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“What We Are, So You Shall Be”: Preparation for Death in the Late Middle Ages

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In the legend of the Three Living and the Three Dead, three living men who have gone for a walk encounter three walking corpses who are essentially their doubles. “What you are, so once were we,” the dead say to the living; “what we are, so you shall be.” (Daniell 69) This story, which originated on the Continent and came to England at the beginning of the fourteenth century, is a common motif in painting and poetry for the rest of the Middle Ages. Though it does predate the Black Death, which reached England in 1348, it is representative of a phenomenon that peaked in the aftermath of the plague—a fascination with the inevitability and unpredictability of death, and a desire to prepare oneself for death during life. This fascination is illustrated in the emerging genre of the macabre, associated with the Dance of Death, and the cadaver effigies found in late medieval cathedrals, which showed the decomposing corpse of their commissioner or patron, often with worms feeding on his body. The extent to which the plague can account for these representations of death is impossible to fully determine, but what is clear is that they stemmed from a fear of sudden death, which in itself stemmed from a fear of Hell and Purgatory. In order to ensure the eventual passage of their souls to heaven, everyone—rich and poor, clergy and layman—was expected to devote a significant portion of life to the contemplation of death, by viewing art and reading poetry, by visiting the sick and dying, and sometimes even by becoming deathly sick.

It is tempting to explain the late medieval attitude toward death as a direct result of the Black Death, which caused massive loss of life and brought about a new awareness of the fact that death could come at any time. While this generalization is not completely false, there are several issues of timing. The fear of sudden death was not new. The administration of the Last Rites was an essential part of pre- and post-plague ritual, and a sudden death without these rites could leave the soul in danger of being corrupted or sent to Hell. Even before the plague, artists and writers were fascinated by death, and by the difference between the living and the dead. As mentioned earlier, the legend of the Three Living and the Three Dead predates the plague: it had certainly arrived in England by no later than 1303, when a diptych illustrating the story was purchased from France (Binski 135). There are questions of chronology in the origins of the cadaver effigy as well. “[A]s a simple explanation,” argues Pamela King, “the Black Death is both too early and too late” (qtd. in Platt 183). It is too late to explain the interest in graphic representation of the dead but too early to explain the cadaver effigy itself, which did not reach England until 1420 and was not found anywhere before the plague (Daniell 184).

In considering the influence of the Black Death, it is important to understand that, as Christopher Daniell states, “such a huge number of deaths did not change the core of traditional theology or religion,” which was still focused on avoiding Hell and lessening one’s time in Purgatory. It did not cause a major shift in doctrine, as the Reformation did. To understand medieval religion, it is essential to understand the medieval definitions of body and soul. According to current doctrine, the body and the soul were two distinct entities, and death was defined as the moment when they separated. The soul remained unharmed despite the death of the body; though death was inevitable, the soul could be saved, and this was the crux of medieval religious practice. Prayers for the souls of the dead were important, and those with wealth and

power could found chantries and request masses to be said for their souls; the number of masses was a status symbol, and often the richest requested over a thousand masses (1).

Just as important as prayers after death, however, was ritual performed during life, especially the Last Rites—Penance, the Eucharist, and Extreme Unction—performed by a priest immediately before the individual’s death. The most significant of these was Extreme Unction, “a ritually transformative act from which there was no return.” (Binski 29) It could be disastrous if an individual died before this rite could be performed, but it also posed a problem if he did not die after it had been performed. Extreme Unction “marked the end of one’s material existence, so those who received it without actually being dead had no proper place in religious understanding (Green 38). They were “latter-day Lazaruses, walking corpses.” (Binski 29) Thus it was important to be able to predict one’s time of death, at least to some extent, and the Last Rites were usually not performed until “the last possible moment” (Green 38).

This, however, was not the only reason to fear sudden death, or *mors improvisa*. (Green 48) It was essential to have purified oneself of sin because, it was believed, “the Devil would take advantage of the weakened state of dying sinners to try and make them fall into heresy, superstition, or cause them to lose faith” (50). Thus death itself was a test, and a “good death” was one that had been properly prepared for. It was necessary to understand that death comes to all, therefore to repent of one’s sins before it was too late. This is the message of the Three Living and the Three Dead. In a French text circa 1310, the Third Dead King says,

...*know*
That I was head of my line;
Princes, kings and nobles
Royal and rich, rejoicing in my wealth;
But now I am so hideous and bare
That even the worms disdain me. (qtd. in Binski 136)

Thus commoners and kings alike are entreated to contemplate death. It was expected that people visit both tombs and sickbeds, and it was believed that “seeing someone die encouraged conversion, as the awareness of mortality made clear the necessity of securing salvation.”

Some, however, sought more than an empathetic experience of death. The mystic Julian of Norwich (1342-c.1416) wished for a “bodilye sykenes...so hard as to the dede...for I hoped that it might be to me a spede when I shulde die” (qtd. in Appleford 195). She wanted to die and yet live—for herself and others to believe she was dying, and to be given the Last Rites. What for others would have been a terrifying prospect—to become, essentially, a zombie—was for her a God-given privilege, as she did eventually have a near-death experience, just as she had wished. (195)

The late medieval attitude toward sickness was conflicted. On the one hand, disease was usually evidence of sin, “indicative of the general spiritual malaise of humanity, or the consequence of divine punishment of an individual.” On the other hand, a long illness allowed sufferer to prepare for death—to put his affairs in order, to write a will, and, most important, to repent his sins. Doctrine had no way of getting around the fact that the virtuous were ill just as much as the sinful, and it was acknowledged that “a difficult death could follow a relatively virtuous life.” Furthermore, it was often believed that one who suffered a long illness was undergoing an earthly Purgatory, which meant that it would take him fewer years to reach Heaven. (Green 43) If the end of such an illness could be predicted, this was also to be praised. According to Daniell,

Once the themes had been established—that fore-knowledge of death was good, and sudden death was bad—there was only a very short logical step to assuming that good people would have foreknowledge, and that bad people...would die suddenly. (71)

The problem, of course, with this idea is that death is impartial, as the Three Living and the Three Dead suggests, and this is one way in which the influence of the Black Death is incontrovertible. Death from plague was always sudden, and it wasn't just the wicked who were in danger of dying without receiving the Last Rites. The religious desperation of this time was reflected in the actions of the Bishop of Bath and Wells, who "issued a remarkable letter to his clergy, which stated that not enough priests could be found" to administer the rites. The Bishop declared that any layman, even a woman if necessary, could hear confession, and the Eucharist could be given by a deacon. "If, however," the Bishop wrote, "there is no priest to administer the Sacrament of Extreme Unction, then, as in other matters, faith must suffice." This was one ritual that even the plague could not change. (Daniell 192)

The primary factor in late medieval attitudes toward death was still, as stated earlier, religious belief, but it undeniable that the Black Death gave them a new level of meaning. (Daniell 195) Cadaver effigies were often commissioned by those who wished to meditate on their own deaths in advance, and they often, according to Platt, had nothing to do with sudden death; nevertheless, their connection to "unsecured death by plague" would have been evident (Platt 158-159). And although paintings and texts of the Three Living and the Three Dead were common before the Black Death, Platt argues that "it was in its later post-plague treatments that the legend lost its levity," coming into "the same spirit as the contemporary Dance of Death" (183-184).

After the Reformation, writes Platt, "the art of Death lived on...for the plague (unlike the Pope) had not been banished. It is impossible to say distinctly how much of the fascination with dying well, and therefore with preparing for death, was a result of the plague and how much was the result of religious doctrine and belief, but what is certain is that it was a distinctly medieval

phenomenon. By the Age of Reason, when “the risks of an untimely death subsided,” as had the fear of Purgatory with the Reformation over a century earlier, so subsided the need to spend life preparing for death. But until that time, cadaver effigies and motifs such as the Three Living and the Three Dead remained popular, and everyone, regardless of status was encouraged to look on them and contemplate their own mortality. As the Three Dead were, so would they someday be, and constant reminder of this fact was their best hope of saving their souls.

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