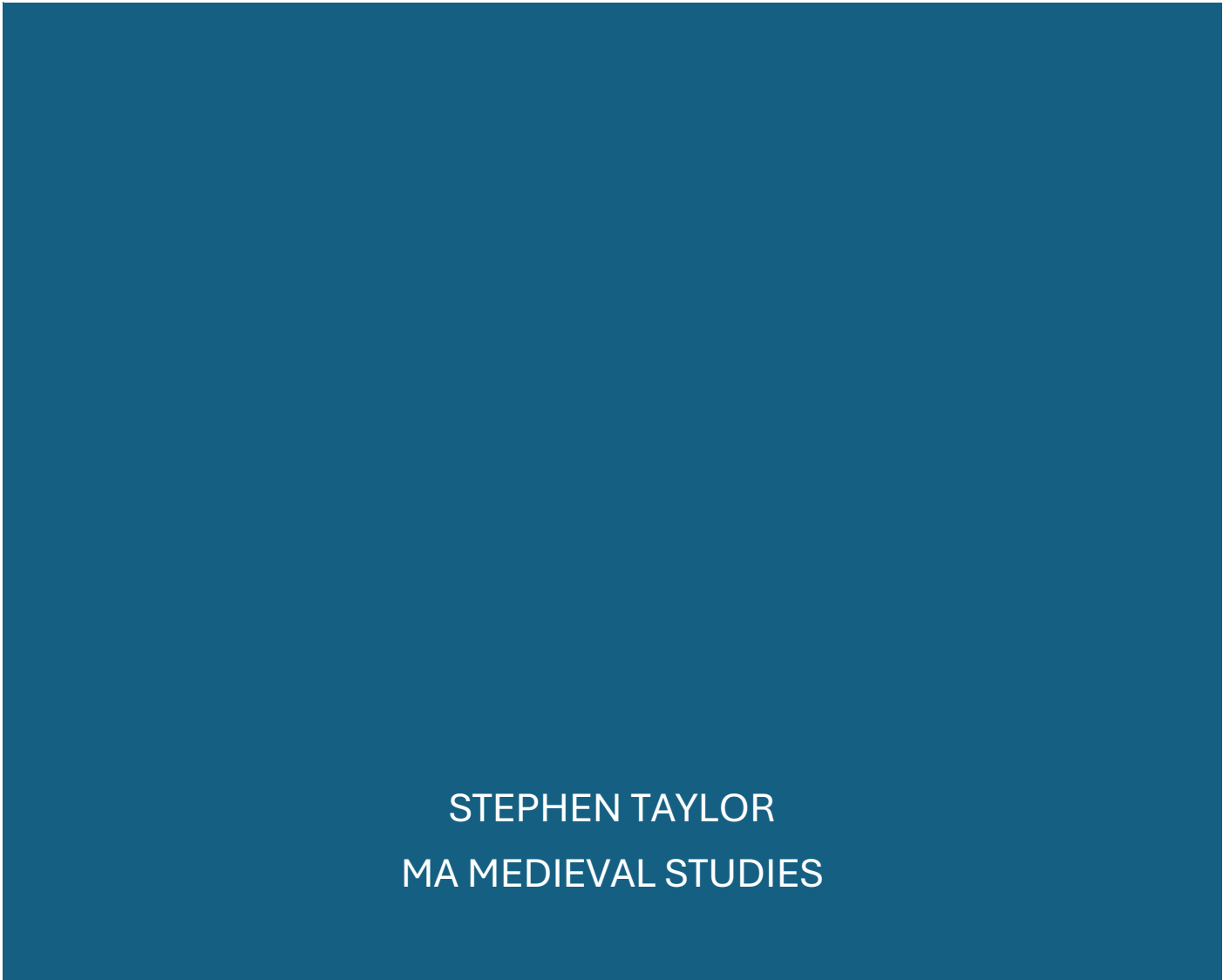




EXERCISE 4: IMAGE COMMENTARY



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**Image used: “Death, with Scythe” – the cover page of the Office of the Dead from the
Mirandola Book of Hours: MMS Add. 50002¹**

Wider context: Books of Hours and Death

Books of Hours are medieval prayer books that were used to assist with praying the canonical hours. They have their roots in the 6th century in the form of Psalters, originally intended to be read only by the clergy, but by the 13th century had become ecclesiastical books aimed at lay persons. The books were originally popular with wealthy nobles, who paid to have their own book with custom decoration. However, by the late 14th century they became widely available across society with the development of the printing press, although richly illuminated books were still commissioned for the wealthy well into the 16th century. They are small books, designed to be portable and regularly used. Their imagery and contents could be customised for the patron, sometimes containing custom prayers with family names added or images of Heraldry (or even the patron themselves). Despite customisation options, most books of hours generally contained an ecclesiastical calendar, extracts from the four gospels, Office of the Blessed Virgin, Office of the Dead, and Hours of the Cross.

The Office of the Dead is a collection of prayers and psalms which remind the reader of the dead. They contained prayers to read at various points in the day, but they could also be read at funerals and to the dying as a form of comfort. The Office of the Dead was also used to pray for those who had passed so that they could move on from Purgatory to Heaven.

At the time the image in question was produced, the *Danse Macabre* was firmly established as an artistic allegory for death. Produced as a memento mori, it reminded the reader that death was inevitable across society through its depiction of skeletons leading people from all walks of life to their graves. This was a development on other “living death” concepts, such as the Three Living and Three Dead.²

Description of Image

The image chosen comes from the cover page of the Office of the Dead from the Mirandola Book of Hours; a Book of Hours commissioned c. 1490-1499 by Galeotto I Pico della Mirandola (1442 – 1499), an Italian nobleman and soldier (“*condottiero*”; a medieval/early modern Italian military leader).

The image depicts a personification of Death as an animated skeleton, wearing a flowing black sash across the ribs and holding a scythe across the shoulder. It is of no determinate gender or age. Death is stood on striated marble steps which lead to an elaborately decorated temple or chapel. There are six black pillars, speckled with gold, standing atop a base of greyish-blue, with an inset on all visible sides depicting gold organic-looking patterns on a red background. The pillars are topped with a gold crown-like structure. They are positioned intentionally to provide depth perception, drawing the eye downwards to a gold archway which is etched with the Latin

¹ The manuscript is currently not online due to the cyber attack at the British Library. However, many of the pages can be found in their Images Online repository, including the image in question which is here: <https://imagesonline.bl.uk/asset/344/>. Additionally, the image is contained in the appendix of this essay.

² Although depictions of death were nothing new by this point, the Black Death’s grip on Europe seems to have propelled the macabre forward as a genre of artwork.

phrase “*OMNIA MORS EQUAT*” – which translates approximately to “death equalises all”.³ Three statues can be seen in the temple: one above an altar or catafalque depicting Mary wearing a red garment and holding the holy infant; a figure of a woman in a red floor-length garment holding a shield by her side,⁴ and another obscured statue of a male figure with a gold halo.⁵ At either side of the steps that Death is standing on, two circular indentations in the marble flooring are present; one appears to have a sponge on a stick laying across it, and the second indentation has a stick coming out of the hole, which is in turn releasing smoke.⁶ An unidentifiable limb bone lies on the marble floor, the only disorder in the otherwise pristine scene.

Surrounding the main image is a border which depicts snakes wrapped around each other and around various human bones, including a pelvis, several limb bones, fragments of spine, ribs separated from the ribcage, and six skulls, both with and without jawbones present. Four of the skulls are depicted interacting with books; two jawbone-less skulls are placed on top of blue books, another skull with jawbone intact has a red book placed into the mouth, and another intact skull is placed in a decorative bowl which is itself placed atop of a book. The border also contains regal and religious hats, including a papal tiara, mitres, a *galero*, and a crown.⁷ At the bottom is a medallion depicting Resurrection Day, showing an angel above a blasted landscape sounding a buisine whilst a crowd of people stare up at him. Finally, the Latin text accompanying the image introduces the reader to the Office of the Dead section of the book and goes straight into the start of Psalm 114 (from the Vulgate bible) following the antiphon.

Image analysis

Border and Medallion – Bones, Hats, Snakes, and Resurrection

The hats depicted are (likely) all ecclesiastical or regal headwear. Most of them are being interacted with and potentially serve as a reminder that even the holy and the regal die – a riff on

³ Therefore a text version of the *Danse Macabre* message - albeit possibly misspelt, as most versions of this phrase include the letter *Æ* at the start of “*equat*”.

⁴ This could be Minerva or Athena – who are often depicted in this stance with a shield at their side. Likely Minerva, given the Northern Italian origins of the image.

⁵ Given the halo and the state of undress, this could very well be Jesus Christ on the crucifix – although it is blurry, obscured, and altogether difficult to make out. It could also be a depiction of Christ as “The Man of Sorrows” from Isaiah 53 in the Hebrew Bible – an image which is subverted in other Books of Hours, eg The Hours of Anne of France c. 1470, in which Death is depicted akin to The Man of Sorrows.

⁶ I was unable to determine exactly what these are. I checked images of the interiors of many Roman and Greek temples as well as medieval catholic chapels and found nothing similar. I suspect the leftmost one is a vessel/font to hold water or oil which are used to wash/anoint bodies, and the rightmost one is possibly a brazier to burn incense/spices, given the stick coming out of it and what appears to be smoke (but also could be water damage to the book). These could potentially be used during the Extreme Unction, although I’m not sure that would be performed at the actual chapel itself.

⁷ Two further hats are present – one blue and one red, both with a downwards-facing crescent moon on the front. Despite extensive research online and asking around, I was unable to identify these hats in time prior to this exercise being submitted and they remain a mystery. I assume these are royal or regal hats in line with the rest of the image; I did briefly consider that maybe the hats were from different people across society in line with the “*omnia mors equat*” message, but the unidentified headwear seems far too elaborate for anything other than royal or religious use.

the *danse macabre*. Notably, the cardinal *galero* is depicted as being suspended; the hanging of *galero* over the tombs of cardinals until they rot away was a common practice during this time.⁸

The snakes in the border are depicted alone or in pairs, knotted around each other or around bones. They are shown to be brown or grey, and when paired they are always of the same colour. Whilst most of the knotted snakes are probably depicted as such for decorative purposes, there is a vaguely Celtic feeling to the knots akin to animal interlacing popular in Hiberno-Saxon manuscripts.⁹ Medieval bestiaries tend to associate snakes with both death and religion, depending on the species being discussed. Of the several snake types listed in the Bodleian 764 bestiary, perhaps notable to this image is the “seps”.¹⁰ Seps is a legendary snake, tiny in size, but whose poison “does not just consume the body, but the bones too”.¹¹ The “consuming” of bones is evident in a metaphorical sense in the image with snakes being wrapped around them. Additionally, as snakes can shed their skin, they are also associated with renewal and rebirth – leaning into the religious aspect of this image as an allegory for Christ.

The bones in the border are varied and fragmented, and likely serve simply as a reminder of the anonymity of death. The interaction of some of them with other elements in the border is perhaps indicative of *memento mori* – the snakes wrapping around them, the tiara being propped up by a ribcage, and the books in the mouths of skulls remind us that the holy and the learned will pass.

The medallion depicts Resurrection Day, a reference to Corinthians and Thessalonians. On this day, it is said that the Trumpet of God will be sounded, and dead believers will be resurrected - whole and uncorrupted. This is likely present as a reminder that the dead are still around in some form and will return one day.

Main Image – Death with a Scythe

Death stands prominently in the centre of the page. Yet it is not entirely skeletal; when comparing it to the bones in the border, it is evident that there is some soft tissue on the torso. Whilst it is possible that this is simply an artistic attempt at shadow, we can see that the statue at the back of the image has background showing between the placement of the arm and torso. That is not the case with the skeleton, where no background is evident between the ribs and the abdominal cavity is covered with dehydrated flesh (although devoid of organs). This could be due to the movement in the late medieval period to depict rot and putrefaction in death imagery.¹² This was particularly common in prayer books and was designed to encourage the audience to think of the consequences of death – not as a concept, but as a reality; you

⁸ John Paul Sonnen, ‘The Custom of Suspending the Galero in Cathedral Churches’, *Liturgical Arts Journal* <<http://www.liturgicalartsjournal.com/2024/03/the-custom-of-suspending-galero-in.html>> [accessed 21 December 2024].

⁹ Albeit simplified. It’s also probably unlikely to be intentional as this is a style from another country, several centuries earlier.

¹⁰ This bestiary was chosen simply because I have a facsimile in my collection. Although it is true there is no single definitive text for bestiaries, the majority of them contain the same animals and the same messages – albeit with different text. Most bestiaries have their roots in the Greek *Physiologus* from the second century and texts were expanded on from that.

¹¹ Richard Barber, *Bestiary: MS Bodley 764* (Boydell Press, 1993).

¹² Sarah Schell, *Image and the Office of the Dead in Late Medieval Europe: Regular, Repellent, and Redemptive Death*, 1st edn (Amsterdam University Press, 2023), doi:10.1017/9789048544233.

unquestionably will decay after death until only the anonymous skeleton remains- therefore an extension of the *memento mori* concept.

The scythe being held by Death is representative of the “*OMNIA MORS EQUAT*” message depicted behind, reminding us that labourers are included amongst the holy and regal, depicted by hats elsewhere in the image, and that they too will die. It can also be read as a tool to literally “reap” the souls of the dead, akin to how crops are reaped from the fields with a scythe.¹³ The depiction is likely a pre-cursor to the Victorian Grim Reaper character. Although the Grim Reaper is a psychopomp, it could be argued at this point that depictions of Death in the Danse Macabre are also serving the same role – showing the dead to their graves (although not usually to the afterlife itself).

The black and gold speckled marble with intricate gold patterns throughout at either side of the steps suggest soil and plant root systems/mycelium – indicating that Death has risen from the earth or, given the direction it is facing, is preparing to venture there. This is likely a reminder that we too will return to the earth when we pass. The temple/chapel itself is supported by six pillars that appear to be made of the same black and gold speckled marble that depicts the soil – possibly indicating literal ‘pillars of the earth’. These pillars are mentioned several times in the Bible and are said to be metaphorical structures that hold society up, but that can be toppled as God sees fit to punish humanity.¹⁴ This would fit into the imagery: death inflicts grief on the living, which feels like the world has come toppling down – but death, in this era, is also a punishment to criminals which can be seen as a metaphorical topping of the pillars to adjust perceived morality within society.

Significance and Artistry

This work is somewhat unusual for the area at the time. By the 1490s, the Italian Renaissance had been growing for several decades starting in Florence, less than 125 miles from Mirandola. Paul Binski in his book “*Medieval Death: Ritual and Representation*” argues that fifteenth century Italy did not embrace the macabre unlike countries north and west of the Alps.¹⁵ Yet here we have a depiction of Death which certainly does evoke the macabre. The image of Death when portrayed like this is secular, but the background of the image is ecclesiastical. This may be attempting to link two worlds: the traditional image of religion within the Catholic church with the “modern” macabre image of the Death at the front. It should not be forgotten that this Book of Hours was made for a patron who was friends with Ercole I d’Este, a prominent patron of the early Renaissance.¹⁶ It is perhaps possible that he wanted to adopt what was then a spreading fashion whilst retaining traditional religious elements. This was a time when the printing press was in its nascency, and Books of Hours were becoming an everyday item; having a uniquely decorated personalised book would have been a status symbol.

The book pages are made from vellum, which was a luxury choice as it was substantially more expensive than parchment. Paper was available but would remain a niche material for a while longer. The golden hue dominating the image is likely egg tempera; other images in the book

¹³ It would be interesting to see if the scythe, which chops down lots of crops at once, was used in Death imagery prior to the Black Death.

¹⁴ Notably in the Book of Job and additionally in Psalm 75.

¹⁵ Paul Binski, *Medieval Death : Ritual and Representation* (Ithaca, N.Y. : Cornell University Press, 1996) <<http://archive.org/details/medievaldeathrit0000bins>> [accessed 19 December 2024].

¹⁶ Joseph Manca, ‘The Presentation of a Renaissance Lord: Portraiture of Ercole I d’Este, Duke of Ferrara (1471-1505)’, *Zeitschrift Für Kunstgeschichte*, 52.4 (1989), pp. 522–38, doi:10.2307/1482468.

appear to be gilded but this one does not. A variety of other colours are used, primarily blue and red which may be derived from azurite and cochineal respectively.¹⁷

There is some evidence of human interaction with the image, notably in the medallion where there is some wear and tear perhaps suggestive of frequent touching. There is also a substantial smudge on Death's scythe-holding hand and potentially a second one in the circular indentation to the right of Death (although this could be smoke). This could (tenuously) be water damage from tears produced when using the book or could simply be smudges from frequent touching of the page.

Conclusion

This is a unique image amongst Office of the Dead cover pages because of its atavistic and ecclesiastical portrayal of death; images from other Books of Hours often contain a lot more natural elements to remind the viewer of our link to the natural world. That said, the point of images like this is to convey a message to be understood by the audience for whom it is intended, and I feel this would have served its purpose well. I noticed several other items in the image where the potential meaning could be explored further, but due to word constraints I was unable to include them; please see footnotes for further information.¹⁸

¹⁷ Other reagents were used to make dyes of these colours, but these would be the most common and easy to find.

¹⁸ There are many things I would have liked to explore further in this essay, but due to limitations I am unable to. These include: wider analysis of the memento mori aspect of the image especially in context of early renaissance Italy, the image of two snakes in a skeletal caduceus to represent life/death and medicine, the significance of the positions of the skulls in the border, further examination of the medallion image, the black sash that Death is wearing, and as mentioned previously the identification and meaning of the crescent moon hats. Identification of the temple/chapel itself would also be interesting; I looked at the medieval churches/chapels of Mirandola and there is nothing that looks like this, although it's possible it is heavily stylised.

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Appendix 1:

