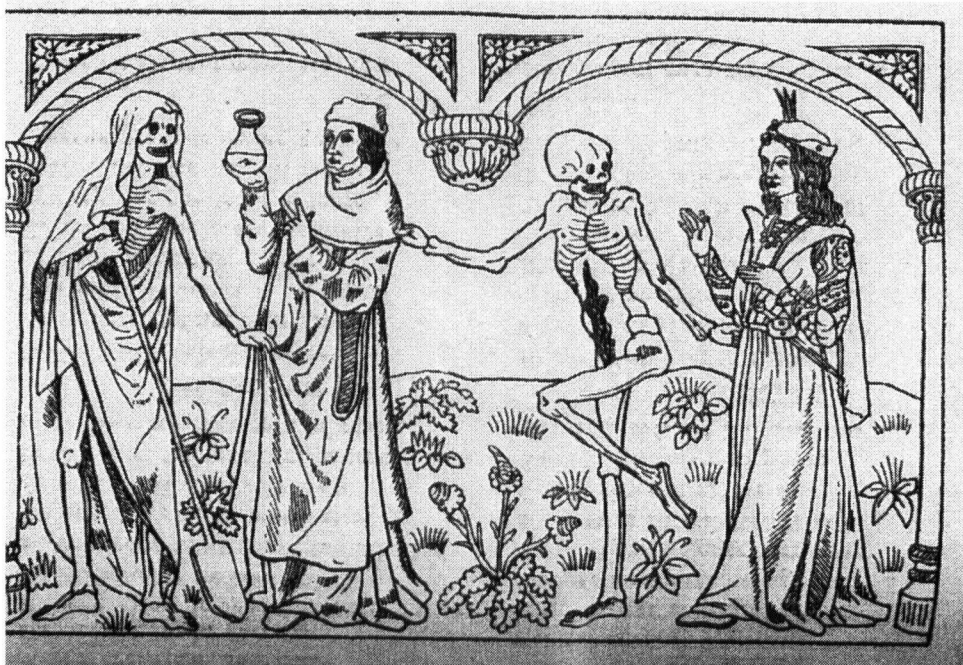


Plate 13: "The Doctor and The Lover," *Danse Macabre*, 1485.



Plate 14: "The Lawyer and The Minstrel," *Danse Macabre*, 1485.



Plate 15: "The Parish Priest and The Peasant," *Danse Macabre*, 1485.

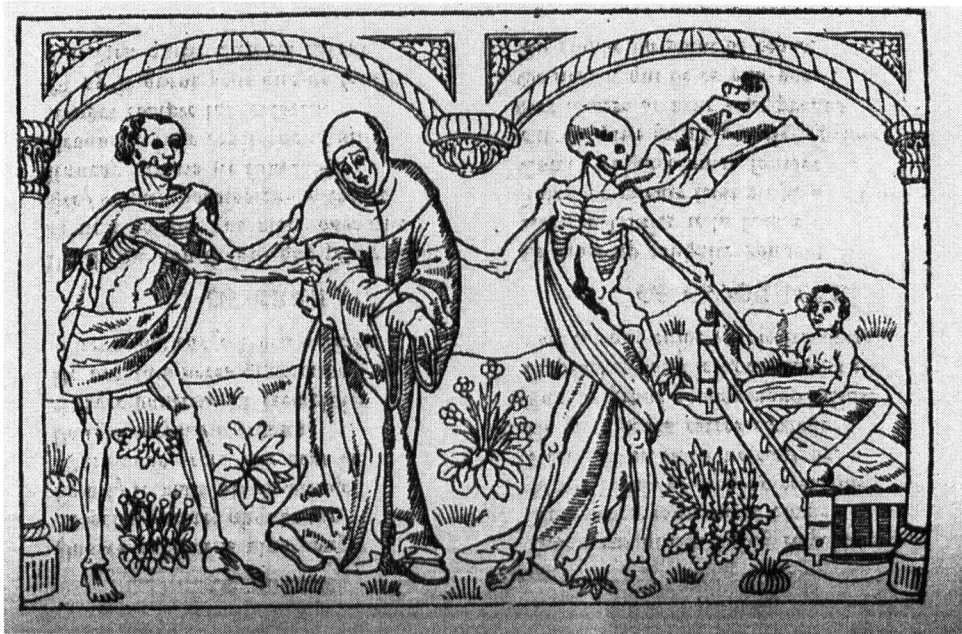


Plate 16: "The Grey Friar and The Infant," *Danse Macabre*, 1485.



Plate 17: "The Cleric and The Hermit," *Danse Macabre*, 1485.

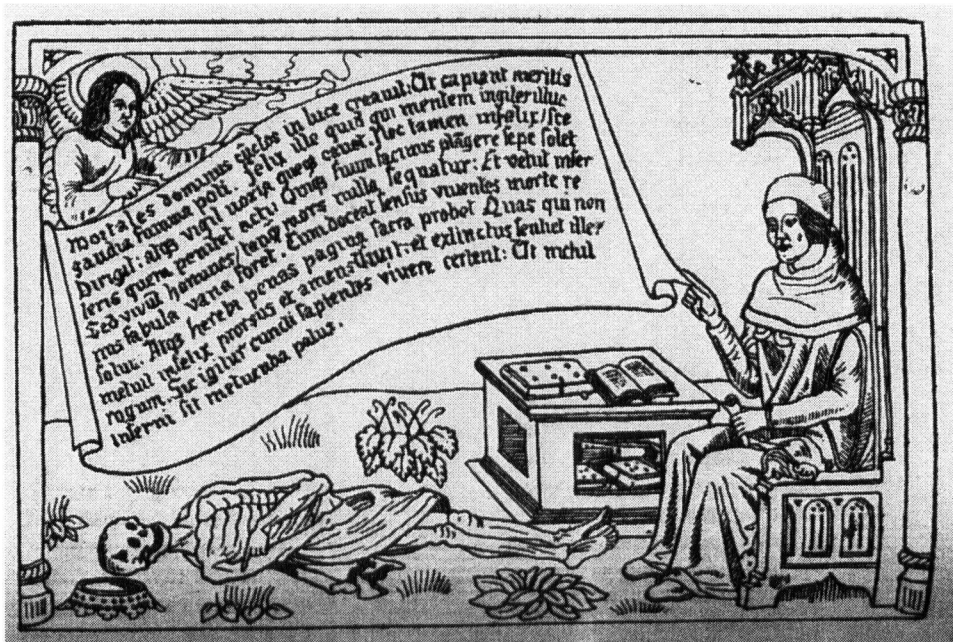


Plate 18: "The Author with The Dead King," *Danse Macabre*, 1485.

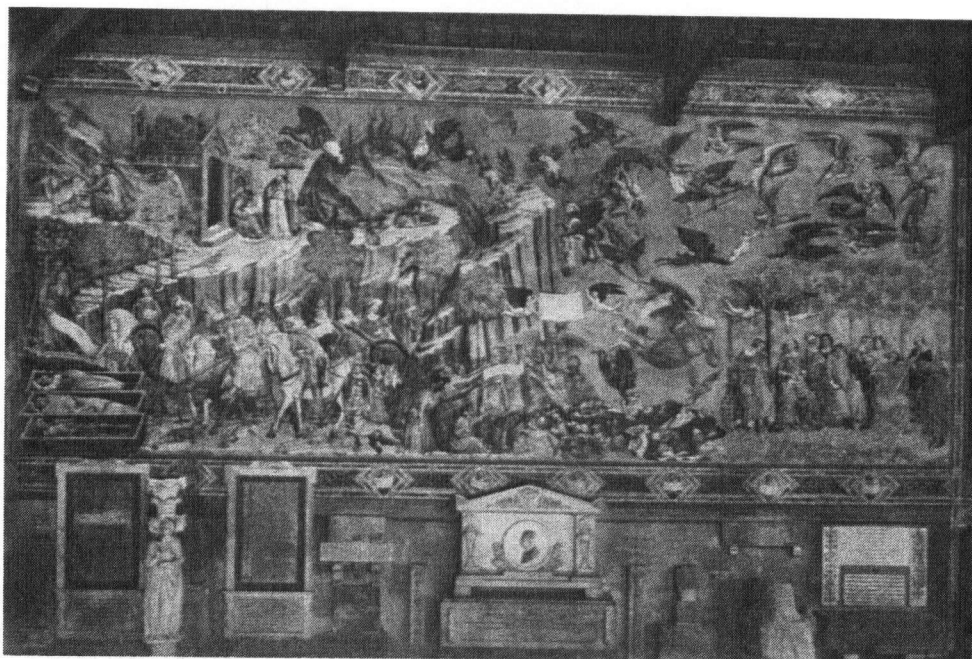


Plate 19: *The Triumph of Death*, Camposanto, Pisa, c.1340

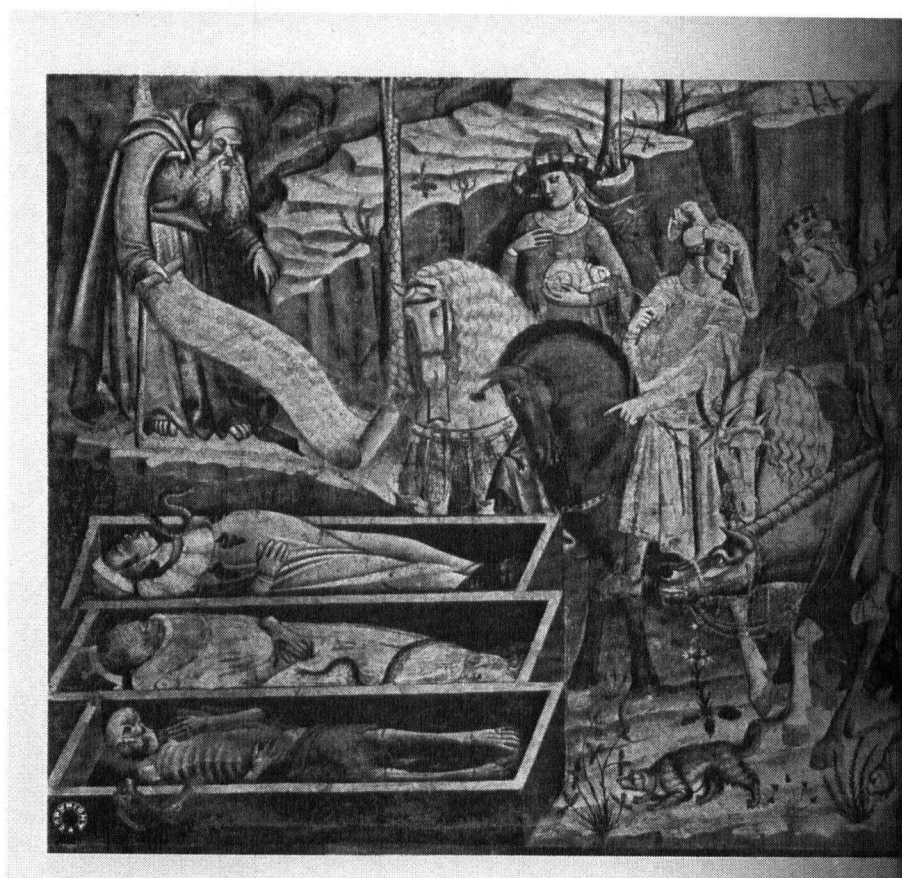


Plate 20: *The Triumph of Death*, Camposanto, Pisa, c.1340 (Detail)

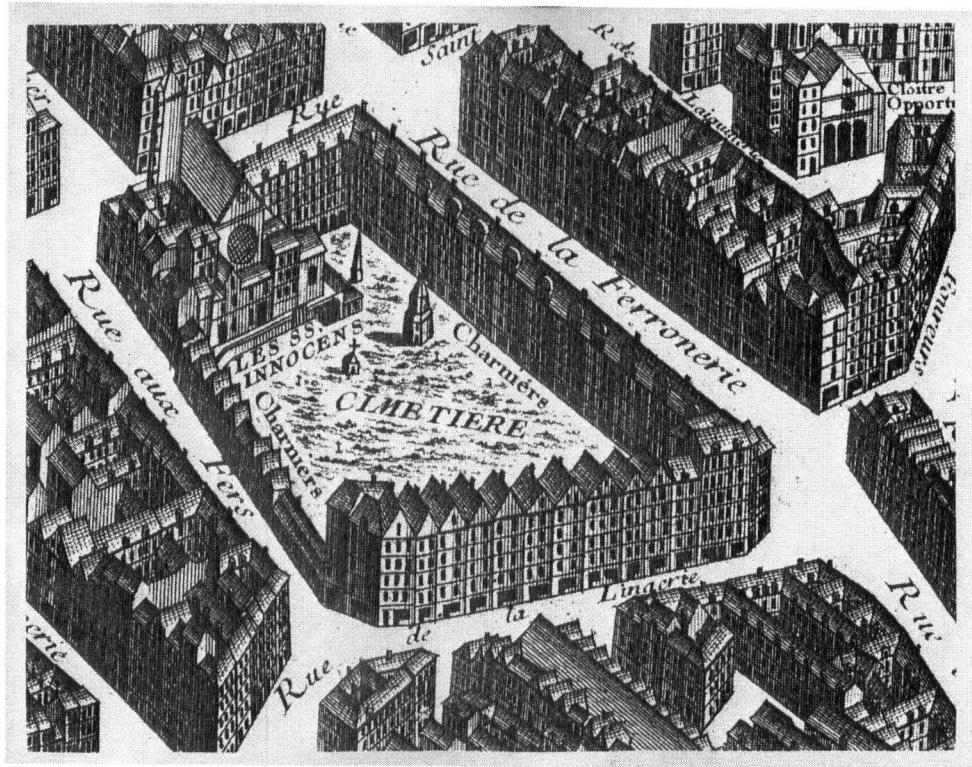


Plate 22: Cemetery of the Holy Innocents, *Turgot, Plan de Paris*, detail, c. 1739

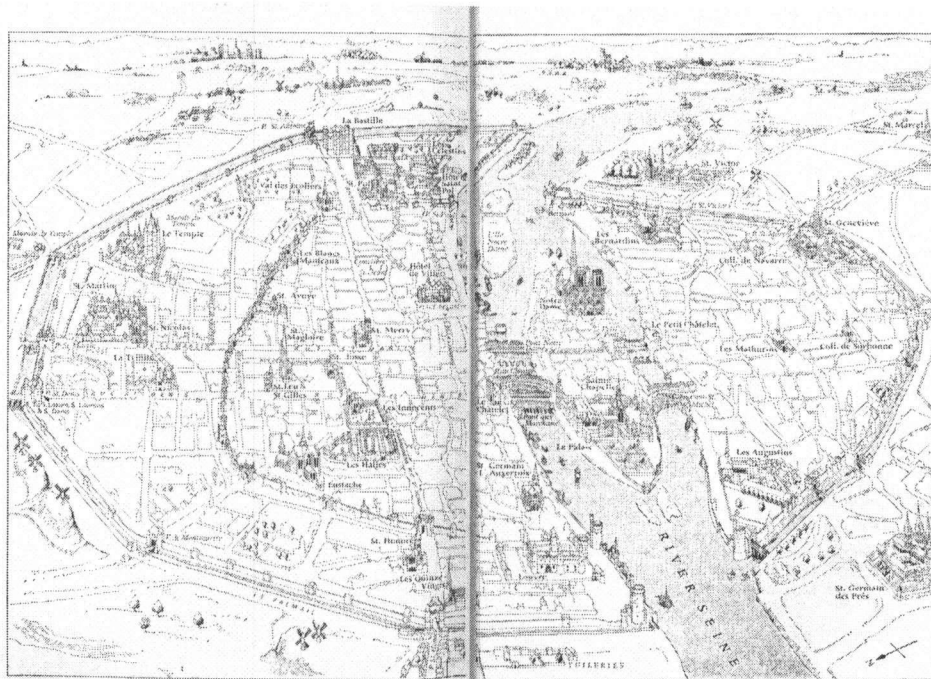


Plate 23: Map of Fifteenth Century Paris, n/d.



Plate 24: *Cemetery of the Holy Innocents*, Jacob Grimer, c. 1580



LÜBECK: DANCE OF DEATH

Plate 25: *The Dance of Death*, Bernt Notke, detail, 1463

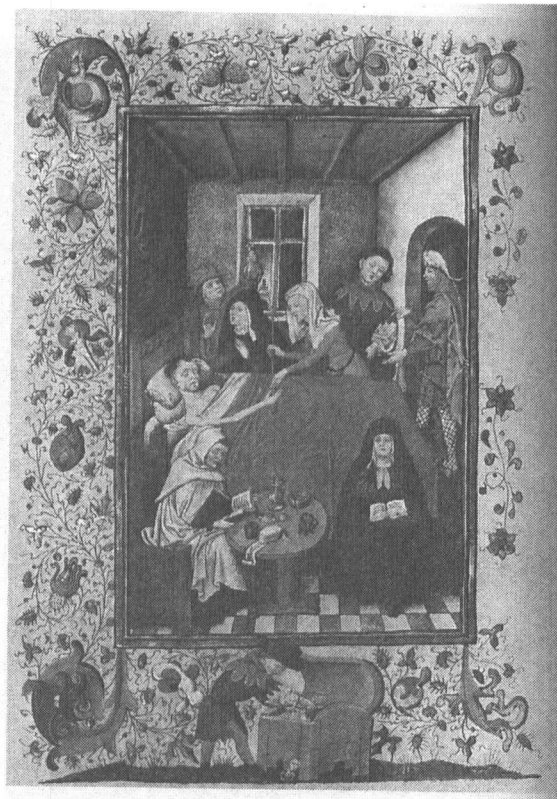


Plate 26: *Deathbed*, by Master of Catherine of Cleves, c. 1440

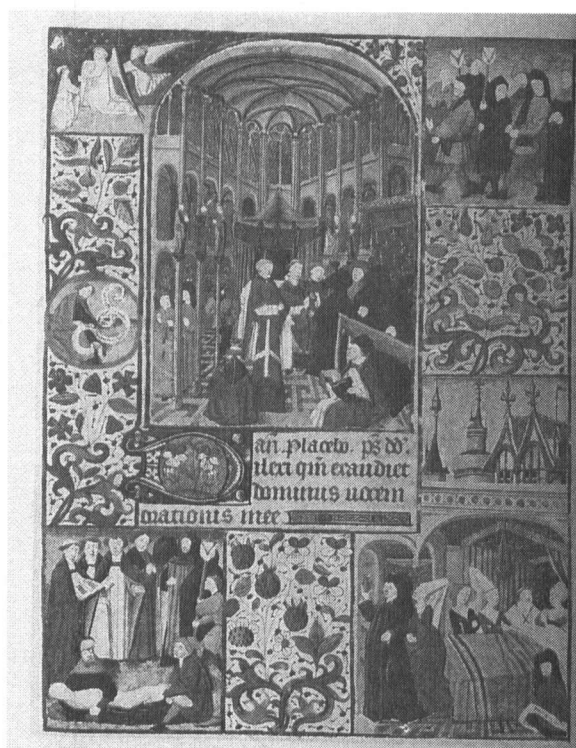


Plate 27: *Requiem Mass*, by Master of Harley Froissart, c. 1450



Plate 28: *Burial Scene*, by Master of Morgan 453, c. 1425

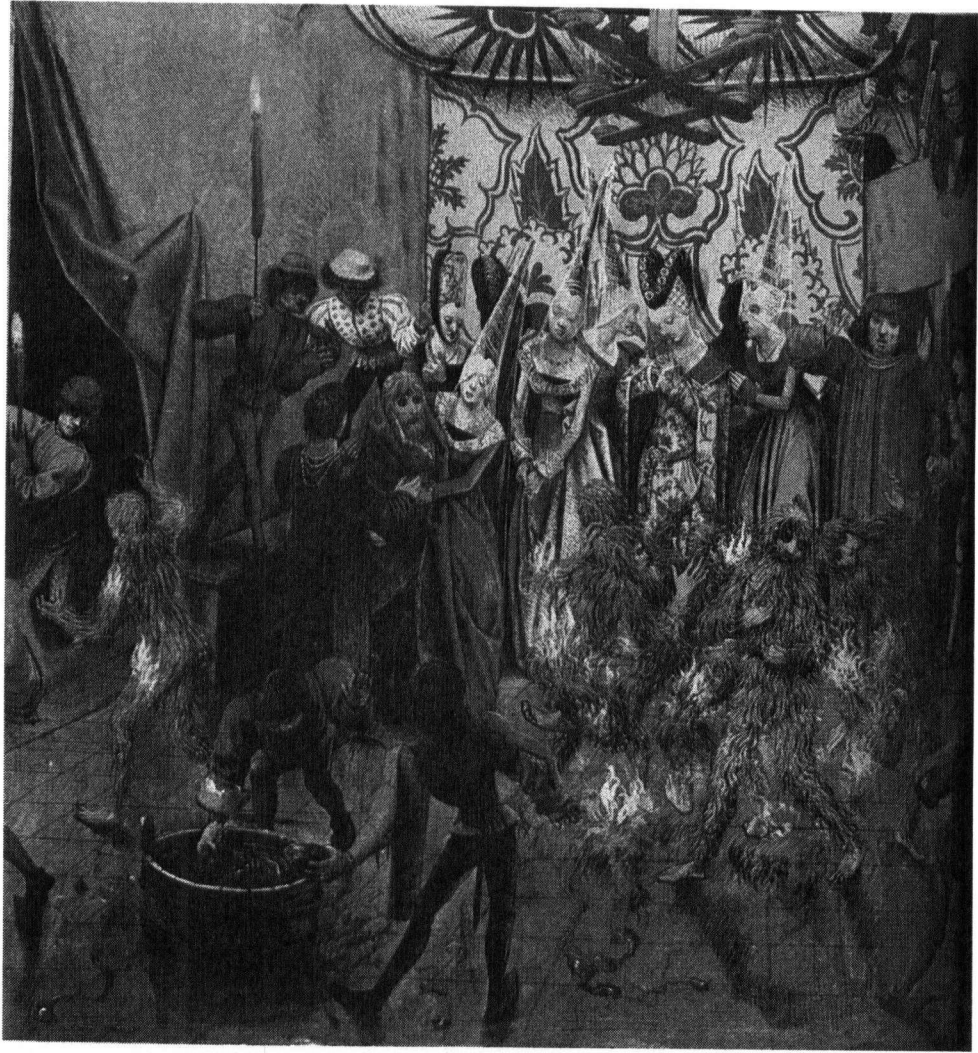


Plate 29: *Bal des Ardents*, c. 1460



Plate 30: *The Justification of the Duke of Burgundy*, 1408



Plate 31: *Monk (Author)*, c. 1400



Plate 32: Gerson Preaching at the Church of St. Bernard, c. 1480



Plate 33: Fountain of the Innocents, Paris, 1800s

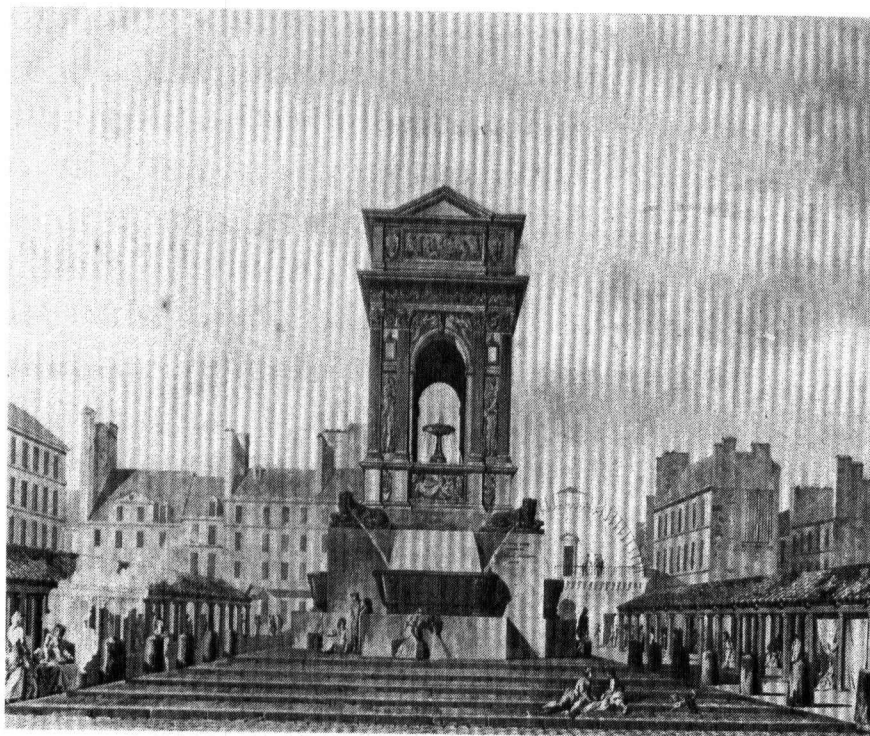


Plate 34: Fountain of the Innocents, Paris, 1800s

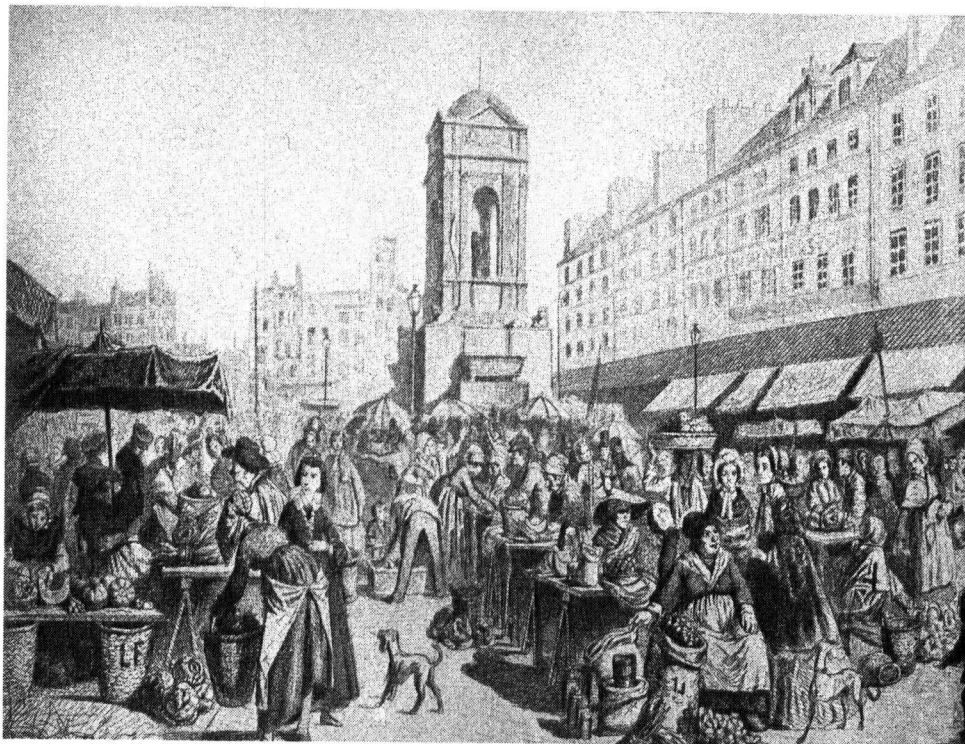


Plate 35: *Le Marché des Innocents, 1800s*