

Assignment feedback

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Module code: HPHI6002

*Student ID
number:*
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*Educational
support needs:*

Yes

Module title: Death, Dying and the Macabre in
the Late Middle Ages

Assignment title: Death, Dying and the Macabre – Portfolio 2: Danse Macabre
print by Pierre le Rouge, 1491-1492

Assignment due date: 10/11/17

Assignment Number: 2
(i.e. 1,2,3)

Marker's signature:

Date:

Provisional.

NB. All marks are provisional until confirmed by the final examination board.

SELF-REFLECTION SHEET.

PLEASE COMPLETE BEFORE SUBMISSION AND ATTACH TO YOUR WORK

Date: 6/11/2017

Module: HPHI6002

Name: Rosie Nye

Guidance: You might consider the following elements:

- Argument: does it have one/ is it backed by sufficient evidence/ how lucid is it?
- Structure: how clear is it / is my essay easy to follow/ does it help my argument?
- Analysis: is more/less analytical than narrative/ does it address the question?
- Reading: was this sufficiently broad/ have I referenced properly?
- How might I improve my performance in future?

Strengths

Examined sources and compared both modern and contemporary in the commentary

Looked at different interpretations to the meaning of the image

Good analytical though

Weaknesses:

Could have said more but did not have enough words.

General Comments:

It was interesting to examine a medieval print in regards to medieval attitudes towards death and what they may have associated the print with.

Please give a mark for your work: 2/2

(for eg: 1st = 70+: 2/1 = 69-60: 2/2 = 59-50: 3rd = 45-49: pass = 40-44: fail = 39-)



The medieval concept and understanding of death is one rigorously addressed by both contemporary sources and modern academics. The concept of death is prevalent across medieval artwork and literature; one of the most prominent being Pierre le Rouge's print of the Danse Macabre (le Rouge 1491-1492). Originating in a late 13th Century poem, "Le dit des trois morts et des trois vifs" (Boase 1972: 104), the Danse Macabre has often been considered to be a warning to the living through the essential transience and mortality to which each individual reader is the manuscript's subject (Taylor 1984: 34). Deaux states that the Danse Macabre, or Dance of Death, was a variation of the idea that Death mocks worldly power and piety (1969: 208). The print of the Danse Macabre, made accessible to the majority of the populous, can allow modern scholars to gain an understanding of how the late medieval people addressed and understood death. Made up of a poem, with each stanza illustrated with a pictorial description, this commentary will be focusing on the images themselves; death seizing each figure to drag them into the "dance of death" (Gertsman 2012: 87).

Functioning primarily as a warning to the medieval population that Death is indiscriminate, regardless of social standing in the hierarchy (Gordon, Marshall 2000: 15), the print is significant because of how the figures representing life and death are presented as a reflection of all classes. Taylor offers an interpretation to the layout of the print by stating that the Danse Macabre was used as a mirror (1984: 34). The procession of types and particular *touaille* of the print provides the onlooker with a range of professions and ranks in which individuals can identify themselves (Taylor 1984: 34, Oosterwijk 2008). Furthermore, the simplicity in the way the living's faces have been painted, the nondescript nature and the lack of expression, again allows the viewer to place themselves in the print (Fig. 1); creating a self-portrait of the reader (Fein 2014: 227). With the concept of a mirror in mind, the illustrations of the poem can be considered to have become an integrated aspect of medieval society; all ranks and professions able to identify themselves in the Danse Macabre therefore understanding that death is a fact of life all individuals would have to face (Fein 2014: 226).



Fig. 1. Note the anonymous nature of the living's faces.
(Pierre Le Rouge 1491-1492)

In regards to the position of the figures themselves in the print, it is immediately noted that in the majority of scenes, the figures mirror each other's body language. For example, in the third scene (Fig. 2) both the representations of life and death are mirroring each other's

position. As a result, it is again reinforcing the idea Taylor presents of the Danse Macabre acting as a mirror (1984: 33). The notion of medieval manuscripts reflecting the viewer and presenting the theme of the memento mori (Oosterwijk 2004: 62), is also present in the legend “Trois Mors et li Trois Vifs” where the three living are mirrored by the three figures representing death; warning the living about the vanity of human endeavor (Warren 1931: xii).



Fig 2. Note how the figures are mirroring each other's body language. (Pierre Le Rouge 1491-1492)

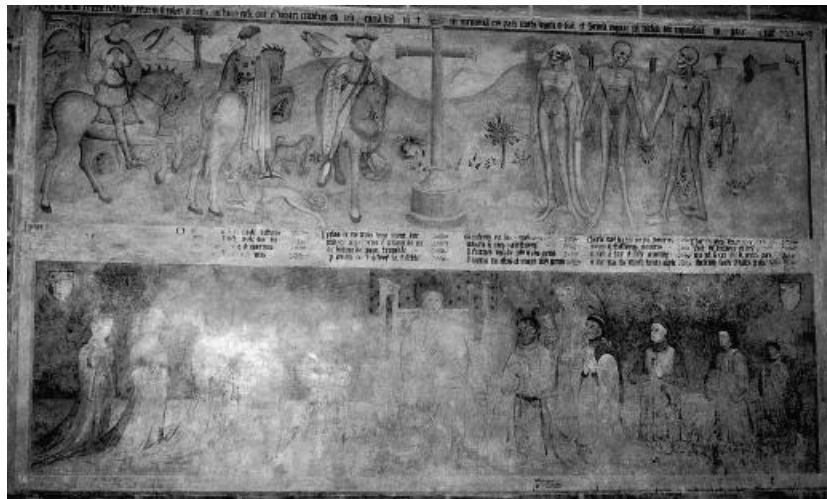


Fig 3. A mural depicting the Trois Mors et les Trois Vifs found in Ennezat, France (Kinch 2008: 49).

Another reason why the Danse Macabre is significant for modern academics is due to the representation of death. Contrary to widespread belief, the representations of death in the Danse Macabre do not depict skeletons (Caciola 1996: 25). Instead, the figures are shown as emaciated corpses, halfway through decay. The representation of death in such a way

reminds living individuals of the superficiality and meaninglessness of the material and social distinctions (Fein 2014: 227). Suggestions such as this are also evident in other contemporary imagery. One example is the “Dances of Death” by Holbein where the representation of death is ridiculing the living individuals (Fig. 3, 4). The line “worthy pastor follows death, who is leading him away, laughing and dancing” again presents the meaninglessness of the material life as well as the inevitability of death (Holbein in Deuchar 1803: 9). The constant interpretation of death in this way is important for a variety of reasons, one of the most interesting being that death, as a figure, is not completely decomposed (Fein 2014: 227). Therefore, the figure is still identifiable and supports the concept of the Danse Macabre as a mirror reflecting the viewer (Taylor 1984: 33). As such, the living individuals could place themselves in the print, as both the living and the dead.

What is also important to note is that the enforcement of the concept of the Danse Macabre would have been used by the clergy in reference to the *Ars Moriendi*. This would have instilled the need for a good death into the populous by frightening sinners into repentance through the insistence of the terrors of death (Warren 1931: xii). By being confronted with the idea that death would seize an individual and drag them into the abyss, it is forcing individuals to look back upon elemental reactions and basic assertions of life (Deaux 1969: 208). However, although it is likely that clergy would have used the print as a tool to reinforce the idea of your life having an impact on your death, as the clergy is also referenced in the Danse Macabre the print is again presenting the egalitarian message of death’s contempt for rank and wealth (Platt 1996: 160).

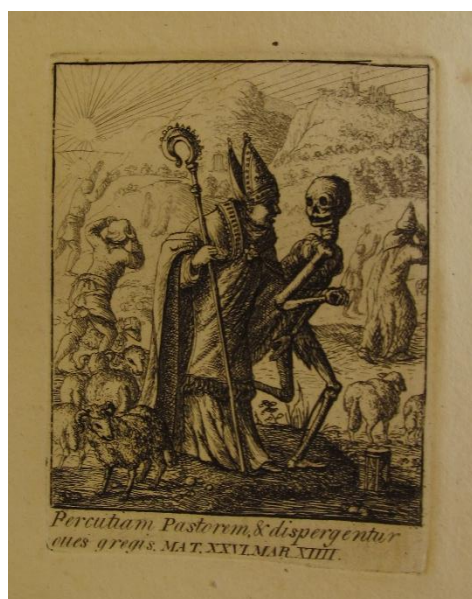


Fig. 3 Death leading the Pastor to the dance of death (Holbein in Deuchar 1803: 9).



Fig. 4 Death taking the Good Friar. Note that he is unable to disengage himself with death and therefore reinforcing the idea that death is indiscriminate (Holbein in Deuchar 1803: 11).

To conclude, the Danse Macabre was considered a warning to the living medieval population, made more prominent by the idea of the print as a mirror reflecting the viewer (Taylor, 1984, 3). The fact that it was available to the population makes the Danse Macabre more significant for modern academics as it offers an understanding of medieval attitudes towards death; mainly, that death is indiscriminate in who it takes (Gertsman 2006: 1).

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