

Spring 2017

Death in the City of Light : The Culture of Death in Paris from the Middle Ages through the Nineteenth Century

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Recommended Citation

Klein, Augusta Julia, "Death in the City of Light : The Culture of Death in Paris from the Middle Ages through the Nineteenth Century" (2017). *Senior Projects Spring 2017*. 273.
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Death in the City of Light:

The Culture of Death in Paris from the Middle Ages to the Nineteenth Century

Senior Project Submitted to

The Division of Languages & Literature

of Bard College

by

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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

May 2017

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my advisor Matthew for all of his help and encouragement throughout this long and difficult process. I am so appreciative of all the feedback you have given me and can't imagine having done this without you. Thank you, also, to Katherine Boivin, whose interest in medieval death ignited a spark in me and in so many ways inspired my own enthusiasm and research into the macabre. I could not have done my Senior Project without the help of the Bard librarians without whose guidance the following would be a complete and utter mess. I would also like to thank my family for the love and support they have always provided me with. And, finally, a huge thank you to my family here at Bard who has made this journey not only possible, but enjoyable.

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INTRODUCTION

When I was thinking about Senior Project topics in the fall I was very drawn to the subject of death and dying. I didn't really know in what way I wanted to explore this topic, but in meeting with professors and looking back at my notes from past classes, I felt inspired to really dig deep into the subject and consider the different interactions that Parisians have had with death over time. I felt a sort of magnetism toward the subject, a similar sort of magnetism that we will see has been present in Parisians since the Middle Ages, and my research and my interest expanded much further than I had originally anticipated.

Growing up in a Western society I thought that I would feel familiar and comfortable with the way Parisians have treated and thought about their dead. However, I was somewhat shocked and definitely intrigued by the completely consuming obsession that Parisians have had and continue to have with death. Whole cultures and forms of entertainment have sprouted out of the relationship that Parisians have had with death – death being something that no one can ever experience. Nevertheless, as Montaigne notes in *De l'exercitation*:

Il me semble toutefois qu'il y a quelque façon de nous apprivoiser à elle [la mort], et de l'essayer aucunement. Nous en pouvons avoir experience, sinon entiere et parfaite : au moins telle qu'elle ne soit pas inutile, et qui nous rende plus fortifiez et asseurez. Si nous ne la pouvons joindre, nous la pouvons approcher, nous la pouvons reconnoistre : et si nous ne donnons jusques à son fort, au moins verrons nous et en pratiquerons les advenuës. Ce n'est pas sans raison qu'on nous fait regarder à nostre sommeil mesme, pour la ressemblance qu'il a de la mort.¹

Like Montaigne I was captivated by death and wanted to learn more. Montaigne, however, focused on the philosophical aspects while I have centered my project on the history and culture of Parisian attitudes towards death. There was nothing in my research that did not amaze me and make me think about my own relationship with the dead.

¹ Michel de Montaigne, *Essais* (Paris: Gallimard, 1962), 351.

I can't say that death has been a consistent or large part of my life prior to this project, as I don't pass through cemeteries on a daily, weekly, or even monthly basis. There are a few moments that I can think of, though, where I have gone out of my way to visit a cemetery or space of the dead, none of which have been to visit the tomb of someone I have known. One of my earliest interactions with the dead was a class trip to Washington D.C. in the eighth grade. On this trip we walked through Arlington National Cemetery, which is more uniform and organized than any other cemetery I have ever encountered. Thinking back to my experience walking through the grounds I find it appalling how many bodies lie under the upright marble headstones in that 624-acre field.



Figure 1. J.D. Leipold, Aerial view of a small section of Arlington National Cemetery's 624 acres, located in Arlington, Va., photograph, accessed May 2, 2017, <https://www.army.mil/e2/c/images/2014/12/11/375466/size0.jpg>.

The gravestones here, as in all other cemeteries, are erected to mark the space where each individual lies. However, the lines of uniform tombstones at Arlington were arguably more successful in making me think about the multitude of bodies buried underground than in establishing the individuality of each person. I had difficulty thinking about the individual

interments and who is actually buried there because I was more struck by the incredible number of people that have lost their lives in the service of this country. Then again, the standardized format and composition of the graves can be seen as resembling the uniforms these people wore during their life, reflecting who they were and what they had devoted their lives to. They chose to give up their individuality in life, just as they had in death.

Another one of my experiences, one that was inherently very different from my visit to Arlington National Cemetery, was walking through the Paris Catacombs in the spring of 2016. I was studying abroad in Paris for a semester and took advantage of any activity that would bring me closer to Parisian culture and enrich my experience of living in a foreign city. Before even departing for Paris I knew that I wanted to visit the Catacombs, but that I wanted to save it for a rainy day because it was such a unique and exciting place. When I finally descended into *L'Empire de la mort* I was so thoroughly thrilled to finally be walking twenty meters under the streets of Paris through the old quarries that seem to go on forever.

I walked through the tunnels lined with remains of Parisians from centuries past and had trouble seeing these bones as coming from real people. I had to constantly remind myself that all of the skeletons that make up the ornately decorated walls of bones had once walked the streets that I had been exploring over the past few months. Even in making this effort to be conscious of the humanness of the bones it never really sank in that each and every skull once carried a brain and had a face and that all of these skeletons, these representations of people from centuries past, had left someone behind on this earth. In theory I knew that they were all once individuals just like you or me, but I still felt unable to really grasp their individuality due to the manner in which the bones were displayed and the multitude of remains occupying the tunnels. I'm sure that my feelings are experienced by other tourists of the macabre judging by the incredibly long entrance

lines, the vocal tones and body language of the visitors I saw there, the amount of photographs that people take to capture their visit, and the signage warning visitors that their bags will be checked upon exiting to make sure no bones had been illegally removed from this place of eternal rest.

Working on my Senior Project has made me more aware of the presence of death around me. Not of sick people in hospitals or of issues of sanitation and public health, but of cemeteries and memorials that we often tread over or walk past without noticing or realizing that there are dead bodies there. I too, admittedly, have walked over graves and past memorials without thinking of the people that may lie under my feet decomposing. Death and the way that we, in modern society, think about the deceased has become more linked to the individual and is arguably more respectful towards the physical body than past cultures, but we still remain detached. We have to remind ourselves that these were once real people as we look at the 400,000 matching gravestones in rows at Arlington National Cemetery or as we walk through the dimly lit tunnels of the Paris Catacombs.

In my body of work I am going to discuss the relationship that Parisians have held with death from the Middle Ages through the nineteenth century. Their interactions, much like my own, have always been somewhat disconnected from the reality of death. In medieval Paris cemeteries were affiliated with churches and one particular cemetery, the Cimetière des Innocents, had become notorious by the time of its closing in 1780. This cemetery located in the heart of Paris did not solely function as the city's largest and most populated cemetery, but also served as a site for markets and every-day interactions. The cemetery was transformed into a space for the living to socialize, which detracted from the ancient Roman idea that a cemetery is a place to respect and honor the dead. Nearly a thousand years passed before Parisians began to

reconsider the age-old tradition of intramural, unregulated burials that had deteriorated living conditions around the cemetery to the point of extreme public concern.

In the eighteenth century Parisians started to look more to science than they ever had before and were increasingly aware of issues of hygiene and sanitation in their city. In 1780, it was declared that the Cimetière des Innocents and all other parish cemeteries would be closed due to concerns over public health. As a result, death was pushed out of the city. Officials oversaw the exhumations of the old cemeteries, the movement of bones into the Catacombs, the construction of new cemeteries, and the work done to improve urban planning. However, the dead never fully left, as Parisians developed a consuming fascination with the death they had just banished from their streets. Death had reclaimed its position as an important piece of Parisian culture, albeit in a more spectacularized and controlled environment in the Paris Morgue.

Each of the interactions with death written about in my Senior Projects touch on this detachment represented in Parisian culture. From the Cimetière des Innocents and the Catacombs to the Paris Morgue and Père Lachaise, there has consistently been an attachment to death, although not to the reality of death and the recognition of the individual, but to a manicured or altered interpretation of death based out of fear.

CHAPTER 1: DEATH IN MEDIEVAL PARIS

The Cimetière des Innocents

The largest and most notable cemetery of medieval Paris, the Cimetière des Innocents, was likely to have been opened in the tenth century, but possibly the ninth.² When it was first established it was not affiliated with a specific church and was located outside of the city in an area called *les Champeaux*. This aligned with the ancient Roman practice of burying the dead outside of the city (establishing all cemeteries as extramural) to help preserve and maintain a healthy and sanitary living environment. As Paris expanded and Christianity became increasingly prominent a church was built in 1225 next to the cemetery called *l'église des Saints-Innocents*. This naming was in memory of the Massacre of the Innocents,³ when Herod, King of the Jews, murdered all the boys under two years old in Bethlehem in an attempt to kill Jesus.⁴ The church and cemetery were located on the right bank of the Seine, opposite the Île de la Cité, which quickly became the heart of Paris.

With the growth of Christianity people wanted to be buried in or near churches so that they would rest eternally in sacred ground and near the sites of the relic or relics of a venerated saint.⁵ The cemeteries that were created in the wake of Christianity reflected a hierarchy among the dead represented in how and where the bodies were buried. In the Cimetière des Innocents the rich were buried underneath flagstones and monuments that were created in their name along the peripheral walls of the graveyard or under arcades (some would even pay to have their bodies

² Jacques Hillairet, *Les 200 cimetières de vieux Paris* (n.p.: Les Editions de Minuit, 1958), 23.

³ Hillairet, *Les 200 cimetières*, 23.

⁴ Matthew 2:13-23 New International Version.

⁵ Harold Schechter, *The Whole Death Catalog: Everything You've Ever Wanted to Know about the Bitter End* (New York: Ballantine, 2009), 144.

buried within the church itself), while the poor were discarded into mass graves that were scattered around the middle of the cemetery.⁶



Figure 2. Theodor Hoffbauer, *Engraving depicting the Saints Innocents cemetery in Paris, around the year 1550 without its frame*, End of 19th century, image, accessed April 21, 2017, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Saints_Innocents_1550_Hoffbauer_NoFrame.jpg.

Those that did not have the luxury of a commemorative and expensive treatment in death were interred in the leftover open spaces in the middle of the cemetery grounds. They were typically dumped into pits wearing just cerecloths because coffins had been deemed too expensive, took up too much space, and didn't decompose fast enough. A trench would always lie open so that the city's corpses could easily be thrown in with a light dusting of dirt sprinkled

⁶ Philippe Ariès, *Western Attitudes toward Death* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), 21.

over them afterward.⁷ The communal graves that littered the nine thousand square meter grounds of the Cimetière des Innocents were called *les fosses aux pauvres*. They were dug to be several yards wide and several yards deep and were gradually filled with corpses. After each ditch was declared full it was covered and an old pit would be reopened, emptied, and reused for more bodies. Whenever the cemetery's undertaker reopened an old grave they removed all of the bones they could find and put them in the one of the eighty garrets of the cloisters that lined the cemetery.⁸

The cloisters of the Cimetière des Innocents were built in the first quarter of the fourteenth century with gothic arcades and a loft space above. The lofts were designed to be used as charnel houses, which were places to put the bones of the dead once they had adequately decayed in the ground.⁹ At an average of sixty burials per week at normal times the charnel houses were quickly stacked with all parts of the human skeleton. The corpses of the wealthy people buried along the walls of the cemetery under their personalized flagstones were also eventually dug up and put in the arches of the cloisters to comingle with the bones of the poor. This was done in an effort to make more space for the graves of paying "customers." The survivors of the deceased did not mind that the remains of their family members were being dug up and moved. As Philippe Ariès claims in his book *The Hour of Our Death*, "It made little difference what the Church saw fit to do with these bodies so long as they remained within its holy precincts."¹⁰

⁷ Hans Holbein, *Holbein's Dance of Death and Bible Woodcuts* (New York: Sylvan Press, 1947), vii.

⁸ Edward F. Chaney, ed., *La Danse Macabré des Charniers des Saints Innocents à Paris* (Manchester, UK: University of Manchester, 1945), 4.

⁹ Hillairet, *Les 200 cimetières*, 29.

¹⁰ Ariès, *The Hour*, 22.

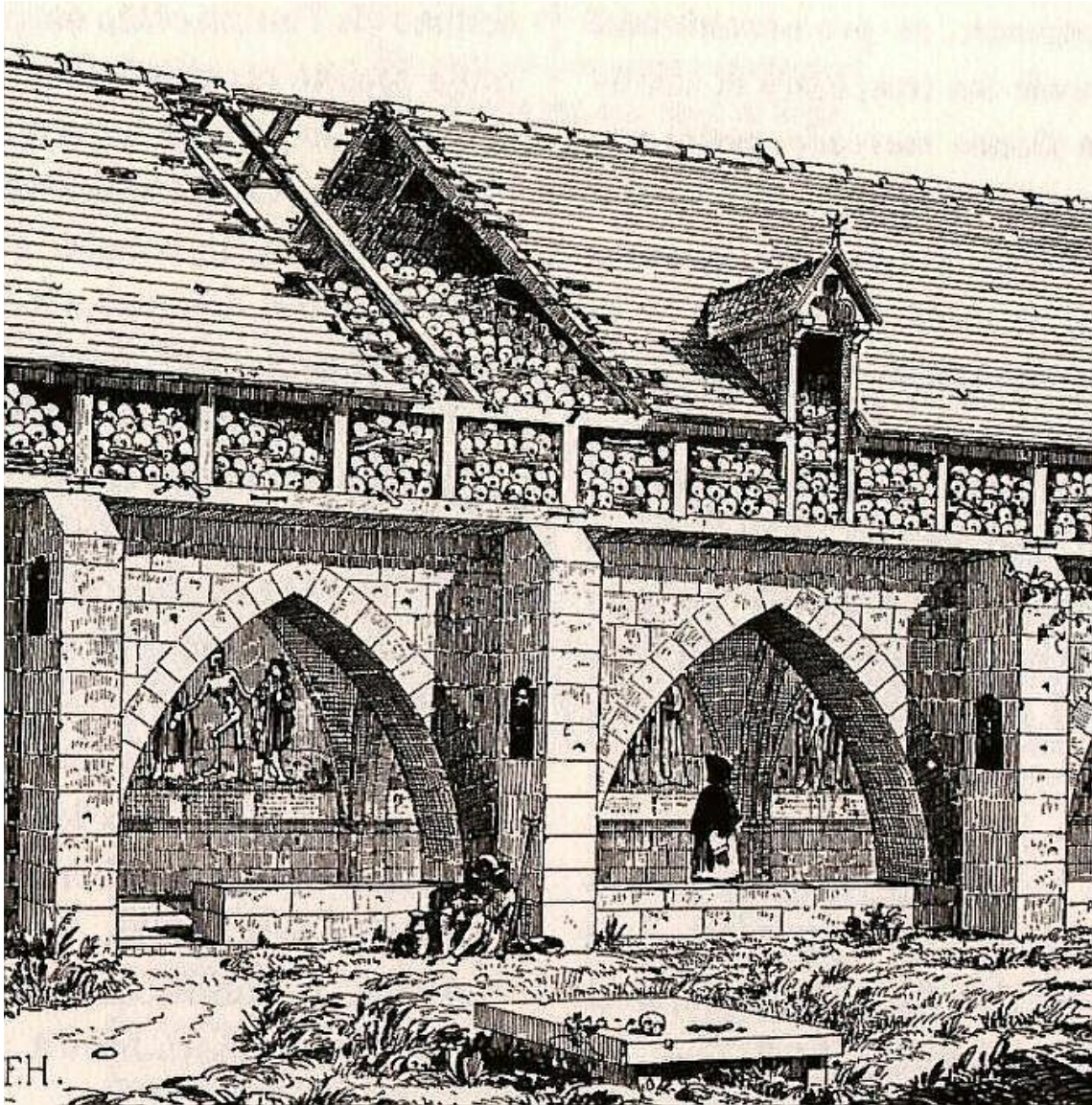


Figure 3. Charnel house at the Saints Innocents Cemetery, Paris. The mural of a *Danse Macabre* is visible at the wall., image, accessed April 21, 2017, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Charnier_at_Saints_Innocents_Cemetery.jpg.

During the Middle Ages and throughout the Renaissance Parisians had a very unique relationship with their dead. Cemeteries doubled as places for children to play and where everyday social encounters took place; prostitutes would even go there to conduct their business. These spaces were essentially the equivalent of a modern day public square or park with all of the interactions that took place in and around its grounds. The Cimetière des Innocents was open

to the public and was rarely, if ever, closed to the city at night, attracting all sorts of people. Nevertheless, the boisterous cemetery crowds showed their respect to the dead by momentarily quieting their noise making or rowdiness whenever a new body was brought to the site and put into the ground.¹¹

Medieval vendors were almost always present the Cimetière des Innocents' to take advantage of its central location and traffic by setting up shop around the periphery of the cemetery to sell their goods. They often even ventured into the cemetery itself to display their wares on top of gravestones or in the covered walkway underneath the arcaded cloisters when there wasn't enough space in the designated market area. This market transformed the cemetery into a permanent and important place of commerce for Paris, drawing even larger crowds to the space. In his book *La Danse Macabré*, Edward F. Chaney describes his version of the cemetery's market. He writes, "Just imagine that graveyard, the seemingly bottomless receptacle of bygone generations, next door to the market, amid all the activity and busy hum of that great company which buys and sells, eats and drinks and, above all, which laughs at and about everything, around those very walls which will encompass them when their earthly toil is ended."¹²

Eventually, these little stalls expanded into the street, crowding the neighboring passageways by making them extremely narrow and difficult to traverse. No one, however, seemed to mind buying items, even food products, from the shops that abutted the same place where they buried their dead. They became a part of the cemetery culture and exemplified the generally indifferent attitude that existed toward corpses during this time.

¹¹ Hillariet, *Les 200 cimetières*, 32.

¹² Chaney, *La Danse*, 10.

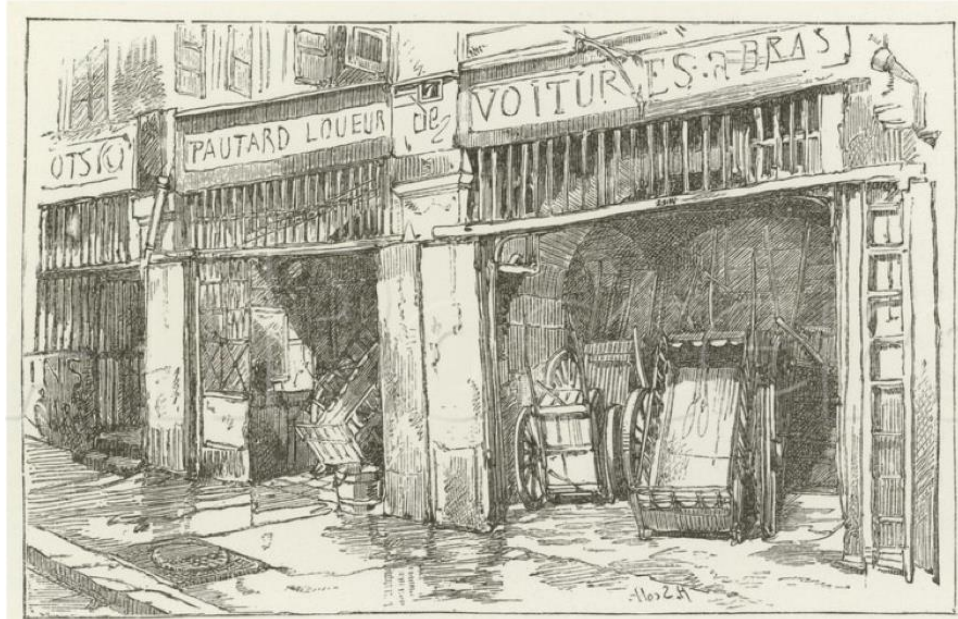


Fig. 30. — Anciens charniers des Lingères, transformés en boutiques, rue des Innocents.

Figure 4. *Anciens charniers des Lingères, transformés en boutiques, rue des Innocents.* Illustration for *Paris A Travers Les Ages*, 1875, image, accessed April 21, 2017, <http://www.lookandlearn.com/history-images/M166948/Anciens-charniers-des-Lingères-transformés-en-boutiques-rue-des-Innocents?img=2&search=innocents&bool=phrase>.

After the cemetery's closure in the late eighteenth century all of the corpses were exhumed and moved into the Catacombs and the ground was leveled and completely paved over to make space for Place Joachim-du-Bellay. The Fontaine des Innocents was erected in this new square to commemorate the history of the space and, as Richard A. Etlin explains in *The Architecture of Death*, "became an icon for the radiant city, which was to unite hygiene, commodity, beauty, order, and monumentality."¹³ The Place Joachim-du-Bellay was used as a flower and vegetable markets starting in 1789 and Les Halles was constructed nearby as the city's new market space so that vendors could continue to sell their goods in the heart of the Paris. Between 1852 and 1870 twelve pavilions constructed out of glass and iron were designed

¹³ Richard A. Etlin, *The Architecture of Death: The Transformation of the Cemetery in Eighteenth-century Paris* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1984), 37.

by the architect Victor Baitard to house the stalls used by vendors. Les Halles served as the city's central market for nearly two hundred years until its demolition in 1971.¹⁴

The *Danse Macabre*

The seemingly neutral or indifferent attitude surrounding death not only appeared in burial practices, but was also frequently represented in art during the medieval period, particularly with the introduction of the *danse macabre*. The *danse macabre* first appeared as a term in a text by Jean le Fèvre from the fourteenth century where he says, “Je fis de Macabré la danse.” “Faire la danse macabré” was a synonym of “mourir” and it is therefore presumed that le Fèvre was saying that he had a near death experience or that he had almost died.¹⁵ Even though it is evident that this is the first recorded instance, it is unclear where the term “macabre” originated and what the meaning of it is.¹⁶

Later, the *danse macabre* was turned into a piece of popular imagery that represented equality in death. The earliest recorded appearance of the *danse macabre* presented in the visual arts was in a mural created by a close friend of the Duke of Berry between August 1423 and March 1424 in the Cimetière des Innocents. It was painted at the southern end of the cemetery on the walls of the first fifteen cloisters seen after walking through the Saint Germaine entrance.¹⁷

The artist created fifteen paintings of the *danse macabre* that covered fifteen arcades. His works

¹⁴ *Les Halles, the New Heart of Paris* (2014), 5, accessed April 17, 2017, <http://www.parisleshalles.fr/sites/default/files/2014-07-Plaquette-Halles-web-UK.pdf>.

¹⁵ Chaney, *La Danse*, 1.

¹⁶ “The etymology of the term *macabre* is uncertain... The term has been connected to the *Chorea Machabaeorum*, the ‘dance of the Maccabees.’ Another possible etymological connection is the Arabic *makabir*, meaning tomb or cemetery. A painter by the name of Macabré, one of whose paintings may have inspired Jean le Fèvre, has also been cited.” Guy Marchant and David A. Fein, *The Danse Macabre: Printed by Guyot Marchant, 1485* (Tempe, AZ: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2013), 2.

¹⁷ Hillairet, *Les 200 cimetières*, 31.

established the tradition of the *danse macabre* to always consist of *la Mort*, commonly represented by a naked, or mostly naked, grinning skeleton, conversing or physically interacting with *les Vifs* who could range from a bishop to a merchant or from a monk to a beggar.¹⁸ This imagery, although somewhat playful, relays a rather grim message to the viewer – everybody dies.

Four verses with eight lines each were written by Jean Gerson, chancellor of the University of Paris, below each of these paintings.¹⁹ These words were added to communicate the dialogue passing between the living and the dead represented in the allegorical images. Each piece of writing ended with a similar phrase, for example: “Sage est le pecheur qui s’amende.”²⁰ or “Qui plus vit, plus a à souffrir.”²¹ or “Dieu punit tout quant bon luy semble.”²² These verses reiterate the idea and theme of the *danse macabre* imagery that death is inescapable. Most medieval Parisians, however, were illiterate and could only understand and enjoy the paintings of the *danse macabre* and not the verses accompanying them. It was, nevertheless, still an effective and alluring piece of art; the paintings showed skeletons leading all sorts of people, the rich, the poor, the powerful, the religious, the unfortunate, to their inevitable death. Parisians were able to admire the paintings for nearly 250 years before they were removed in 1669. Their destruction came about in an effort to widen the streets around the cemetery, but a series of prints created in 1485 by Guy Marchant of the scenes survived.²³

¹⁸ Hillairet, *Les 200 cimetières*, 31.

¹⁹ Hillairet, *Les 200 cimetières*, 31.

²⁰ Chaney, *La Danse*, 40.

²¹ Chaney, *La Danse*, 41.

²² Chaney, *La Danse*, 41.

²³ Chaney, *La Danse*, 6.



Figure 5. Guy Marchant, "Death taking the Priest and the Peasant from the Danse Macabre", image, accessed April 21, 2017, http://www.wikigallery.org/wiki/painting_255808/Guy-Marchant/Death-taking-the-Pope-and-the-Emperor-from-the-Danse-Macabre.

The original mural of the *danse macabre* was incredibly influential and many artists across cultures would produce similar images of the same theme. *Danse macabre* imagery was used as a warning for those that were powerful or wealthy and as a consolation for the poor or the unfortunate. In his book *La Danse Macabré* Edward F. Chaney says that in death their bodies would "be struck down by death and that, after death, the fate of his body and theirs [those more fortunate than he] would be the same."²⁴ The *danse macabre* also had a more basic use as a reminder for all to lead a good and responsible Christian life, as Christianity was the dominating religion during the popularity of this imagery.

²⁴ Chaney, *La Danse*, 12.

Bodily Death

A poem that appeared in the thirteenth century entitled *A Disputation between the Body and the Worms* also discusses the idea of the equality in death. This poem, unlike the imagery of the *danse macabre*, speaks to what happens to the body after death. This poem presents the idea that once someone's inevitable end arrives their body will be given over to the worms and the earth for decomposition. Even though this text is an English source it closely relates to the motifs of medieval culture that were present in Paris during the same time. The poem tells the story of a beautiful young woman who has died, been buried, and is arguing with the worms feasting on her flesh. She asks them to leave her be and to go consume the flesh of a different corpse. The worms deny her this wish because it is their job to eat her flesh no matter what social status she had during life.²⁵

The worms say to the body:

“No, no, we won't depart from you
While one of your bones with another's connected,
Till we have scoured and polished 'em, too,
Made 'em clean as can be, not a joint neglected.
And for our work, there's no pay expected.
For gold, silver, or riches we have no need.
We only ask your flesh on which to feed.

For we have no way of tasting or smelling
Your horrible, rotting, stinking waste.
All creatures find you extremely repelling
Except for us worms; we're already disgraced.
If we, as beasts, could smell or taste,
Do you think that we your corpse would touch?
Nope, we'd surely avoid it, thank you very much!”²⁶

The young woman believes that her body is too beautiful to be eaten by such vile creatures and attempts to scare them off with threats of brave and loyal knights coming to save

²⁵ Rytting, Jenny Rebecca. (2000). *A Disputacioun Betwyx þe Body and Wormes: A Translation. Comitatus: A Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* (2000).

²⁶ Rytting, "A Disputacioun," 228.

her. The worms that have devoured the flesh of so many greats are not frightened by her threats because, according to them, the dead have no power or agency once they are put underground; the worms will perform in the way that they always have and always will as facilitators of the transitory state from dying to decomposing to skeleton.

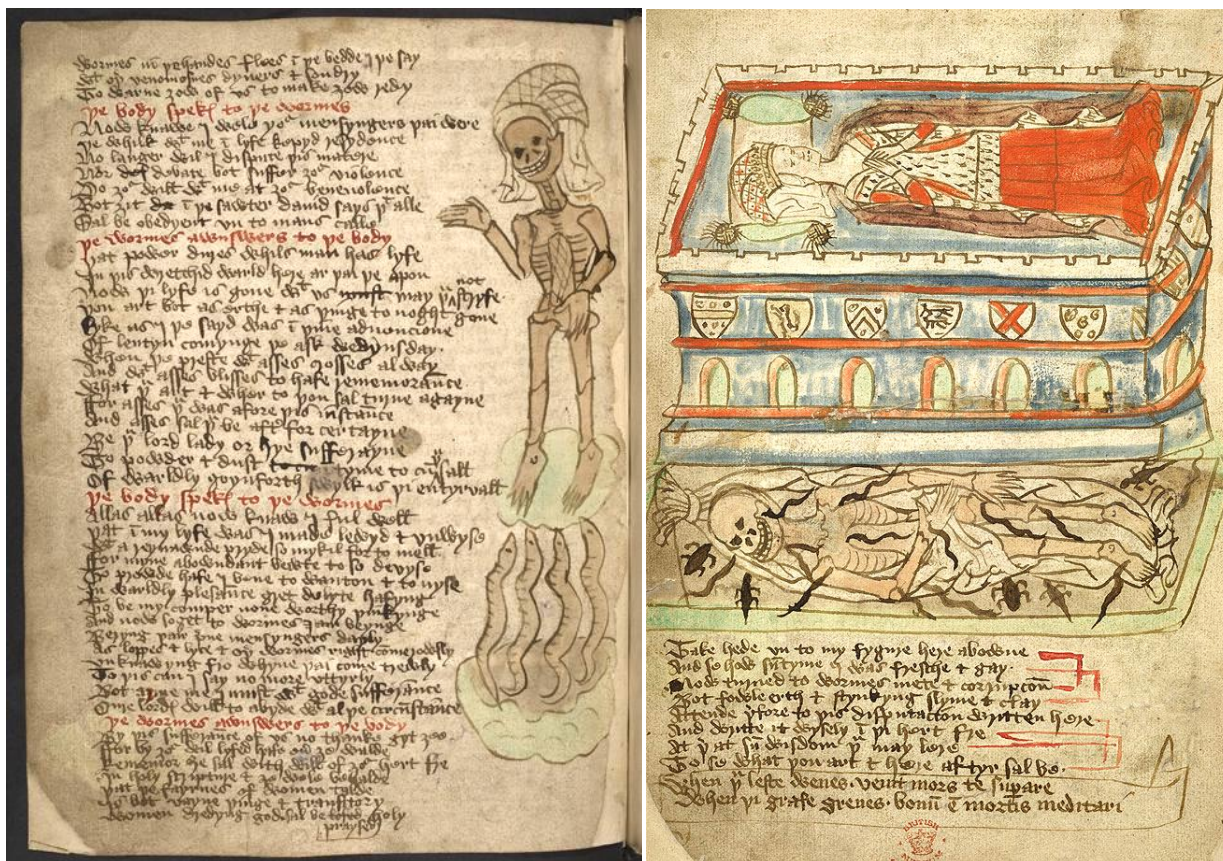


Figure 6 (L). An illustration of the female skeleton and the worms disputing, ca. 1475-1500, image, accessed April 21, 2017,

<http://britishlibrary.typepad.co.uk/.a/6a00d8341c464853ef0192abf663e8970d-500wi>.

Figure 7 (R). Take hede unto my fygyre, ca. 1475-1500, image, accessed April 21, 2017,

<http://www.bl.uk/learning/images/medieval/death/large13952.html>.

A Disputation between the Body and the Worms shows that even though people understood death to be inescapable and universal, it remained a mysterious and fearful part of their life. This instance of equality in death reiterates the idea that no one should be afraid of their own mortality, as all people get treated fairly both in the coming of death and what's in store for them bodily after burial. It is clear then that medieval Parisians believed in a physical

equality in death, but it is important to also consider what their views were in relation to what happened to the spirit in death.

Spiritual Death

From the literature and art of the time it is evident that medieval Parisians knew everyone eventually died, worms and maggots ate human remains, and bodies decomposed no matter who someone was or what they did during their lifetime. Despite this knowledge, the Church continued to hold power over medieval Christians because they were terrified that their souls would be denied entrance into Heaven after death. This fear was instilled in them through the possibility of eternal damnation in Hell, which led to increased confession and penance. This intense fear and anxiety led the Church to adopt the doctrine of Purgatory in 1274 at the Second Council of Lyons.²⁷ It was explained as a sort of prison or antechamber before the soul was allowed to enter Heaven where it could be cleansed of its sins. One of the Church's motivations to destroy the binary system of Heaven and Hell and to practically nullify the idea of eternal damnation was to alleviate some of the stress surrounding death and concerns over the goodness of one's soul.

People didn't want their souls to suffer for long and took it upon themselves to look for a way to abbreviate their soul's inevitable punishment in Purgatory. The Church consequently came up with a system that would help minimize the duration of a soul's stay in Purgatory by permitting the deceased to have Masses said in their name or, for the wealthy, have supplementary altars set up for them in the church itself. It was believed that the living could intercede and help the dead move through Purgatory more quickly. This spectacle surrounding the easing of the soul's passage through Purgatory led to the financial gain of parish churches.

²⁷ Danielle Westerhof, *Death and the Noble Body in Medieval England* (n.p.: Boydell, 2008), 20.

The dead frequently left money in their wills specifically for the recital of Masses in their name with the hopes that it would help speed up their ascension into Heaven. One could ask for a certain number of Masses to be said for them or to have them be said in perpetuity. Additionally, people would typically leave money in their wills for their funeral processions and thoroughly explain exactly how they wanted them to proceed. These demonstrations were originally secular in nature and reserved for the friends and family of the deceased. However, towards the end of the medieval period (around the thirteenth century) and until the eighteenth century the Church obtained control over this tradition, becoming, as Ariès calls them, the “new specialists in death.”²⁸ This did not mean that relatives or friends were not allowed to join, but “they are so unobtrusive that one is sometimes inclined to doubt their presence.”²⁹ The original purpose of these processions was to give the survivors a forum to release their grief, which was somewhat negated with the clericalization of the event.

The demonstrations varied greatly in extravagance based on who the deceased was and what they wanted as their last “public appearance.” People tended to opt for as elaborate a demonstration their money could afford because it was considered an honor to have processions attended by large numbers of priests and poor people. The priests of the church were typically charged with the role of carrying the body from the home to the church for vigil and then from the church to the cemetery for burial. They thus gained a monopoly over the service of carrying the deceased, turning a traditionally secular ritual into a clerical one. They received money for carrying the body, which was often helpful in providing a source of income for their respective churches.³⁰

²⁸ Philippe Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death* (New York: Knopf, 1981), 165.

²⁹ Ariès, *The Hour*, 165.

³⁰ Ariès, *The Hour*, 166.

Local poor people were given alms as incentive for their attendance during processions. They followed corpses through city streets wearing mourning robes that covered their faces and carried candles or torches.³¹ Children from foundling homes often accompanied these poor people, both of whom replaced the friends and family that had originally been key members during these demonstrations. Ariès explains, “The size of this procession and the quantity of alms and contributions that it represented not only attested to the generosity and wealth of the deceased but also, interceded in his favor before the court of Heaven... The gathering of the poor at his funeral was his last act of charity.”³² Poor people became part of this public spectacle of and for the dead by contributing to the idea that the deceased was well liked during life and worth grieving over.

Masses and special memorials were bought to honor the dead with the hopes that the soul would gain easier access into Heaven. It is evident that people were more concerned with the state of the soul during this period of time than the state of the body. All of their attention was focused on the intercession of the living for the sake of the soul’s ascent into Heaven, which meant there was little energy left for the care of the body. The general religious indifference toward the physical body of the dead (besides making sure that the remains stayed within the precincts of holy ground), which manifested in a disregard to how the body was presented and treated after death, is what likely led to the *fosses communes* and charnel houses in the Cimetière des Innocents and other Parisian parish cemeteries. A cursory glance at the way medieval Parisians treated corpses, may suggest that they were unafraid or indifferent towards the physical act of dying, but in analyzing the Christian traditions surrounding death with the purpose of the soul’s salvation it seems otherwise. The fact that everyone died was general knowledge, but what

³¹ Ariès, *The Hour*, 187.

³² Ariès, *The Hour*, 168.

happened to the soul after leaving the body made medieval Parisians uneasy and turn to Christianity for hope.

CHAPTER 2: HIDING THE BONES

The Problems

The tradition of church burials in Paris was not immediately problematic, but as time went on and more and more Parisians died cemeteries became overstuffed with corpses. Mass graves were constantly being filled with corpses in an attempt to accommodate the amount of bodies needing to be buried. It is estimated that the Cimetière des Innocents took in about one tenth of the annual dead of Paris.³³ This site was so overused because it was the designated cemetery for eighteen parish churches, two hospitals, and, later, the city morgue.³⁴ Not only did this site serve as the largest burial ground in Paris, it was also one of the city's principal markets and places of commerce, as mentioned in Chapter 1.

Throughout the Middle Ages there was a growing amount of filth in the Cimetière des Innocents due to the way corpses were dealt with, the amount of people passing through the space, and the markets and vendors that surrounded it. One of the most productive solutions to contain the growing filth of the market and cemetery was made early on in its existence. This improvement was made with the construction of walls that stood three meters tall around the market in 1183 and around the cemetery in 1186 under King Philippe Auguste. He decided to build these walls to contain the poor conditions and render them less visible to all that passed by. The construction of these walls was funded by some of the proceeds he had received from confiscating property from the Jews he had expelled from the royal demesne in April 1182. Philippe Auguste was also responsible for building Paris' city walls four years later, walls that would officially include the Cimetière des Innocents in the city.

³³ Etlin, *The Architecture*, 13.

³⁴ Paul Koudounaris, *The Empire of Death: A Cultural History of Ossuaries and Charnel Houses* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2011), 90.

In times of increased death rates, the entrances to the Cimetière des Innocents were walled up in an attempt to prevent the foul stench of rotting corpses from seeping out into the streets. Strong odors were consistently an issue for those who lived in buildings that neighbored the cemetery. Complaints were frequently made to officials concerning the putrid smells that crept through the walls and into their homes. Although the first recorded complaint was in 1554, it wasn't until the eighteenth century that these complaints became frequent with others being made in 1725, 1734, 1737, 1746, and 1755.³⁵ For the most part, however, Parisians were accustomed to the conditions in and surrounding the Cimetière des Innocents because it had been around for centuries and was seen as just another part of daily life.

By the fourteenth century the cemetery's soil was said to be so strong that it could remove all of the flesh from the bones of a body in just ten days.³⁶ These quickly decomposing "powers" of the Cimetière des Innocents' soil were eventually lost because of its excessive overuse and by the time of its closure corpses were barely even decomposing. In the eighteenth century, the cemetery was notorious for being nearly three meters taller than the surrounding roads due to the piles of corpses stuffed under the ground. Its hill-like composition was described by Philippe Muray in *Le XIXe siècle à travers les âges* as a "montagne vivante de la mort."³⁷

In the sixteenth century two doctors concluded that the cemetery should be closed down due to the dangerous chemicals they claimed were present at the site. Nothing came of this proclamation and the cemetery continued to function and take in more and more bodies. In 1763 another study was done by members of the *Académie des sciences* to analyze the chemicals present at the site, coming to the same conclusion as the one done two centuries earlier that they

³⁵ Hillairet, *Les 200 cimetières*, 35.

³⁶ Holbein, *Holbein's Dance*, vii.

³⁷ Philippe Muray, *Le XIXe siècle à travers les âges* (Paris: Gallimard, 1999), 30.

were harmful for the living to interact with.³⁸ The cemetery was again ordered to be closed, this time not by scientists but Louis XV himself. His edict banned all future burials within the confines of the capital city. He also made a proposal for the transformation of all existing cemeteries into markets or parks, which they essentially already were, albeit with gaping pits filled with dead bodies and cloisters stacked with bones.³⁹ Alas, the Church, unwilling to let go of tradition and a good source of income, defied the edict and continued to offer funerary services even after it was declared.

Everyone knew that there would be some serious consequences if the dead continued to be buried in preexisting church cemeteries. The location of the Cimetière des Innocents was too central and too important in Parisian life for the issue of sanitation to remain unattended to for much longer. However, no one jumped at the opportunity to make any permanent and drastic changes to the city's urban planning for nearly twenty years after Louis XV's decree, essentially allowing the *fosses communes* to keep being filled and emptied and refilled. Part of the issue with the decree was that the Parisian Parliament never proposed a solution as to where and how corpses should start being buried after the closure and exhumation of all Parisian parish cemeteries.⁴⁰ Voltaire, among others, was highly critical of the government's lack of productive response to the way the French buried their dead. He wrote about and argued for a society that was not guided by Christian thought or the Catholic Church, but rather by natural law and reason. He saw the tradition of church burials to be too closely linked to the power the Church held over the French, power created by instilling a fear of eternal damnation into the common

³⁸ Muray, *Le XIXe*, 28.

³⁹ Ariès, *The Hour*, 498.

⁴⁰ Koudounaris, *The Empire*, 90.

citizen.⁴¹ Voltaire argued against church burials in his *Dictionnaire philosophique* (published in 1764) by saying it was “une vanité de barbares [qui] fait ensevelir à prix d’argent des bourgeois riches qui infectent le lieu même où l’on vient adorer Dieu...”⁴² He goes on to say that the incense burned during Mass and other religious ceremonies is only used to cover up the smell of the corpses rotting away in their crypts or in the graveyard and that the practice of church burials helps spread disease among the living.

The Tipping Point

The bustling market, the *fosses communes*, and the general disregard towards public health were all factors that contributed to the eventual closing of the Cimetière des Innocents in 1780. By this time the cemetery had already seen the burials of forty generations of Parisians and had consumed more than two million bodies (about 2,500 cadavers yearly).⁴³ In the last thirty years of the cemetery’s existence, the Cimetière des Innocents’ gravedigger, François Poutrain, is said to have buried ninety-thousand bodies in these mass graves, bodies that just lay there rotting in heaps because the soil was no longer able decompose corpses due to overuse.⁴⁴

In 1776, there was a night where a shoemaker was traversing the cemetery and fell into one of the open holes of the *fosses communes*. He was so struck by the toxins being emitted by the pile of corpses that he was dead by the time the sun rose.⁴⁵ By 1780 conditions had deteriorated to the point that one of the common graves had “subsided into the cellars of next-

⁴¹ "The Enlightenment in France," The Enlightenment, accessed December 5, 2016, http://www3.gettysburg.edu/~tshannon/hist106web/site6/enlightenment_in_france.htm.

⁴² Voltaire, "Dictionnaire philosophique" [Philosophical Dictionary], Wikisource, accessed December 5, 2016, [https://fr.wikisource.org/wiki/Dictionnaire_philosophique/Garnier_\(1878\)/Index_alphabétique/C](https://fr.wikisource.org/wiki/Dictionnaire_philosophique/Garnier_(1878)/Index_alphabétique/C).

⁴³ Hillairet, *Les 200 cimetières*, 35.

⁴⁴ Holbein, *Holbein's Dance*, vii.

⁴⁵ Alistair Horne, *Seven Ages of Paris* (New York: Vintage Books, 2004), 413.

door houses, almost provoking the suffocation of their occupants⁴⁶ and causing an incident where one of the walls holding in these bodies collapsed, spilling a pile of old rotten corpses into a neighboring property.⁴⁷ This event was the tipping point that led to the official closure of the cemetery on December 1st, 1780,⁴⁸ marking the end of the unsanitary practice of the living cohabitating with the dead.⁴⁹

Eighteenth century Parisians had mixed opinions when it was officially decided and announced to the public that the cemetery would be exhumed in entirety and all remains would be moved into the old quarries that ran underneath Paris, transforming them into the Catacombs. The cemetery and the church were officially closed to the public in 1780, but continued to be honored from a distance because of their long histories as a place of public worship. The Cimetière des Innocents was hardly considered beautiful, but it had been around for over eight centuries and people were accustomed to its smells and rather unappealing appearance. Many Parisians were thrilled to have a more sanitary and healthy living environment while others were against destroying the church and cemetery, reluctant to experience such a large shift in the way they, both as individuals and as a city as a whole, dealt with the dead.⁵⁰

However, once the cemetery and church were finally destroyed, the people of Paris were accepting of the change and ready to move on. Is this surprising? Or does it reinforce the idea that Parisians of the time were indifferent or detached from the physical aspects of death? That they weren't invested in the space as a place where the remains of their ancestors laid, but

⁴⁶ Horne, *Seven Ages*, 413.

⁴⁷ "The Dark Underworld of the Paris Catacombs," *Ancient Origins*, March 28, 2015, accessed November 1, 2016, <http://www.ancient-origins.net/ancient-places-europe/dark-underworld-paris-catacombs-002834>.

⁴⁸ Hillairet, *Les 200 cimetières*, 36.

⁴⁹ Cemeteries were not the only things moved out of the city, the slaughtering of animals, garbage dumps, and cesspools were all eliminated as well.

⁵⁰ Ariès, *The Hour*, 499.

instead that they resented the closure of their “public square” and feared that the area would mean something different once it had been reconstructed and given a new name?

The Catacombs

It took five years between the time of the cemetery’s closing (1780) for the exhumation and removal of bodies to start (1785). The process of finding and preparing an appropriate place to put the bodies and gathering enough workers who were willing to work under such terrible conditions took a considerable amount of time. When exhumations finally began the Lieutenant General of Police M.Thiroux de Crosne gave all control of the process to the *Société Royale de Médecine*. Thiroux de Crosne’s decision shows that the government understood the potential health issues that came with destroying a cemetery and acknowledged that scientists were the ones most capable of dealing with it. It also reflects the idea that the dead “already fell under that category (of noxious substances) and that their disposal and treatment were thus beginning to be officially recognized as medical issues.”⁵¹

Under the terms of these mass exhumations there was to be a new place for the remains to rest; they were not to be cremated and disposed of or forgotten about. It was decided that the bones would be transported into the quarries that ran underneath the streets of Paris that had once had been used, in the Roman period, as limestone mines to help construct sections of the city. Unfortunately, the tunnels were crumbling and had collapsed in spots, so M.Thiroux de Crosne requested the assistance of the architect and Inspecteur Général des Carrières Charles-Axel

⁵¹ Jonathan Strauss, *Human Remains: Medicine, Death, and Desire in Nineteenth-century Paris* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 63.

Guillaumot to orchestrate a construction project on these passageways to make them a suitable home for Paris' ancestors.⁵²

After this project was finished at a depth of seventeen meters below street level, the Catacombs were finally ready for their new inhabitants. The tunnels were blessed and consecrated in preparation for the bones that would soon be dwelling there for the rest of eternity. Remains from cemeteries all over Paris were brought into these underground tunnels by carts late at night, so as not to drastically disrupt the daily lives of Parisians. Numerous priests would accompany these processions, chanting prayers and reciting burial services for the overflowing carts of bones. The whole grouping would walk slowly through the streets, occasionally dropping a bone or two along the way.⁵³ In *Le XIXe siècle à travers les ages* Philippe Muray depicts the scene as follows: “Des ossements s'échappent des draps, tintent par terre, roulent entre les pieds des chevaux caparaçonnés de croix de moire d'argent. Des volets s'ouvrent sur le passage de défilé, les prêtres chantent l'office des morts. Quel moment trouble, tremblant, dans la chaleur flottante, les odeurs, le sillage...”⁵⁴

It took about fifteen months (December 1785 – May 1786, December 1786 – June 1787, and August – October 1787) to dig up all the bones from the Cimetière des Innocents and remove them from the cloisters that lined the cemetery for their move into the Catacombs. The exhumations mostly took place in the colder months of the year so that the intense summer sun wouldn't be constantly beating down on the open graves, worsening the already terrible working conditions.⁵⁵ The people that worked on this enormous project dug up more than fifty large

⁵² Hillairet, *Les 200 cimetières*, 300.

⁵³ Hillairet, *Les 200 cimetières*, 303.

⁵⁴ Muray, *Le XIXe*, 37.

⁵⁵ Ariès, *The Hour*, 499.

communal graves, some with upwards of two thousand corpses piled inside.⁵⁶ Scientists made an effort to be present during the months of excavation so that they could closely examine and learn about the different stages of a decomposing cadaver. Torches and bonfires were burned constantly at the cemetery throughout this time to help increase air circulation for all involved with the project.⁵⁷

The process of moving bones into the Catacombs was not restricted to the Cimetière des Innocents, as the smaller or less central cemeteries also posed a threat to public health. The exhumation of the fifty-two parish cemeteries in Paris was ordered and their buried remains were transported into the old quarries by cart, the last of which coming from the Église Saint Laurent cemetery on April 17, 1871.⁵⁸ The Catacombs were officially opened on April 7, 1786 with a Church benediction. This was just four months after the first cart full of bones came from the Cimetière des Innocents. So, while parts of the Catacombs were open to the public, there were still workers coming in and dumping bones in tunnels that remained closed. A reporter to the *Société Royale de Médecine* in 1789 describes the atmosphere of the Catacombs saying,

The appearance of this subterranean place, its thick vaults which seem to sever it from the realm of the living... the profound silence, the frightful din from the crashing bones thrown in here and rolling with a clamor which echoed far away: everything in those moments recalled the image of death and everything presented the spectacle of destruction.⁵⁹

In order to accommodate all of the remains that were transferred underground and to ensure the safety of visitors, the tunnels were restored and enlarged in 1810 and 1811, just twenty-four years after its initial opening. *Préfet de la Seine* Nicolas Frochot and Héricart de Thury, Guillamort's successor as *Inspecteur Général des Carrières*, organized this refurbishment

⁵⁶ Hillairet, *Les 200 cimetières*, 300.

⁵⁷ Ariès, *The Hour*, 499.

⁵⁸ Koudounaris, *The Empire*, 108.

⁵⁹ Etlin, *The Architecture*, 155.

project. They started this project with the intent of making the Catacombs less gloomy and morose in appearance, which would be hard to do considering its contents solely comprised of bones. It is likely that they facilitated this project with the goal of attracting more visitors for the candle-lit tours that went through the Catacombs. If this was indeed their goal, then they were very successful because the tours were almost always sold out.⁶⁰ Frochot and Héricart de Thury were also responsible for rearranging the remains within the tunnels of the Catacombs into way they are today with ornate walls and pillars created by carefully and decoratively stacked tibias, femurs, and skulls. Plaques with phrases taken from the Holy Scriptures and various moralists were also installed during this period of restoration to stand alongside the inscriptions that announced the location of where a grouping of bones had originally lain and when they were transferred to the Catacombs.⁶¹ One of the poems written on a plaque in the Catacombs reads:

Ainsi tout passe sur la terre
Esprit, beauté, grâce, talent
Telle est une fleur éphémère
Que renverse le moindre vent
– Anonyme⁶²

By the 1880s, the Catacombs were estimated to contain the bodies of six million people making it the largest ossuary in the world. This underground museum of death served and continues to serve as a morbid spectacle that attracts many visitors. On the first Monday of every month after its opening a guide would take a tour of up to two hundred people through the tunnels, walking past piles of skeletal remains.⁶³ At this point, the bones were not ornately organized as they are today; instead they were deposited in heaps to speed up the process of exhuming all of Paris' cemeteries. The tours succeeded in feeding the macabre curiosities of

⁶⁰ Etlin, *The Architecture*, 159.

⁶¹ Hillairet, *Les 200 cimetières*, 305-6.

⁶² Rosamere, "Place Denfert-Rochereau – Les catacombes," *Carpe Diem* (blog), entry posted December 21, 2013, <https://rosamere.wordpress.com/2013/12/21/place-denfert-rochereau-les-catacombes/>.

⁶³ Holbein, *Holbein's Dance*, vii.

eighteenth and nineteenth century Parisians that related to death and destruction. Today the Catacombs continue to attract flocks of tourists and is the most visited ossuary in the world, attracting over thirty-thousand guests per year.⁶⁴

The Catacombs can be seen as a form of respect for the dead because the remains of Parisians from centuries past were not cast aside and forgotten about, which would have been a much faster and easier solution to the issue that the city faced. Instead, bones were carefully placed in a protected area within the same city in which they had lived, died, and been buried for the first time. Their remains were admittedly not thrown into the Catacombs haphazardly like the bones in the charnel houses of the Cimetière des Innocents, although one might wonder whether arranging them in an ornate and organized manner detracts from their humanness. So, the Catacombs can alternatively be seen as responsible for turning the physical aspects of death, the exposed human skeleton, into a spectacle for the public to come visit and look at as a popular leisure activity.

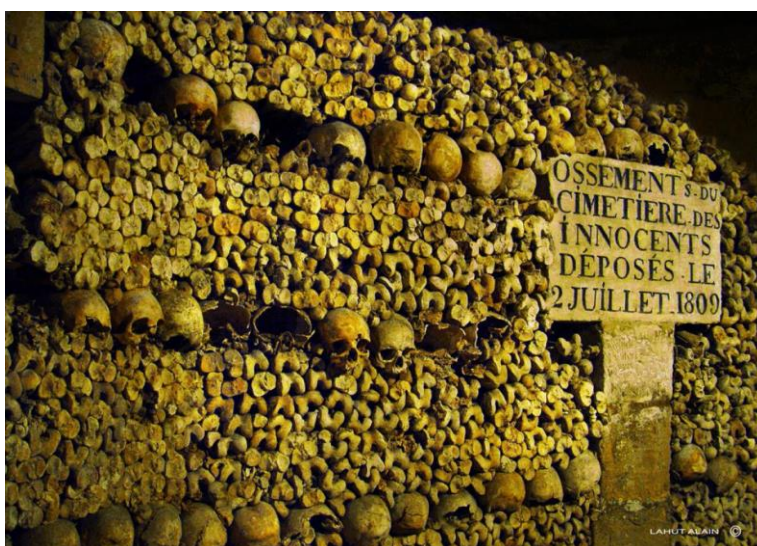


Figure 8. *Hague d'ossements*, photograph, accessed April 21, 2017, http://museosphere.paris.fr/sites/museosphere.paris.fr/files/styles/large_fiche/public/images/cat_s4_origine_v3_dsc00269m.jpg?itok=lZlul2n7.

⁶⁴ Koudounaris, *The Empire*, 191.

The creation of the Catacombs was only one small part of a larger shift that eighteenth and nineteenth century Parisians experienced. There was a change in traditions relating to death, partly due to the French Revolution of 1789 and the secularization of the country and partly due to urbanization and the need for a more sanitary and productive system of burying bodies. In this shift there is a resemblance of ancient Roman burial practices where bodies were laid to rest outside of the city and the families of the deceased were charged with taking care of their respective cemetery plots. In ancient times, the Romans abided by a set of laws called the Twelve Tables. Within the Twelve Tables there was a strict prohibition of burying citizens within the boundaries of the city. This law was brought about because there was a fear that corpses would lead to the pollution of the city. This fear was so strong that the undertakers for these communal cemeteries could not be buried in them because they had defiled their own body by tending to the corpses and accepting money for working with the dead. Only once the bodies were buried safely underground were families permitted to visit the graves of loved ones to pay their respects.⁶⁵ Ancient Roman culture was frequently used as a model for France's post-revolutionary society. Their customs highly influenced how Parisians decided to deal with their dead, but nineteenth century Parisians modernized the burial ground and reestablished the cemetery as a destination with a park-like and charming atmosphere.

Cemeteries During the Reign of Terror

The imitation of Roman practices was not immediately effective in Paris because of the disruption the Reign of Terror made on the hygienic advancements that the city was moving towards. The Reign of Terror, which began on September 5th, 1793 with Robespierre in power,

⁶⁵ Colin Dickey, "Necropolis," *Lapham's Quarterly*, accessed October 12, 2016, <http://www.laphamsquarterly.org/city/necropolis>.

was committed to executing anyone who was suspected of being an opponent to the Revolution.⁶⁶ During this time the guillotine was being used in Paris' public squares and created an astonishing amount of corpses. At the height of the Terror there were four places in Paris that were used as burial grounds for victims of the guillotine. These were: the Cimetière de la Madeleine, the Cimetière des Errancis, the Cimetière de Sainte-Marguerite, and the Cimetière de Picpus. Each of these places had mass graves that would remain open waiting to consume the corpses of those killed by the guillotine. After a day's worth of public executions, carts of dead bodies were carried to whichever of these four sites was open at the time. Then, officials would log the names of the dead, inventory their clothing and any other personal belongings, and put them in the ground. Once a grave was filled, it was covered and a new hole was dug for more bodies, much like the mass graves in the Cimetière des Innocents.⁶⁷

The Cimetière de la Madeleine was in close proximity to Place de la Révolution (now called Place de la Concorde) and was used as the designated burial ground while the guillotine executed 1,120 people in this public square. Le Cimetière de la Madeleine took in bodies intermittently from January 21st, 1793 to March 25th, 1794. When it was closed in 1794 a royalist magistrate, Olivier Desclozeaux, who lived just a few houses away, bought the land. Somehow he was able to locate where Marie Antoinette and Louis XVI were buried and had planted cypress trees and weeping willows to demarcate where their bodies lay. The cemetery remained closed until the Bourbon Restoration when Louis XVIII came searching for their bodies. They then had the king and queen exhumed in January of 1815 so that they could be transported to

⁶⁶ "Reign of Terror," in *Encyclopædia Britannica* (n.p.: Encyclopædia Britannica, n.d.), <https://www.britannica.com/event/Reign-of-Terror>.

⁶⁷ Ronen Steinberg, "Spaces of Mourning: The Cemetery of Picpus and the Memory of Terror in Post-Revolutionary France," *Proceedings of the Western Society for French History* 36 (2008): 135, accessed February 20, 2017, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/w/wsfh/0642292.0036.011/--spaces-of-mourning-the-cemetery-of-picpus-and-the-memory?rgn=main;view=fulltext>.

Saint-Denis to lay with other royal corpses for the rest of eternity. The Restoration also oversaw the construction of the Chappelle Expiatoire and a garden full of Marie Antoinette's favorite roses on the same ground as where the bodies were found, which both still exist.⁶⁸

Place de la Révolution continued to house the guillotine after the Cimetière de la Madeleine closing, so the Cimetière des Errancis (the Cemetery of Wanderers) was opened to replace it. Errancis ceased being used as a depository for victims of the Terror on June 9th, 1794, but continued to function as a cemetery for the first four arrondissements under the Directoire to replace the Cimetière de la rue Pigalle that had recently closed. The Cimetière des Errancis shut its gates on April 23, 1797 after a group of protestors from the area argued against the city's decision to keep using the cemetery. They suggested that the Cimetière de la rue Pigalle, which had just reopened, be used instead. In 1817 Louis XVII requested the recovery of his sister's body, Mme. Elisabeth, who had been decapitated on May 10th, 1794. Unfortunately, there was no way of knowing which of the ten women who had been decapitated on the same day was her. So, her remains have since been transported to the Catacombs in either 1844 or 1859 along with the other 933 bodies buried at Errancis. The space that the cemetery once occupied has been paved over by the Boulevard de Courcelles, the Rue de Miromesnil and the Rue de Monceau.⁶⁹ The Cimetière Sainte-Marguerite was used when the guillotine was removed from Place de la Révolution and relocated to Place de la Bastille on June 9th 1794. The graves here only lay open for only three days and took in a total of seventy-three bodies before moving onto Place de Trône-Renversé (this is now called Place de la Nation). The cemetery used while the guillotine was decapitating people from Place de Trône-Renversé was called the Cimetière de Picpus.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Hillairet, *Les 200 cimetières*, 292-293.

⁶⁹ Hillairet, *Les 200 cimetières*, 294.

⁷⁰ Hillairet, *Les 200 cimetières*, 291-294.

The Cimetière de Picpus was in use from the June 13th until July 28th, 1794. In these six short weeks the Cimetière de Picpus consumed more dead bodies than had been produced in the thirteen months that the guillotine was stationed at Place de la Révolution – about 1,306 against 1,120. One of the mass graves at Picpus was measured to be six and a half meters wide, eight and a half meters deep, and the other one was six and a half meters wide and ten meters deep.⁷¹ This cemetery is probably the most important of the four because it still exists today having survived the laws banning all cemeteries from the capital city. It was able to endure the sanitation of Paris because eleven descendants of aristocratic victims of the guillotine bought the land in 1797. They turned the site containing the two mass graves into a memorial for those executed during the Terror and turned the remaining adjacent six and a quarter acres into a cemetery for descendants of the noble victims of the Terror.⁷² They thus created Paris' largest private burial ground.

A memorial of any form commemorates an individual or a group of people for the hard times they were put through and the suffering that was inflicted upon them. Memorials are inherently political and can often be controversial, which was exactly the case with the Picpus memorial and conjoined cemetery. This controversy arose because the two mass graves were never exhumed and the cemetery continued to function after Napoleon's reform of funerary practices in 1804, which stated that the Church would cede all authority over burials to the State and that all cemeteries had to be destroyed and moved outside of the city. Primarily, though, people were worried that the exclusivity of this burial ground to descendants of old nobility would, as Ronen Steinberg explains it, "reproduce the social hierarchies of the Old Regime."⁷³

⁷¹ Hillairet, *Les 200 cimetières*, 295-96.

⁷² Amy Lifson, "Remains of the Day," *Humanities*, March/April 2010, accessed February 20, 2017, <https://www.neh.gov/humanities/2010/marchapril/curio/remains-the-day>, 4.

⁷³ Steinberg, "Spaces of Mourning," 141.

The victims that were buried in the two mass graves were from all different backgrounds, but the neighboring Cimetière de Picpus was “reserved only for families who could afford it and was thus in practice, if not in intent, a privileged *lieu de mémoire*.”⁷⁴

Municipal officials that held control over Parisian burials during the nineteenth century were forward in voicing their concerns about the creation and functionality of the Cimetière de Picpus. They noted that it defied Napoleon’s decrees on two fronts: the location of Picpus was within the city’s walls and its burials were not regulated or supervised by municipal authorities. They stated that it was a matter of public interest and order to permanently close the cemetery.⁷⁵ Nevertheless, the memorial of Picpus was allowed to remain open because it was important to create spaces where those that suffered are remembered, not just those who were valiant or who made notable accomplishments during their lifetime, and the fully functioning cemetery remained open with it. It is thought that Napoleon may have been lenient with how he dealt with Picpus because of his personal connection to it. Empress Josephine’s former husband, the Vicomte de Beauharnais, was one of the 1,306 victims buried there and his children, whom Bonaparte adopted, visited the place regularly.⁷⁶ This memorial remains open today and is frequently visited by American tourists because the body of Marquis de Lafayette is buried there.

⁷⁴ Steinberg, "Spaces of Mourning," 142.

⁷⁵ Steinberg, "Spaces of Mourning," 142.

⁷⁶ Steinberg, "Spaces of Mourning," 143.

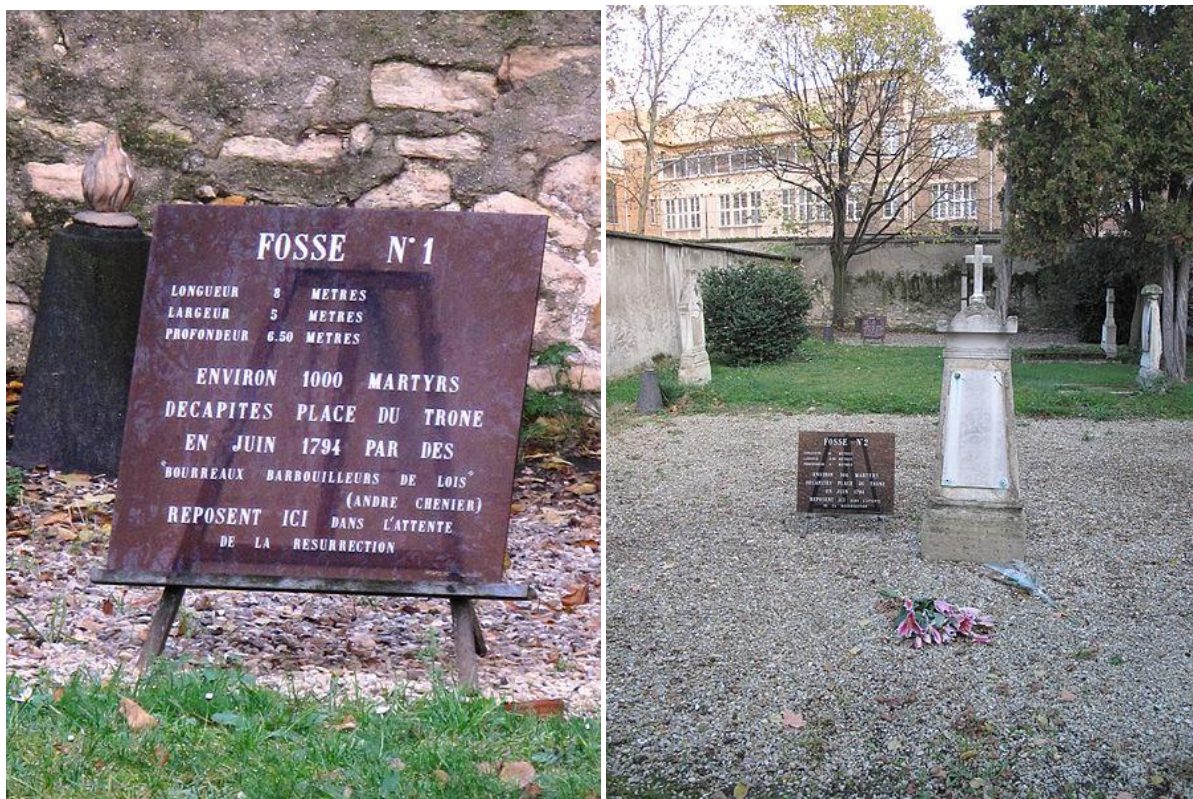


Figure 9 (L). Tangopaso, *Plaque of the common grave #1 where were buried 1,002 people executed by guillotine during the Reign of Terror in June 1794. Cemetery of Picpus, Paris 12th arr., France, November 25, 2017, photograph, accessed April 8, 2017, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File%3APlaque_fosse_n%C2%B01_Picpus.jpg.*

Figure 10 (R). Tangopaso, *Common graves where were buried victims of the French revolutionary Terror (1794) in the cemetery of Picpus, Paris 12th arr., France. The gravel areas are at the place of the graves., November 25, 2010, photograph, accessed April 8, 2107, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File%3AFosses_communes_de_Picpus.jpg.*

In 1815, during the Bourbon Restoration, it was decided that all future burials in the Cimetière de Picpus would need to receive special authorization from police *and* state authorities. The requests were primarily made to either fulfill the dead's last wishes to be reunited with their families or for political interests. The majority of these applications were approved with authorities only denying burials to those who couldn't prove they were related to the victims of the guillotine buried there.⁷⁷

⁷⁷ Steinberg, "Spaces of Mourning," 145.

The Medicalization of Death

The city didn't seem to know how to sanitarly deal with its dead until the start of the nineteenth century. At this point in post-revolutionary Paris science, was gaining credibility as a discipline due to a general increased curiosity in the subject matter and a growth in the number of medical professionals. This interest may have been influenced by the departure from Christianity in the wake of the Revolution, compelling Parisians to put their newly lost faith into something else. The growing number of specialists in Paris focused a large part of their time and energy into figuring out why so many people died in their city and what could be done to try and lower death rates. Additionally, doctors started to study the human cadaver more closely in an attempt to remove the imminent threat of death from the city.

It was theorized that when undergoing putrefaction corpses released toxins that were harmful to living things. Odors that had once been thought of as unpleasant were newly reconsidered to be repulsive, incredibly dangerous, and were likely a large source of disease and death in Paris. Human remains were no longer just a reminder of mortality, but had transformed into what Jonathon Strauss calls "agents of death."⁷⁸ The pathogens released during putrefaction were believed to act as noxious elements that could infect material objects and potentially contaminate living beings. All of these fears surrounding the dead had originated in the miasma theory that was introduced in the eighteenth century and popularized in the nineteenth. This was the notion that death was somehow materially present in odors.⁷⁹

Various dramatic stories circulated toward the end of the eighteenth century that depicted some of the horrific and terrible effects a putrefying corpse can have on a living human body. One of these stories was told in a study by Scipione Piattoli that opens with a shocking incident

⁷⁸ Strauss, *Human Remains*, 69.

⁷⁹ Strauss, *Human Remains*, 125.

at a parish church in Montpellier. There was a tomb in this church that was being reopened for the burial of another corpse, but when a workman entered the tomb he lost all consciousness due to the release of fumes that had been trapped within. Three of his colleagues went in to try and retrieve the first man, but none came out because they had each died from asphyxiation. Another story describes an incident where workmen opened a tomb in a church that exuded vapors so deadly that it killed the vicar, forty children and two hundred other by-standers.⁸⁰

These kinds of stories frightened people and caused them to be wary of interacting with death in the way they used to. Cemeteries where children had once played, cattle had once grazed, and merchants had once conducted business became increasingly vacant. It was believed that the dangerous toxins released in the process of decomposition entered into the air where they “threatened to break down the structure of bodies by infecting them with the same putrefaction that had given rise to the gases in the first place.”⁸¹

In order alleviate this fear that Parisians felt, two principal solutions were proposed to improve the city and its public spaces. These were to help encourage the flow and circulation of air and to remove all sources of pestilence.⁸² Hygiene and cleanliness, two subjects highly influenced by medical principles and standards, became key components in nineteenth century Parisian urban planning. This meant that buildings needed to be removed from the bridges that crossed over the Seine, streets and boulevards needed to be rebuilt wider to increase the circulation of air, a proper waste management system needed to be established, and cemeteries needed to be removed from inside of the city’s walls.⁸³ These alterations to the urban landscape completely transformed how one thought and continues to think about cities. The miasma theory

⁸⁰ Strauss, *Human Remains*, 93.

⁸¹ Strauss, *Human Remains*, 91.

⁸² Strauss, *Human Remains*, 97.

⁸³ Strauss, *Human Remains*, 97.

was slightly complicated in the 1860s when Louis Pasteur came to the conclusion that putrefaction definitely destroyed life, but also served as a rich and nurturing environment for certain living organisms. It was originally thought that germs were born in and released by decomposing subjects, but he proved that rotting subjects only served as places for the dormant seeds to wait for “an appropriate environment” that they could then latch onto and create more generations of disease. Pasteur was able to make these discoveries by working closely with and experimenting on rotting and decomposing subject.⁸⁴

In addition to science contributing to the physical recreation of Paris’s landscape it also played a large part in how people thought about and treated the process of dying. Death was becoming medicalized, which shifted society’s focus away from religion (Christianity) and more towards secular ideals (medicine and science). The government got involved by making it their job to authorize certain physicians, *médicins des morts*, as officials to determine and verify when someone had truly met the end of their life.⁸⁵ People believed that in order to fight and deal with death one had to know it and those that knew death best were doctors not priests. The *curés*, parish priests, of Paris claimed that with this transformation death “will disappear. It will be nothing. Through their apparently pragmatic concerns, doctors – hygienists in fact – were altering one of the most basic structures of human existence.”⁸⁶ The Church resented the shift and was open in expressing how troubled it was by the change, even though it was forced to accept that death had become a medical matter.

The Church continued to expend a large portion of its energy and resources to maintain its influence in the business of death even with this widely accepted shift away from Christianity. They did this because funerary services represented an important source of income and their

⁸⁴ Strauss, *Human Remains*, 108.

⁸⁵ Strauss, *Human Remains*, 63.

⁸⁶ Strauss, *Human Remains*, 71.

sustained influence in this field would imply that they were still a dominant power in France and French culture. The State did not seem to go to great lengths trying to eliminate their monopoly and the general population accepted and held onto the age-old tradition of religious funerary ceremonies out of a desire to show how much they respected and honored the dead. Monseigneur Charles Freppel, a French bishop and politician, was one of many to argue that it would not be right for death to become a commercial or political issue and that the Church was the only institution capable of preventing that from happening.⁸⁷

This very same reasoning is what kept legislators from taking away the Church's monopoly on funerals until the law of 1905, which established France as a secular nation and solidified the separation between Church and State. This moment also marked the complete severance of the Church's relationship with corpses. The Church was forced to slowly recognize and accept that death was no longer within their domain throughout the nineteenth century. Doctors and scientists had gradually taken over as the new experts on death. Medical professionals understood best the very real dangers of putrefying corpses and were the ones who could come up with plans to protect the public from the life-threatening diseases and illnesses they transferred to the living.⁸⁸ Along with realizing how important and significant science was becoming in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century there was a profound intellectual and cultural shift concerning how Parisians considered and dealt with their dead.

Scientists and doctors were able to exponentially increase their understanding of the human body and the effects that death had on it through autopsies and the study of cadavers. Consequently, physiology became the most important field of medical study in the early nineteenth century. Marie François Xavier Bichat was one of many scientists who were

⁸⁷ Strauss, *Human Remains*, 70-71.

⁸⁸ Strauss, *Human Remains*, 71.

interested in the effects of death and attempted to isolate its processes in the animal body. He worked towards being able to map how organs were connected and how one organ's failure could affect the others. He was primarily concerned with the heart, the lungs, and the brain in his experiments.⁸⁹ The clinical examination of cadavers increased the scope of internal access of the human body, leading to discoveries of physiological connections that would never have been made if scientists continued to be constrained by solely studying the living body. Not only did cadavers provide insight on improving medical treatments for the living, they were also incredibly helpful in learning about death itself.⁹⁰

At the dawn of the nineteenth century people began to ask questions they believed could now be answered by science and medicine, such as: "What is life?" and "What is death?" Scientists and doctors all gave different answers to these kinds of questions, which made it clear that there was no way to precisely define these terms. Scientists continue to struggle with defining these terms today with the implementation of life support, experimentation with fetal tissues, and organ transplants. Bichat wrote, "Life is the set of functions that resist death."⁹¹ His view was, of course, not one that all scientists agreed upon. Discoveries about the human body were constantly being made during this time, resulting in contrasting opinions consistently arising in relation to what death was and how it related to life. One aspect that all of these theories seemed to have in common was the idea that death and the processes associated with it (putrefaction and decomposition) were a threat to the living. Nineteenth century Parisians were thus living in a new world of doubt where an anxiety over life and death had been formed.

Was this new fear that people felt based on what happened to their bodies after death?

The body is the physical representation of the person and upon dying the individual no longer

⁸⁹ Strauss, *Human Remains*, 111.

⁹⁰ Strauss, *Human Remains*, 78.

⁹¹ Strauss, *Human Remains*, 112.

has control over the vessel they had occupied during life. Once dead, the body is turned over to the forces of nature. Strauss describes the effect that the continued representation of the dead by the corpse has on the living:

The dead have faces and eye-sockets that seem to stare. They look as if they were able to return our gaze, although we know they cannot, and with their resemblance to people it is difficult not to imagine that cadavers retain some sort of consciousness as they rot into the dirt, offering the image of a thinking that defies both death and the limits of the subject.⁹²

The body survives the individual on this earth, but for the living the body often continues to represent the person even after death and arouses unease in them upon viewing the lifeless body of a loved one.

Parisians were comfortable with corpses before the medicalization of death and this inexplicable fear of the dead. They would hold vigils in their homes and wash the dead bodies of their relatives. There was an intimacy with the dead that disappeared at the turn of the nineteenth century and has not resurfaced in Parisian culture to this day. This previously existing closeness helped people become familiar with how “they [the dead] leak, and fall apart and yet retain the name and semblance of a friend, with how they write their nonsense across the blank sheets in which the living wrap them.”⁹³ Now, however, the dying are sent to hospitals or put under the care of professionals so that those not involved in the business of death or dying don’t have to be unnecessarily touched by the effects of death. Anyone who now desires to interact with the dead has to seek out the experience and even then it is in a very tame and controlled environment. Death, which had once been a very public process, has been forced out of the world of the living so that people don’t have to deal with the realities of dying and the physical reminders of an unavoidable death. As Walter Benjamin once remarked: “Today people live in rooms that have

⁹² Strauss, *Human Remains*, 271.

⁹³ Strauss, *Human Remains*, 272.

never been touched by death – dry dwellers of eternity; and when their end approaches, they are stowed away in sanatoria or hospitals by their heirs.”⁹⁴ Throughout the nineteenth century death had become medicalized to the point that it was more common for people to die in hospitals than it was for relatives to deal with it on their own or in their own homes, which completely altered the way people thought about and dealt with the dead.

Those that dealt with death were held in relatively high regard by society when the popularity and credibility of science increased. Scientists and doctors formed a select group of individuals who committed their life’s work to medicine and the human body with the intent of broadening their medical knowledge and, consequently, helping humans live longer. Those that interacted with death on a regular basis were once considered lowly beings and thought of as being contaminated (gravediggers), but scientists replaced priests as the new specialists in death in the nineteenth century and changed that perspective. Instead of being ignored or isolated, as gravediggers had been, doctors were figures that closely resembled priests since the community looked up to them and would seek their advice and assistance when needed.

⁹⁴ Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott and Howard Eiland, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University, n.d.), 3:151.

CHAPTER 3: THERE'S NO ESCAPING DEATH

The Paris Morgue

The presence of death in the city and the anxieties surrounding it became less and less prominent at the close of the eighteenth century with the removal of all cemeteries from Paris, the remedying of sanitary issues, and the increased regard for scientific findings. However, people continued to be oddly drawn to it. They were incredibly curious and excited about the dead body and, for this very reason, created a spectacle out of death, which gave rise to the popularity of the city morgue and other morbid encounters as forms of entertainment in nineteenth century Parisian culture.

The morgue was originally the name given to a place in the basement of the Grand Châtelet where prison guards held new prisoners for a few hours so that they could familiarize themselves with the faces of the detained in case they needed to be identified later on. The word morgue likely stems from the Old French verb *morguer*, which means, "To look solemnly." This verb probably comes from Vulgar Latin's *murricare*, which means, "To make a face, pout."⁹⁵ 1734 is the first recorded mention of a functioning public morgue in Paris. This morgue ran from inside of the Grand Châtelet and was used for the identification not of prisoners, but of cadavers. It was called the *basse geôle de Châtelet* and was free of cost and open to the public all days of the week. Officials hoped that by allowing people to walk through the morgue's viewing room someone would be able to correctly identify any one of the anonymous bodies lying there.⁹⁶

⁹⁵ "Morgue," in *Online Etymology Dictionary*, accessed March 5, 2017, <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=morgue>.

⁹⁶ Vanessa R. Schwartz, *Spectacular Realities: Early Mass Culture in Fin-de-Siècle Paris*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley [u.a.]: Univ. of California Press, 2003), 46.

Bodies in the city morgue were typically fished out of the Seine or had been the victims of terrible crimes.⁹⁷

In order to help in the process of identifying the individuals morgue workers would hang the clothing of victims alongside the marble slab on which they were displayed in an attempt to complement any individuality that the bare lifeless body still had. The morgue also kept any personal items found with the body in case it was identified and a relative of the deceased wanted to claim their affects. If not, workers would put all the items into a bag that would be carted off to a kiln outside of the city where they were burned to ashes, destroying any evidence of that person's life.⁹⁸

People were thoroughly intrigued by the dead and were incredibly drawn to the morgue as a space where they could feed their curiosities. Unlike the *danse macabre* of the Middle Ages, the Paris Morgue did not function as a piece of Parisian culture that reiterated the mortality of humans. Parisians were instead sidestepping the realities of death and the fact that what was lying in front of them on a marble slab was a real person by making the morgue into a spectacle and turning the identification of bodies into a sort of game. Some regulars even went so far as to make a request to the principal keeper of the morgue in asking if they could pose as a corpse in the viewing room. These people were consequently deterred by the morgue keeper's explanation of how they would have to lie naked in a room that was kept at temperatures near freezing for up to twelve hours.⁹⁹

Since the Paris Morgue was such a highly trafficked area city officials decided that the site's sanitary regulations needed to be improved upon. This decision manifested itself in making a clearer and more absolute separation between the living (the spectators) and the dead (the

⁹⁷ "Morgue."

⁹⁸ Jones, "The Morbidity," *Edwardian Promenade* (blog).

⁹⁹ Jones, "The Morbidity," *Edwardian Promenade* (blog).

spectacles). In 1804, the same year as Père Lachaise's opening, a new morgue was built in Paris that was highly praised for its innovative and hygienic facilities. The morgue's new space allowed for more visitors and protected them from the fumes that the corpses expelled, which kept them safe from the dangers associated with putrefaction as described in the popular miasma theory of the time. It was successful in aligning with "the contemporary concerns about the toxicity of the dead."¹⁰⁰ A thick glass window was installed between the visitors and the cadavers so that the living could not easily pass into the display room if they were so compelled. This added to the idea of death as a spectacle because it made the space where the bodies were displayed seem detached from the reality of the living and gave it an appearance similar to that of a Paris storefront.



Figure 11. *The Paris Morgue*, illustration, accessed May 1, 2017, <http://static.messynessychic.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/parismorguecover.jpg>.

¹⁰⁰ Schwartz, *Spectacular Realities*, 51.

In 1864 the morgue was moved once again under Préfet de la Seine Baron Haussmann's authorization. The plan for the Paris Morgue's relocation sparked a serious discussion on what the proper place for the unidentified dead should be. Did they belong in the heart of the city where people could conveniently walk through and contribute to their "civic duty" of identifying the anonymous bodies? Or did they belong on the other side of the city's walls along with the cemeteries to keep the general public safe in both a hygienic sense and a moral sense? Morality frequently came up as a question in this debate because it was thought that overexposure and extreme interest in cadavers would lead to a detachment from reality and from what it meant to be a moral being. Additionally, women and children could and would go through the morgue just as frequently as men did, which only added to the question of how the spectacle of death affected or influenced the morality of its frequent visitors and where it should be moved to.

In this deliberation, the *Conseil d'hygiène et salubrité* and the general council of the Seine voted to remove the morgue from the city and to construct a new one that was isolated from the spaces that the living occupied. Haussmann contradicted their vote and declared that it would be best for the morgue to remain at the heart of the city so that it could continue to attract as many visitors as possible.¹⁰¹ This means that the Paris Morgue was permitted to remain within the city while all other unsanitary establishments had been forced out of it. Slaughterhouses were relocated in the 1830s, public executions were moved from the Place de Grève to the barrier Saint-Jacques in 1832, and in 1850 the Loi Grammont prevented the beating of animals in public.¹⁰² Not only was the new morgue going to remain within the walls of the city, it was also

¹⁰¹ Schwartz, *Spectacular Realities*, 54.

¹⁰² Schwartz, *Spectacular Realities*, 55.

going to be in a more central and highly trafficked location right behind Notre Dame at the eastern tip of the Ile de la Cité.

A green curtain was hung framing the vitrine that separated the visitors from the cadavers in the new Paris Morgue behind Notre Dame. The curtain was pulled closed whenever the morgue workers changed out the bodies on display almost like a scene change in the theater.¹⁰³ This added to the theatricality of the space and the separation that individuals felt toward the dead bodies laying out in front of them. Reality was even further detached from death in the city morgue with the use of photography starting in 1877 and refrigeration systems in 1882. These two processes were employed to extend the amount of time a body could be observed. Photographs of corpses that had remained unidentified after their removal from the morgue were posted at the entrance to the viewing room to help continue the search for their identity. The human-sized refrigerators replaced the antiquated method of dripping cold water onto corpses to maintain and preserve the body. Officials were hopeful that the lengthened time of display for corpses would increase the chances that a curious Parisian or tourist would step into the morgue and recognize one of the anonymous individuals that lay behind the large glass window.¹⁰⁴

The corpses exhibited by the Paris Morgue became theatricalized and spectacularized by both the Parisian public and those that ran the establishment. It was part of this detachment from reality that attracted such large crowds. Visitors would comment on the corpses that were bluntly laid on the marble slabs by saying that they were far closer in resemblance to a human than the wax figures in museums because they were made of ““real flesh.””¹⁰⁵ The public was also very open about the disappointment they felt if they came back to the morgue and none of the bodies had been changed out since their last visit.

¹⁰³ Schwartz, *Spectacular Realities*, 58.

¹⁰⁴ Schwartz, *Spectacular Realities*, 58.

¹⁰⁵ Schwartz, *Spectacular Realities*, 49.

The widespread popularity of and interest in the Paris Morgue was often equated to that of the theater or museums. The hundreds of thousands of visitors to the morgue defended this piece of Parisian culture by claiming that the “spectacle existed in the name of science.”¹⁰⁶ In reality the vast majority of people were there for spectacular entertainment because it was the best free theater in town. Few would enter the space with the intentions or the thought that they would be able to recognize a corpse. They would enter the building, look at the bodies, and then promptly leave, having only gone to be entertained and to detach themselves from the reality waiting for them beyond the morgue’s walls. There were probably even more people that frequented the Paris Morgue than the city’s museums or plays because there was no entrance fee and it had become a sort of neighborhood gathering space that was accepting to a diverse crowds.¹⁰⁷ Vendors were even known to make a profit from the high-traffic area by setting up shop outside of the building. They sold apples, oranges, cookies, gingerbread, coconut slices and other touristy fairground items.¹⁰⁸ The way that vendors treated this space as a place of potential monetary gain is similar to how the area around the Cimetière des Innocents became a market with taking advantage of spots that were frequently visited, no matter how morbid, so that they could have good and consistent business.

The Paris Morgue, proving and ensuring its popularity, was also listed in nearly every guidebook to the city. Even after the morgue’s closure to the general public, guidebooks continued to list it as an attraction that had once drawn enormous crowds. *Black’s Guide to Paris* published in 1907 says:

¹⁰⁶ Schwartz, *Spectacular Realities*, 59.

¹⁰⁷ Messynessy, "That time when Parisians used to Hang Out at the Morgue for Fun," *Messy Nessy : Cabinet of Chic Curiosities* (blog), entry posted May 13, 2014, accessed March 6, 2017, <http://www.messynessychic.com/2014/05/13/that-time-when-parisians-used-to-hang-out-at-the-morgue-for-fun/>.

¹⁰⁸ Messynessy, "That time," *Messy Nessy : Cabinet of Chic Curiosities* (blog).

MORGUE, The. – A dead-house at which the bodies of all found dead in the streets or the river are exposed for the purpose of identification. The spectacle used to be much enjoyed by the Parisian working classes, many of whom managed to spare a few minutes from their dinner hour to see if there were any fresh tenants... the present structure was erected in 1864. Moreover, since the last edition of this book the Morgue has been closed to the general public.¹⁰⁹

Regardless of the excitement that the morgue aroused in Parisians and tourists alike not everyone found the “dead-house” appealing. In 1887, twenty years before the Paris Morgue was closed, Adolphe Guillot published a book about the Grand Châtelet prison and the Paris Morgue called *Paris qui souffre*. He argued that the morgue had become too much of a spectacle and reduced the sentiment of viewing the dead human body to be more similar to the viewing of an animal carcass than the corpse of one of our own. He also stated “En admettant que même parfois l’exposition ait amené une reconnaissance, nous aimerions mieux, au point de vue social, que quelques misérables de plus fussent restés inconnus et qu’on supprimât un spectacle que démoralise et pousse au crime.”¹¹⁰ Other bourgeois men joined Guillot in this common concern over the “moral quality of the spectacle.”¹¹¹ They were hardly consumed by the question of hygienic regulations surrounding the care for the dead body in the morgue, but were instead worried that granting entry to any passerby of the morgue had turned the miserable death of one human being into the leisure activity of another and that the Paris Morgue had rendered people less respectful of the human life.

In March of 1907 the Paris Morgue was finally closed off to the general public. It was arguments like Guillot’s that helped lead to its closing. However, Paris still needed people to come to the viewing room to identify the bodies that were being brought in. It was decided then that all future use of the morgue’s showroom would be reserved to those who were most likely to

¹⁰⁹ Charles Mathon, ed., *Black's Guide to Paris* (London: A. & C. Black, n.d.), 43.

¹¹⁰ Adolphe Guillot, *Paris qui souffre: la basse-gêole du Grand-Châtelet et les morgues modernes*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Rouquette, 1888), 248.

¹¹¹ Schwartz, *Spectacular Realities*, 84.

make a positive identification on the anonymous corpses. This meant that there were to be no more visits made out of pure curiosity.

Parisians had begun to think about death in a more hygienic and separated manner when all cemeteries were removed from the city, but they were so excited by the morgues and having corpses at their disposal as a form of entertainment that they let their morbid curiosities come in the way of advancing further into a hygienic society. How, then, does the morgue as a public spectacle differ from the functions of the Cimetière des Innocents as a meeting space and market place? Nineteenth century Parisians and tourists were attracted to the morgue regardless of all the advancements and separations that had been made for them during their lifetime to keep death and its malignant toxins out of the city. They were also more familiar with the dangers that could arise from coming into contact with the dead than the people who a century earlier had no information on the matter and would walk freely through the Cimetière des Innocents where mass graves lay open and full of putrefying corpses. Nevertheless, nineteenth century Parisians were obsessed by their morbid curiosities and let the dead slip back into their newly sanitized city for the sake of entertainment.

The Theater of the *Fantasmagories*

Another exciting piece of entertainment and culture in nineteenth century Paris that fed the macabre curiosities of the public was the creation of the *machine à fantôme* or “ghost machine” and the theater of the *fantasmagories*. The term *fantasmagorie*, or phantasmagoria, is thought to mean “crowd of phantoms,” stemming from the Greek *phantasma*, which means “image, phantom, apparition,” and a French version of the Greek word *agora*, “assembly.” It is

possible, however, that the second part of the word was chosen because it sounded dramatic and has no literal connections to Greek.¹¹²

Etienne-Gaspard Robert (Robertson), the inventor of such contraptions, experimented with his ghost machines in the 1780s in an attempt to “create a scientific device for understanding and curing just such irrational fears [that of ghosts]... and to demystify the irrational by literally bringing it to light.”¹¹³ He called his popular machines *fantasmagories* and held his first event in Paris in 1798. Spectators entered into a darkened room where a *fantascope* (projector) was set up to project a series of images onto a transparent screen. This screen was used to divide the room in two with the *fantascope* placed on one side and the observers on the other. Robertson was able to make images appear as though they were coming closer or backing away from the audience with his invention as well as vary the intensity of the light emitted with a shutter that could be placed over its lens.¹¹⁴

There were three key elements to having a successful performance of the *fantasmagories*: the naivety of spectators, the suggestive power of the presenter, and a number of special visual and auditory effects. The overall stimulating experience of Robertson’s events was created with the goal of terrifying and entertaining the viewer. The figures that were shown on the screen varied greatly in form, but were always closely associated with death because of how much fear it generated in nineteenth century Parisian society. Some of the most common images were of skeletons, monsters, devils, ghosts, and bats. In order to reach his goal of having the audience leave the theater feeling as though they could master their fears, Robertson created a number of

¹¹² "Phantasmagoria," in *Online Etymology Dictionary*, accessed May 1, 2017, <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=phantasmagoria>.

¹¹³ Strauss, *Human Remains*, 226.

¹¹⁴ Patrice Guerin, "Spectacle de fantasmagorie ROBERTSON," *Histoire des Projections Lumineuses de la lanterne magique au projecteur de diapos* (blog), entry posted November 19, 2010, accessed May 1, 2017, <http://diaprojection.unblog.fr/2010/11/19/spectacle-de-fantasmagorie-robertson/>.

additional optical illusions to go along with his use of the *fantascope*; one such tactic used to ensure that the spectators were frightened was to have images of ghosts projected onto clouds of smoke that would float through the audience.¹¹⁵

Robertson's theatrical invention was so popular in Paris that by 1799 imitators had sprung up nearly everywhere. Robertson, however, was the most successful in this business and would advertize his spectacles as such:

Apparition de spectres, Fantômes et Revenants, tels qu'ils ont dû et pu apparaître dans tous les temps, dans tous les lieux et chez tous les peuples. Expériences sur le nouveau fluide connu sous le nom de galvanisme, dont l'application rend pour un temps le mouvement aux corps qui ont perdu la vie. Un artiste distingué par ses talents y touchera de l'harmonica. On souscrit pour la première séance qui aura lieu mardi, 4 pluviôse, au Pavillon de l'Échiquier.¹¹⁶

Robertson's success with his ghost machines in the nineteenth century led him to continuously make his shows more creative and more elaborate. He wanted to be the best in the business and would even go on to travel the world as an entertainer, bringing his show to new cities and spreading his ideas on how to "cure" the public of their irrational fears surrounding death.

¹¹⁵ Guerin, "Spectacle de fantasmagorie," *Histoire des Projections Lumineuses de la lanterne magique au projecteur de diapos* (blog).

¹¹⁶ Guerin, "Spectacle de fantasmagorie," *Histoire des Projections Lumineuses de la lanterne magique au projecteur de diapos* (blog).

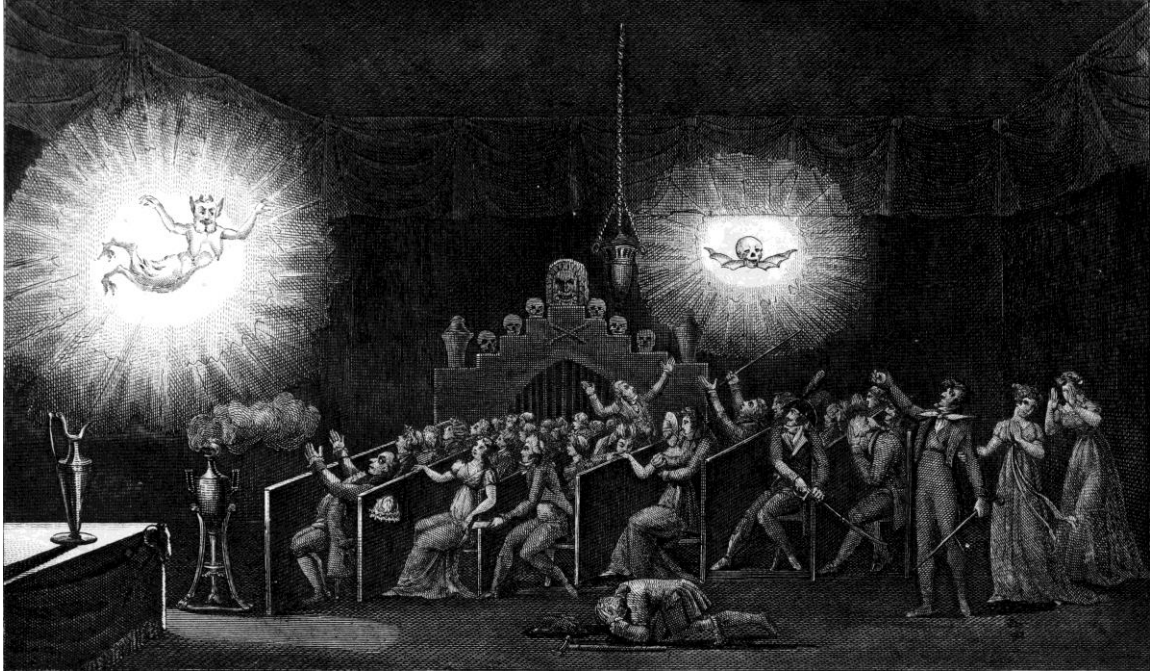


Figure 12. Lejeune, *Fantasmagorie de Robertson dans la Cour des Capucines en 1797*, 1831, image, accessed April 21, 2017, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:3AM%C3%A9moires_r%C3%A9cr%C3%A9atifs%2C_scientifiques_et_anecdotiques_du_physicien-a%C3%A9ronaute_E.G._Robertson_\(vol._1_frontispiece\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:3AM%C3%A9moires_r%C3%A9cr%C3%A9atifs%2C_scientifiques_et_anecdotiques_du_physicien-a%C3%A9ronaute_E.G._Robertson_(vol._1_frontispiece).jpg).

Even though these death-related spectacles were incredibly popular nineteenth century Parisians were unable to completely let go of their fear of the dead. They could momentarily suppress their internal trepidations for the sake of entertainment (much like going to horror movies today), but remained horrified by the imminent threat of death and the presence of the dead in their lives. Parisians were willing to go out of their way to interact with death in controlled environments, like with the morgue and the theater of the *fantasmagories*, but no matter how comfortable they were in these settings they remained frightened by death. It is possible that in entering these spaces they were hoping to be freed of their fears, but more than likely it was out of curiosity and for the thrill. Just because someone is able to endure a horrifying experience doesn't mean that their fear of it is gone. Nineteenth century Parisians gave power to the dead by paying attention to them and making them out to be dangers to

humanity. “The very attempt to dispel beliefs in their powers only increased them.”¹¹⁷ This once again begs the question of where this fear of the dead came from? And if Parisians were so scared of death, why did they let it come back into the city even if in theatricalized or manicured ways?

Père Lachaise

In addition to fulfilling their macabre curiosities nineteenth century Parisians showed a contrastingly profound amount of respect for their dead with the development of a new kind of cemetery. This newly conceived garden cemetery was applied to the design of Père Lachaise, which opened in 1804. This cemetery contradicted the filth and disorder that had long been associated with death through its meditative and beautiful atmosphere that was so successful it even attracted visitors outside of those paying respects to their friends or family members. Père Lachaise introduced the world to modern cemetery design and reintroduced the Western world to the practice of burying the dead outside of their city walls.

In 1801 Préfet de Seine Frochot brought the issue of building a new cemetery to the new Premier Consul Napoleon Bonaparte. Frochot reported that the small cemeteries around the periphery of Paris would never be capable of holding the amount of bodies that would have to be buried over time and stated, ““Most of the cemeteries have long suffered from a condition of overcrowding. They can neither hold more corpses nor decompose those that are there. All decomposition takes place practically in the open. The ground has become a pitted black mire from the constant process of decay.””¹¹⁸ Frochot learned from his city’s history and worked to prevent anything like the Cimetière des Innocents from happening again in Paris. Three years after Frochot’s proposal Napoleon Bonaparte declared that he would oversee the creation of

¹¹⁷ Strauss, *Human Remains*, 228.

¹¹⁸ Horne, *Seven Ages*, 414.

three gigantic municipal and non-denominational cemeteries outside the walls of Paris. The plans for these cemeteries included walls along their peripheries in an attempt to further hide and physically separate the dead from the living. This effort was made to establish that the city itself was entirely for the living and that the dead should be confined to their place of eternal rest. Designs essentially created a “hermetic seal” between the city of the living and the city of the dead.¹¹⁹ The three cemeteries would be built in the next two decades were Père Lachaise to the east, Montmartre to the north, and Montparnasse to the south.

The largest of these extramural cemeteries was Père Lachaise, which lay to the east of Paris on a property that had belonged to a landowner named Jacques Baron. Baron’s land was originally owned by the Bishop of Paris and was used as an agricultural smallholding, a small farm, in the twelfth century. Then in 1430 the property was bought by a rich spice-merchant named Règnault de Wandomme, and eventually, some two hundred years later, became a Jesuit retreat before falling into the hands of Baron. However, Baron had to sell his acquired land to the city of Paris because he had lost all of his money and was financially ruined from of the Revolution. The land that was bought to build the Père Lachaise Cemetery provides an amazing view of Paris where the Panthéon, Sacré-Cœur, the Eiffel Tower, and the countryside that stretches beyond Meudon and to the southwest can all be seen.¹²⁰

At first Parisians did not appreciate Père Lachaise. They were upset that the new cemetery was so far outside of the city (Paris had yet to expand that far east) and that they would have to travel far to visit the graves of loved ones. In the first year of its existence Père Lachaise oversaw just thirteen interments. People generally preferred to be buried in the parish cemeteries that existed outside of the city because it aligned more closely with the Christian traditions they

¹¹⁹ Strauss, *Human Remains*, 228.

¹²⁰ Horne, *Seven Ages*, 415.

knew and were comfortable with. Frochot made the decision to have notable remains transferred to the burial site as a method to increase the popularity of the cemetery. As holy ground and notable saintly relics had once attracted more burials to churches, the people of nineteenth century Paris wanted to be buried along with the greats. Among the remains transferred to Père Lachaise were Héloïse and Abélard, Jean de la Fontaine, and Molière. These transfers of famous remains were successful in increasing the amount of burials in the cemetery and by 1830 there were some thirty-three thousand people interred at Père Lachaise¹²¹ compared to the five hundred thirty graves that had been dug in its first eleven years.¹²²

A strict set of standards was set in 1804 with the opening of this Parisian cemetery so that the city would be able to avoid having its cemeteries slip back into the state of disorder and filth that they had gradually come to in the past. These regulations were: bodies had to lie side-by-side and *not* one on top of the other, cemeteries should be park-like places where individuals can come enjoy a trip to the grave of a loved one, they should be full of greenery, and families should be able to buy plots in perpetuity if they so desired.¹²³ Père Lachaise's groundbreaking design was so successful that it influenced the structure of many other Western cemeteries on both sides of the Atlantic.¹²⁴

Père Lachaise, like the Cimetière des Innocents, was open to all classes of citizens. There were to be "public cemeteries" within the grounds of the larger cemetery reserved the interment of the poor. These burials could only take place if enough land was set aside so that every five or six years the gravesites could be dug up and reused for new bodies. Those that were buried in the recycled graves were allowed to have temporary memorials or tombstones as long as they didn't

¹²¹ "Cimetière du Père-Lachaise," *SmarterParis city guide* (blog), accessed November 1, 2016, <http://www.smarterparis.com/reviews/cimetiere-du-pere-lachaise/>.

¹²² Horne, *Seven Ages*, 415.

¹²³ Schechter, *The Whole*, 146.

¹²⁴ Schechter, *The Whole*, 146.

get in the way of the eventual exhumation.¹²⁵ The middle class was interred in plots that were most often maintained by the deceased's living relatives for a number of years and then turned over to a new occupant. Parisians had to pay fifty francs for one of these modest plots and an additional fee was added if they wanted to erect a tombstone or monument to the dead. The majority of these middle class graves were temporary due to cost and by 1825 the concessions paid for them were required every five years on a renewable contract.¹²⁶

Those who were wealthy enough did not have to worry about the renewable contracts because they could buy a plot in perpetuity if they so desired. Individuals had to pay one hundred francs per square meter for one of these eternal gravesites. An additional fee was required for each body that was added to family vaults. The original plan for these plots was to have each individual or family build a portion of a uniform peristyle as part of their tomb. The idea behind this was for there to eventually be an arcade that encompassed the cemetery without the government having to pay for its construction. The government also thought these arcades would serve as suitable places to honor and hold the tombs of notable French contemporaries. Unfortunately, the arcades were never built and the plan never came to fruition.¹²⁷

Père Lachaise was created in the image of Bonaparte's decree and seemed to abide by the standards that he had set for the cemeteries of Paris.¹²⁸ However, to the left of the entrance of Père Lachaise there were large *fosses communes* where people were buried free of charge. The creation and utilization of these mass graves directly defied Napoleon's Imperial Decree, but in order to successfully create and maintain the atmosphere desired and not have an incredibly over-filled cemetery Père Lachaise needed these *fosses* to accommodate the largest number of

¹²⁵ Etlin, *The Architecture*, 310.

¹²⁶ Etlin, *The Architecture*, 310

¹²⁷ Etlin, *The Architecture*, 312.

¹²⁸ Etlin, *The Architecture*, 300.

bodies possible.¹²⁹ In 1860, however, Paris expanded to encompass Père Lachaise and the surrounding suburbs,¹³⁰ which prompted a ban in 1874 on the continued use of the communal graves in Père Lachaise. It also stated that mass burials could only occur in cemeteries that were truly outside of the city's walls.¹³¹

The city of Paris managed the space and the use of Père Lachaise in a much more organized manner than it had the Cimetière des Innocents. As a municipal cemetery there was a public officer appointed to oversee all burials and buildings of monuments or installment of tombs within the grounds. There was a strictly defined system in place for those who wanted to be buried there and it was mandated that living relatives take charge of maintaining the plots that their deceased relatives were buried in. Parisians were extremely invested in Père Lachaise as a place of memory and contemplation, so they worked hard to preserve the beauty of their city's landscaped garden cemetery. The space was laid out in a modern grid format, like that of a town, with cobbled paths and cast-iron signposts, which gave it the feeling of truly being "a city of the dead."¹³² Père Lachaise gradually became a major tourist destination and was written up in all of the major Paris guidebooks.

¹²⁹ Etlin, *The Architecture*, 317.

¹³⁰ Brown, *Père Lachaise*, 32.

¹³¹ Hillairet, *Les 200 cimetières*, 323-324.

¹³² Horne, *Seven Ages*, 416.



Figure 13. Landscapelover, *Père Lachaise*, June 2, 2011, photograph, accessed April 21, 2017, <https://landscapelover.files.wordpress.com/2011/06/views-from-montparnassel.jpg>.

When Marianne Baillie, an English traveler, poet, and author, ventured to Paris in 1818 she noted how disgusted she was by the narrow and crowded streets of Paris, saying that they were filthy and had a plethora of horrible smells. Yet, when she visited Père Lachaise she was deeply moved by the cemetery: “[E]verything marked the existence of tender remembrance and regret.”¹³³ She found this space to be particularly unique because it seemed as though a special bond was formed between the living and the dead and that the deceased were never forgotten there. Nathaniel Carter, an American traveler, visited Paris just a few years after Baillie and said that there was a sense of communication between the dead and the living seen in the way that the

¹³³ Etlin, *The Architecture*, 357.

living treated and maintained the gravesites of their deceased loved ones. He also said that the cemetery created a more immediate and earthly bliss than Paradise and that the “graves at Père Lachaise offered a sense of immortality by suggesting the sweetness of death and by sustaining the illusion of a continuing presence which bound the dead to their attentive survivors.”¹³⁴

Père Lachaise’s secularity was reflected in the way that individuals reacted to the cemetery. None of the sentiments that these writers shared with the public were aligned with Christian theology. This is not to say that the garden cemetery wasn’t enchanting, because it definitely had and continues to have that effect, but visitors weren’t thinking about their faith at every bend in the paths. It offered a more worldly experience that allowed visitors to experience and appreciate the beauties and the joys of life.¹³⁵ The cemetery was expanded multiple times throughout its existence to prevent overcrowding and preserve the park-like atmosphere while accommodating as many Parisians as possible. It was enlarged for the first time between 1824 and 1829, then again in 1832, 1842, 1848, and 1850. With these expansions Père Lachaise grew to be a total of forty-four hectares (about 109 acres), making it Paris’ largest cemetery.¹³⁶

The tombs and grave markers that populate Père Lachaise are each carefully and beautifully constructed to show profound honor and respect for the dead. The diverse architecture represented in the cemetery is successful in commemorating the deceased by celebrating the lives of the individuals that are buried there. The markers are not created in a generic uniform format that is often seen in cemeteries today, but instead physically express the individuality and identity of the person interred under their unique stone slab. This was done in an effort “to ensure that important ancestors were not lost.”¹³⁷ However, it is worth noting that

¹³⁴ Etlin, *The Architecture*, 357.

¹³⁵ Etlin, *The Architecture*, 357.

¹³⁶ Hillairet, *Les 200 cimetières*, 323.

¹³⁷ Koudounaris, *The Empire*, 101.

some individuals seem to be more important than others. Upon entering the cemetery visitors can look at a map that points out the notable and famous tombs, which essentially turns them into a tourist destination. The search for the tombs of Chopin, Géricault, or Jim Morrison reduces the meaning of the thousands of other graves in the cemetery that get passed by without a second glance.

Today it is nearly impossible to get a plot in the Père Lachaise cemetery. The graves are strictly reserved for residents of Paris or relatives of those already entombed in a family plot. Those who wish to be buried there can only lease the land for interment for ten, thirty, or fifty years. After the allotted time or if the grave has clearly been left unattended to the remains are dug up, deposited into a central ossuary, and the leased land is relet to another paying customer.¹³⁸ Parisians so desperately want to be buried in Père Lachaise that there are frequently long waiting lists to rent these temporary plots.¹³⁹ Death has become something that Parisians must plan for and make arrangements around because of the popularity of Paris' first municipal cemetery. However, the temporary plots at Père Lachaise are more similar to the burials in the Cimetière des Innocents than one might think. This is not to say that Père Lachaise has pits lying open waiting to be filled with corpses, but the idea that someone's bodily remains are not guaranteed to stay in the ground for long after their burial is still present. People put their names on the waiting list with full knowledge that they will be dug up in just a few years' time. This attitude is shockingly similar to that of medieval Parisians who were comfortable with their remains being taken out of the *fosses communes* and put into the charnel houses that lined the cemetery. However, modern Parisians who wish to be buried in Père Lachaise must pay an extraordinary amount of money for something that was once free.

¹³⁸ Steve Stoper, "FAQs," Paris Cemeteries, accessed April 28, 2017, <http://www.pariscemeteries.com/questions-1/>.

¹³⁹ Horne, *Seven Ages*, 421.

CONCLUSION

The culture in and around Parisian cemeteries had once been boisterous, crowded and dirty because they functioned as places for daily interactions between vendors, beggars, prostitutes, and vagrants. In the nineteenth century this culture was erased and the cemetery was transformed into a meditative and peaceful place. The desire for changes in the city's relationship with death seems to have primarily developed out of concerns over public health and sanitation which prompted the removal of Paris' internal cemeteries, the creation of new laws surrounding burials and the construction of three new extramural cemeteries. Additionally, this shift can be seen as reflecting the secularization of France after the Revolution. The creation of the Parisian municipal cemetery served as a solution to various problems that the city faced in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

For nearly a thousand years the same thoughts and practices surrounding death survived before anyone came to the realization that something needed to be done to improve the conditions of the cemeteries littered throughout Paris. It is unclear, though, why this change happened when it did and what it is that prompted such a complete reversal of ideas surrounding death. Did the French Revolution and the secularization of the nation affect these traditions? Or was it because people were more interested in and convinced by the growing amount of scientific studies on living conditions around Paris? What was it that brought Paris to both love and fear death in the nineteenth century after being relatively indifferent towards it for so long?

The secularization of France after the Revolution seems to have had less significant of an impact on burial practices than the influence of public health concerns. From the end of the eighteenth and into the nineteenth century people maintained their faith and continued to use the funerary services that their churches offered. There was no immediate threat to the Church's

power in the business of death, as no one was trying to replace or take away the tradition of Christian burials as long as interments did not happen within city limits. So, it may be seen as pure coincidence that these two events in Paris's history – the secularization of the country and the sanitation of the city – coincide. However, it would be problematic to say that the two are not at all related. The ideas of the French Revolution were drawn from the Enlightenment, which emphasized the importance of scientific method and questioned the influence of religion. Leading up to and after the Revolution people were moving away from blind faith and more towards scientific fact and reason. They were starting to question what they had always taken for granted and rely more on medicine and science as fields that could offer them answers.

Both the Christian and the medical relationship with death were very different in nature, but had one major intersection: fear. People were much more afraid of a spiritual death than they were of a bodily one from the medieval period until the eighteenth century when Christianity was dominant in Paris. This can be seen in the indifferent attitudes expressed over the treatment of corpses and the contrasting amount of time and energy spent to help ensure the safe and easy passage of souls into Heaven. There was a much larger concern over piety and goodness, so that the soul wouldn't have to suffer in Purgatory before eventually gaining access into Heaven, than there was over the physical state of the dead body. This fear of post-mortem suffering was widespread and influenced people to act in specific ways during their life to ease the punishments that would come after death.

The medical fear of death, however, was more focused on the physical effects that the dead could have on the living. This relationship was concerned with the toxins emitted by putrefying corpses and how harmful they could be to those that came into contact with them. This kind of fear was new to Parisian culture because it was not as closely associated with what

happened to the individual in death, but how the dead as a whole affected the living. This pushed Parisians to distance themselves from the corpses they had once interacted with so casually on a daily basis, but also led to a growing curiosity and an inexplicable magnetism that spectacularized death and the macabre.

At the same time as this spectacularization of death Parisian cemeteries were developing their own culture around the dead. They became largely nondenominational and open to the general public, starting with the creation of Père Lachaise. At the outset, this cemetery was incredibly influential to different western societies and was used as a template for municipal cemeteries in cities that were facing similar problems of public health and sanitation due to overcrowded intramural burial grounds. The boisterous and crowded social culture around cemeteries had been completely eradicated with this new garden cemetery that promoted peaceful and reflective visits. Cemeteries created in this style were designed to motivate the living to care for their dead in ways that more closely reflected ancient Roman practices than Parisian ones.

In medieval times the living were charged with taking care of the souls of the dead by saying prayers for them and performing Masses in their name. At this point in time the culture surrounding death in Paris was directly connected to the idea that the living could have an influence on the dead. With the shift in Paris' relationship with death in the nineteenth century the culture moved away from how the living could affect the dead and focused on how the dead could, and did, affect the living. Parisians then went to great lengths to minimize the impact that death had on their lives by pushing it out of their city. However, they could not completely rid themselves of their links to the deceased and the idea that the living and the dead are connected in some way.

At the turn of the nineteenth century it became less important for the souls of the dead to be at peace than it was for their bodily remains to be cared for in a place where the living could go and think about their lost loved ones. Garden cemeteries provided and continue to provide a peaceful place for individuals to reflect upon the relationships they had with the deceased. The emotions and the physical health of the living in relation to the dead have in turn become more important than the care of the dead for the dead's sake. Cultures and traditions surrounding death have changed greatly since the Middle Ages to have come to this point and continue to change today with the increased popularity of cremations and alternative burial styles.

The research I have done for this project has inspired me to pay closer attention to the physical presence of death around me, so that I can appreciate the beauty of places like Père Lachaise, and to think more about how much the concept of a burial ground has changed. Throughout this project, we have seen spaces of death physically and culturally transform in many ways: from the overstuffed soil of the Cimetière des Innocents, to the ornately decorated walls of bones in the Catacombs, the morbid curiosities at the Paris Morgue, the illusion of death and fear at the theater of the *fantasmagories*, and finally, to the breathtaking grounds of Père Lachaise. My question, then, is what will be the next step that Parisian attitudes towards death will take and will it affect the Western world in the same way that the creation and success of Père Lachaise did in transforming how we think about and treat our dead?

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