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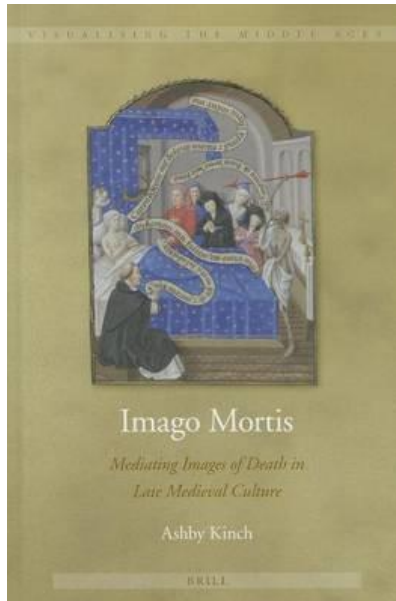
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Book review Ashby Kinch, *Imago Mortis. Mediating Images of Death in Late Medieval Culture*, Visualizing the Middle Ages, vol. 9 (Leiden: Brill, 2013), XVI + 301 pages, 45 b/w and color illustrations, €136.00/US\$189.00 (hb.), ISBN 1874-0448.

By Sophie Oosterwijk, University of St. Andrews

Death has become a trendy topic among medievalists. Recent years have seen the publication of Elina Gertsman's monograph *The Dance of Death in the Middle Ages* (2010), Kenneth Rooney's *Mortality and Imagination: The Life of the Dead in Medieval English Literature* (2011), and the co-edited volume *Mixed Metaphors: The Danse Macabre in Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (2011), to name a few. The subject of the *Danse Macabre* attracts particular interest on an international scale, although many publications are in languages other than English. Ashby Kinch's book is a recent addition to the anglophone literature. It is an ambitious attempt to combine Middle English literature and art of the period to investigate medieval attitudes to death and to address another topical subject: community.

The book is divided into three sections: "Facing Death," "Facing the Dead," and "The Community of Death." In his introduction Kinch surveys human thinking on death and its physical appearance from Socrates and Aristotle via Augustine and St Benedict to Petrarch, Jean Gerson, Julian of Norwich and John Mirk, while his epilogue presents a very sketchy "afterlife" of medieval death imagery that includes the macabre video of Robbie Williams's "Rock DJ." Kinch's ultimate aim is to contextualize three specific strands of fifteenth-century death iconography through a select number of illustrations in three medieval death-related texts. The first chapter is constructed around three deathbed illustrations in two Middle French translations of Henry Suso's meditation on death in "De scientia" (based on the second chapter in book II of

Suso's *Horologium Sapientiae*) and in a Middle English translation of this same text in the well-known "Carthusian Miscellany" (London, BL Add. MS 37049). A number of other comparative examples serve to show that whereas the focus of the source-text is the "bad death," the illuminators concerned chose to illustrate the positive concept of a "good death" instead. This argument is continued in the second chapter, which concentrates on Hoccleve's poetic translation of Suso's chapter in "Lerne for to Die" and the penitential model offered by the poet for the benefit of his aristocratic patrons.



Following his discussion of these select medieval visualizations of how the living experience Death, in his second section Kinch targets the huge corpus of medieval depictions of the Three Living and the Three Dead. This Legend can be found across Europe in a range of vernacular texts and as images in different media. The participants in this non-fatal encounter tend to be presented as aristocratic or even royal, unlike those in the *Danse Macabre* who represent a wide range of social classes and who all die: nonetheless, the Legend is often seen as a precursor of the *Danse*. Curiously the only known Middle English version of the Legend is relatively late, viz. *Three Dead Kings* by John Audelay (d. c.1426), a poem that Kinch juxtaposes with a selection of well-known cadaver monuments in chapter five.

The first two sections build up to a grand finale in Kinch's third section, "The Community of Death," which focusses on the *Danse Macabre* and centers around the two versions of John Lydgate's *Dance of Death* poem (originally written in 1426) and a painted *Danse Macabre* cycle

in a slightly later Parisian book of hours usually attributed to the Bedford workshop (New York, Morgan Library MS M.359). <http://corsair.morganlibrary.org/msdescr/BBM0359.htm>

The first chapter opens with the creation in 1424-25 of the *Danse Macabre* mural in Paris that inspired Lydgate to produce his own Middle English translation of the *Danse* during a visit to that city. Yet there is no discussion of the presumed author of the French poem or of the likely patron of this impressive mural, *i.e.* Philip the Good, Duke of Burgundy, even though an understanding of this mural and its genesis is essential if one wishes to argue how Lydgate and the Bedford workshop supposedly “reinvented” the *Danse*, as Kinch aims to prove. Unfortunately we no longer have the earlier French poem – possibly by Jehan le Fevre – of which the text in the Parisian mural was evidently an adaptation, and scholars are unsure how such a French prototype related to the Spanish *Dança general de la Muerte*, a text that predates the Parisian mural by several decades. There was thus no “standard” *Danse* to be “reinvented.” The structure and character of the *Danse* made it easy for artists and authors to add or remove characters as they pleased: this very adaptability was the strength of this enduring motif.



The *Danse Macabre* at Les Saints Innocents was begun in August 1424 and destroyed probably in 1669, long before the demolition of the cemetery itself in 1786. However, in 1485 Guy Marchant published the text with accompanying woodcuts of all the pairs of dancers presented in the mural. This edition underlines people’s familiarity with the famous Parisian *Danse*, albeit that its illustrations are not faithful copies of the mural. Yet Marchant’s pivotal edition is mentioned only in passing by Kinch, who illustrates none of his woodcuts. Instead he builds his theory around the extensive cycle of roundels in the margins of a single manuscript (Morgan MS. M.359), while relegating to a footnote the *Danse Macabre* borders in another, slightly earlier Parisian book of hours (Paris, BnF ms. Rothschild 2535).

Kinch does a good job of presenting the historical circumstances in France in the 1420s, even if he is not the first to link the traumatic impact of the English Regency with the *Danse Macabre*. It is surprising, therefore, that he still presents the *Danse* in Paris as “a representation of an idealized community” (p. 191), but then he seems unaware of all that has been published on the political subtext of the Parisian mural since at least 2007 (e.g. by Maja Dujakovic). A nice find is the *devinette* about the absence of women in the *Danse Macabre* (p. 207, n. 57), but no



date is given for this witticism, which is repeated verbatim in n. 9 on p. 267. Interesting is also his novel identification of the *Parlementaire* in his characteristic red robe in the roundel on fol. 128, yet Kinch is clearly not an art historian and thus no expert on the use of color in medieval art. This explains his naïve description of the polychromy on the tomb effigy of Philippe de Morvilliers (d. 1348) as “an aesthetic choice” (p. 234) and his assumption that the colorfully dressed laborer on fol. 147v is “dressed for a public ceremony rather than for work” (p. 241) – the latter because Kinch is keen to link this *Danse Macabre* cycle with Henry VI’s coronation procession in Paris in 1431, although here the colors *are* an “aesthetic choice” of the illuminator. Kinch also understands little of the commissioning of luxury manuscripts: whereas anyone who has ever studied or even just held this richly illuminated 173-folio manuscript would understand that it must have been commissioned by a wealthy patron, Kinch supposes its manufacture to have been a “gamble” and a “speculative” venture for an unknown “potential” patron in which the Bedford workshop “indulged” at a time of political crisis (pp. 246-247). In fact, although the patron remains unidentified there are interesting clues, e.g. the inclusion in the calendar of

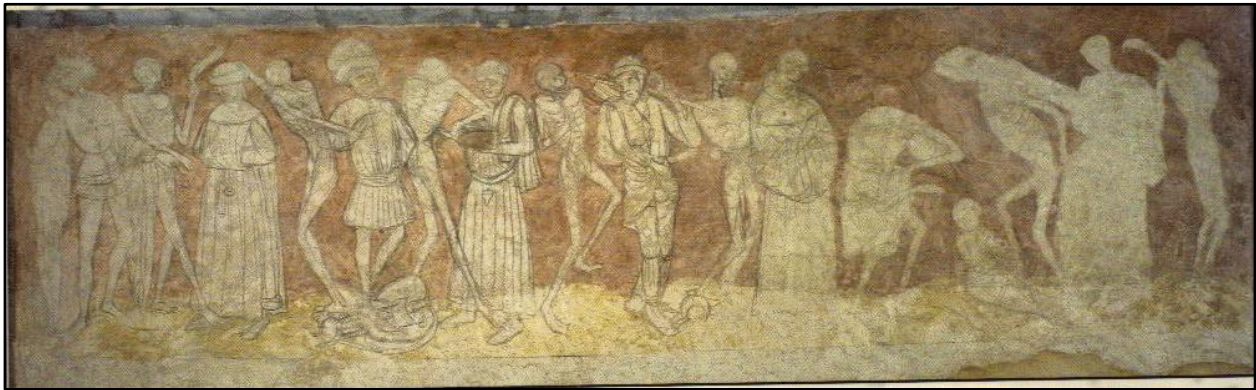
typically English saints such as Sts Botolph, Edward, and Augustine of Canterbury, and the highlighting in gold of St George. Moreover, the earliest recorded owner was Charles de Bourgueville (1504-1593), sieur de Bras, of Caen in Normandy – the region still held by the English long after they had been expelled from Paris in 1436. Kinch makes no reference to any of this, which is curious as he yokes this Parisian book of hours to Lydgate’s Middle English poem.

Kinch’s arguments for a revision by Lydgate himself of his original *Dance of Death* poem (or A-version) are based on his apparent desire to read a message of “community” in the poem, rather than on all the available evidence. His inspiration is a 2008 article by Amy Appleford, who assumed the B-version as Lydgate’s own revision for the painted cycle commissioned by London town clerk John Carpenter, but his patronage does not interest Kinch. Whereas Appleford mentioned in a footnote that Carpenter is named as the patron of the London cycle in one rubric to the A-version of the poem (Trinity College Cambridge MS R. 3. 21), Kinch ignores this altogether. In fact, there are more copies extant of the A-version and these show remarkable consistency compared to the huge textual variation in B-version copies. Scholars since Elizabeth Hammond have commented on the poor quality of the rhetorical features and the lapses in meter in the “revised” parts of the B-version. Moreover, it was the A-version that Richard Tottel chose to include in his 1554 edition of Lydgate’s *Fall of Princes*. However, Kinch dismisses the idea of scribal corruption because Lydgate’s authorship of the B-version is fundamental to his hypothesis of a “reinvention” of the *Danse Macabre*.

Kinch tries hard to impress, which is also evident from his writing style, but is his book a valuable contribution to the literature? It does contain interesting material and observations, but there are gaps in the author’s understanding and the discussion is ultimately flawed because he is blinded by his own hypotheses. The book is beautifully illustrated and many images may be unfamiliar, but Morgan MS M.359 is available online and thus generally accessible. The bibliography seems extensive, yet it contains important lacunae and is not up to date. It also does not separate primary and secondary texts or include a list of manuscripts: there is no indication that manuscripts listed in the index have actually been examined by the author.

Young scholars are under huge pressure to publish a monograph, preferably with a reputable academic publisher. Therefore, one expects expert peer-reviewing to ensure high standards of

scholarship. Brill's books are far from cheap, which raises expectations further. *Imago Mortis* certainly looks promising, but ultimately it is like the curate's egg: good in places.



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