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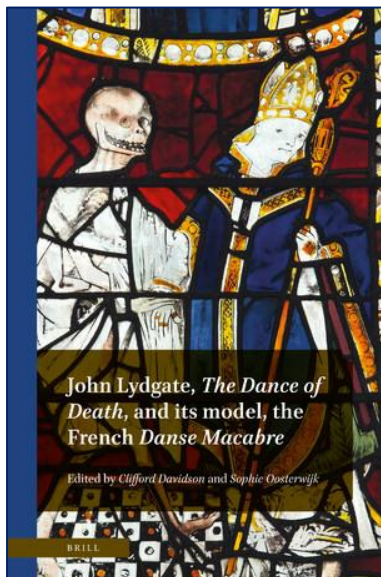
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PEREGRINATIONS

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Review: Clifford Davidson and Sophie Oosterwijk, *John Lydgate, The Dance of Death, and its model, the French Danse Macabre* (Leiden, Koninklijke Brill, 2021), xiv + 279 pp, 33 images, bibliography, glossary and index: \$138 (hardback); ISBN-13: 978-9004442597

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In this volume, aimed at an international readership, two leading experts on the *Danse Macabre*, Clifford Davidson and Sophie Oosterwijk, have joined forces to produce an authoritative edition of John Lydgate's 'Dance of Death' of 1426, with a detailed comparison of the different written versions of the poem, as well as a new scholarly edition and translation of Guy Marchant's French *Danse Macabre* volume produced in 1485. These key texts and their local derivatives, principally the German *Totentanz* and the Spanish *la Danza de la Muerte*, are discussed within a wider literary context. Their precursors reach back to *Vado Mori* texts of classical origin and, more importantly in a Christian framework, the Ash Wednesday liturgy from Genesis 3:19 "Remember, man, that thou art dust, and unto dust thou shalt return."

As explained in the introduction, John Lydgate (c. 1370-1450), was a Benedictine monk of the abbey of Bury St Edmunds (Suffolk). Renowned for his prodigious poetic output, his best-known work was “The Dance of Death,” a translation from the French verses which he made during a visit to Paris in 1426. The French text accompanied a mural painting of 1424-25 of the *Danse Macabre* on the walls of the charnel house in the Holy Innocents cemetery in Paris.

Around 1430 Lydgate’s poem inspired a mural located in London similar to the Paris exemplar. Commissioned by Jankin Carpenter (c. 1372-d.1442), town clerk of the City of London, it was painted on board mounted on the walls of the Pardon Churchyard at Old St Paul’s Cathedral. He may have intended it as a memorial to himself. Although it was destroyed in 1549, the design is known from antiquarian sources, which were drawn upon for *The Survey of London*, published in 1598 by John Stow (c. 1524/25-1605). An English historian and antiquary, Stow was in close contact with many like-minded scholars of his day and built up an extensive library of manuscript and printed historical sources, which became known to contemporaries as his ‘storehouse.’ Stow recorded that “About this Cloyster, was artificially & richly painted, the dance of Machabray, or dance of death, commonly called the dance of Pauls: the like wherof, was painted about S. Innocents cloister, at Paris in France: the metres or poesie of this daunce, were translated out of French into English, by Iohn Lidgate, the Monke of Bery, & with ye picture of Death, leading all estates painted about the Cloyster: at the speciall request and dispence of Iankin Carpenter, in the Raigne of Henry the 6.” Although Lydgate referred to it as “the dance of

Machabray," 'Machabré's dance' was possibly originated as a dramatic performance. The painting and its derivatives became known popularly in England as "The Dance of Paul's." This is exemplified by a testamentary request for a monument to be set up in the chantry established in 1512 at the west end of St Lawrence's church in Ludlow (Shropshire) by Thomas Cooke, esquire, a "servitor to Prince Arthur" and former bailiff of the town. He died in the following year and his will is mentioned, albeit briefly, in the volume under review. Yet it merits more attention. He requested burial "behind the Font near my chantry of St Catherine's and directed that he be memorialised by a brass of unusual design: 'I will that my Executors lay a stone upon me of 2 yards and almost a foot long and one and a half yards broad with 3 images of laten one for me and another for my wife Isabel third after the mortal after the daunce of powles having a scripture in his hand in this manner 'Man behold so as I am now, so shalt thou be Gold and silver shall make no plea This daunce to defende, but follow me' ..." Two key points emerge. First, the term "Danse of Paul's" was common currency. Second, the iconography chosen was an abbreviated variant of the Dance with Thomas and his wife shown holding hands with Death personified 'between them.'

The bulk of Davidson and Oosterwijk's volume is devoted to the texts of the English and French poems, both of which are a dialogue between Death (a personification of death) and his victims. For the literary scholar in particular they form its essential heart. The edited texts include commentaries, technical notes, and a glossary. To readers unfamiliar with the literary genre compiling this might seem a

relatively straightforward task especially as there is an extensive bibliography already in print, but that is far from the case, particularly when dealing with Lydgate's original text. There are multiple manuscript sources, no two of which are identical. They are divided into two assemblies: the so-called A-Group is represented by nine original medieval manuscripts and the B-group by six manuscripts. Those in the latter category show many textual variants and reorderings in contrast to the A-Group which have greater consistence both in the order and wording. Davidson and Oosterwijk argue persuasively that the A-Group manuscripts represent the text as initially prepared by Lydgate from the Paris *Danse* and are thus earlier. The B-Group has its supporters as the preferred text, who propound that they include revised versions authored by Lydgate himself and thus are the superior sources; here they are convincingly dismissed as derivative. That they represent a revision of the A-Group texts for which Lydgate was solely responsible lacks conviction.

The new edition of Lydgate's *Dance* presented here rests on the A-Group sources. The authors adopt a "starting from scratch" approach with no reliance on earlier printed versions. Instead, the authors have studied digital copies of the original manuscripts, which date from between 1430 and 1475. One was unfortunately unavailable: Yale University Library Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library MS. 493 is misplaced or possibly thought lost. In their edited text, Davidson and Oosterwijk adopt a conservative approach to spellings and format to aid readability. Hence, the yogh and thorn and original pointing, including

the virgule, have been preserved. Significant variants between individual sources are listed in the extensive and detailed textual and critical notes, which will be of especial interest to expert literary scholars. The amount of time, focus and attention to detail which must have been required to compile this is staggering. It is illustrated by the fact that, while the new text required 44 pages of the book, the textual and critical notes take up a further 44 pages.

The text and translation of Marchant's *Danse* has been transcribed from the unique 1485 edition now in the Bibliothèque Municipale in Grenoble (complete apart from the missing first leaf). Alongside is an English translation. They are set out with the edited text in one column and the translation opposite for ease of use by readers. This element is followed by reproductions of the seventeen original woodcuts, each with an informative commentary explaining the content. Again, detailed textual notes have been added. Finally, as an appendix there is a transcription of the Chambéry roll, a French dramatised *Danse Macabre* text of the late 14th or early 15th century. This is shown in the original French, with no translation.

The volume is enriched by contextual evidence in the introduction which, as well as setting out the background to the Dance, throws valuable light on its wider influence. It is persuasively suggested that the Dance was also seen as the basis for a performance, with records of such events dating back to the mid-15th century. Related themes addressed include the legend of "The Three Living and the Three Dead" and the personification and visualisation of Death. Familiar are many of the illustrations of woodcuts and manuscripts, including what seems to be an almost

obligatory scene in studies of the *Danse Macabre* and related imagery from the Carthusian Miscellany of c. 1435-40 in British Library MS. Add. 37049 fo. 32v. This shows a sumptuous tomb to a woman above a grave with a decaying verminous corpse. Below is a text which warns the viewer to “Take hede unto my figure here abowne And se how sometime I was fresshe and gay Now turned to wormes mete and corrupcion Bot fowle erth and stynkyng slyme and clay Attend perfore to this disputacion written here And write it wysely in thi herte fre At therat sum wisdom thou may lere To se what thou art and here aftyr sal be When thou leste wenes, venit mors te superare When thi grate grenes bonum est mortis meditari.” It comprised a new rendition of the old warnings against earthly pride and the joys of the flesh.

Also discussed in the introduction is how the message was conveyed via church art, including wall-paintings, painted glass, architectural sculpture, woodwork and tombs. Examples cover many countries in continental Europe, including Belgium, Croatia, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Slovenia, Spain, and Switzerland. The main focus, however, is on British examples, of which the authors display a commendably extensive knowledge, not just of extant specimens but also of lost ones which are recorded in documents, principally antiquarian notes and testamentary evidence. Many are mentioned but this section is inevitably somewhat of a ‘whistle-stop’ tour with little opportunity for extended discussion of especially interesting examples. The notes provide valuable references for the reader to explore in more depth; the merit of giving them close scrutiny cannot be understated. Clearly to extend discussion in the main text would have



Figure 1 Painted 'Death and the Gallant' on the exterior of Robert Markham's chantry chapel at Newark (Nottinghamshire). Photo: © Tim Sutton.

made the introduction overly lengthy but more attention to a few particularly key examples would nonetheless have been welcome.

Often what is left to us is a mere fragment of an original scheme. At Newark (Nottinghamshire) on the exterior of the chantry chapel for Robert Markham (d. 1506) is a scene painted on board, showing what is known as "Death and the Gallant" (**Fig. 1**). It would originally have formed part of a more extensive Dance cycle. The front of the screen has two pairs of six arches either side of the door, which would have provided room for a total of six pairs of figures of Death and his victims and others may have been on the other sides. The sole extant element shows

the female skeleton offering the Gallant a pink gillyflower (clove pink or dianthus, incidentally the favored device of Queen Elizabeth Woodville) while also pointing to a grave beneath. On the right a well-dressed young man with his hand on his purse. Overall, the message is clear: death comes to all, and all your worldly wealth will not put it off.

Glass is another fragile medium with many examples doubtless having been lost. The book showcases the lone panel showing a Dance scene featuring Death and an archbishop in St Andrew's church, Norwich (Norfolk). Although not mentioned in the volume under review, more about this glass is revealed in a digital publication by David King in the *Corpus Vitrearum Medii Aevi of Great Britain* series, available at <https://www.cvma.ac.uk/publications/digital/norfolk/sites/norwichstandrew/history.html> Church notes made about 1712 by the antiquary John Kirkpatrick (1687-1728) show that the surviving panel formed part of an early-sixteenth century scheme originally in the south clerestory. These formed part of a series of some 33 panels across eleven windows, showing Death leading off men of all degrees, from an emperor, pope, cardinal and bishop to a carpenter and other tradesmen. Importantly, in each window was also the merchant's mark of Nicholas Colich, a grocer and mayor of Norwich, who on his death in 1502 was buried in the church, to which he gave 50 marks towards the rebuilding. Perhaps his bequest was spent on the Dance of Death glazing scheme? It must have provided an impressive display and a lasting *memento mori* to the members of the congregation. Yet although rare

Figure 2 Glass roundel showing Henry Williams, Vicar of Stanford, as the target of a figure of Death at Stanford (Northamptonshire). Photo: © Cameron Newham

now the example in glass was not alone. At Stanford (Northamptonshire) is a single roundel from a larger scheme showing Henry Williams, Vicar of Stanford, as the target of a figure of Death (**Fig. 2**). The composition was specified in William's will.



Not all examples are necessarily part of a full Dance scene. At Llancarfan (Wales), wall-paintings uncovered in 2005 include one scene described by Davidson and Oosterwijk as “Death and the Gallant” in which ‘death’ and a richly-dressed man carrying a sword are shown together (**Fig. 3**). What we see now is the complete image, with no possibility that it formed part of a Dance cycle. Yet the authors have not considered the implications of its precise location, which reveal an additional layer to its interpretation. The so-called well-dressed ‘Gallant,’ probably representing a wealthy member of the congregation who funded the scene, is on the

Figure 3 Wall-painting known as 'Death and the Gallant' at Llancarfan (Wales). Photo: © St Cadoc's Church, Llancarfan



main wall while in the adjoining window embrasure is a rotting and verminous shrouded figure who appears to be dragging the living figure towards his destination in the graveyard outside.

Church monuments, especially carved *transi* tombs, are the subject of particular attention. Elaborate examples of double-decker tombs with the effigy *au vif* on top and *au mort* below are discussed, including internationally reputed examples at Canterbury Cathedral (Kent) to archbishop Henry Chichele (d. 1443, but tomb in place by 1426) and to bishop Thomas Becketon of Wells (d. 1465) whose pre-need double-decker monument was made in 1451. Yet, even more crucial to the theme of this volume is the *transi* memorialising John Baret (d. 1467) at Bury St Edmunds (Suffolk), which was in place by the time he made his will in 1463 (**Fig. 4**). As the authors explain, Baret was a wealthy and influential merchant who enjoyed a close and friendly relationship with Lydgate, thus explaining the choice of a *transi* tomb. Yet they make an error in saying that “the effigy of the man as he had been in life is omitted, so only the decaying corpse is displayed.” A close examination of the panelled chest shows that



Figure 4 Carved cadaver tomb of John Baret (d. 1457), church of St Mary, Bury St Edmunds (Suffolk). Photo: © Cameron Newham



Figure 5 Detail of tombchest for John Baret (d. 1457), church of St Mary, Bury St Edmunds (Suffolk). Photo: © Cameron Newham

it has in the central quatrefoil the miniature image of a merchant wearing the Lancastrian collar of eses and holding a scroll inscribed 'me' (Fig. 5). Baret is thus shown *au vif* and *au mort* albeit in a totally original way. Regarding monumental brasses only a mediocre example at Salle (Norfolk) is illustrated. It is not the earliest extant example, that honour belonging to one at Sheldwich (Kent) memorialising Joan Marys (d. 1431) (Fig. 6). Other brasses show inventive ways in which the person

Figure 6 Shrouded cadaver brass to Joan Marys (d. 1431), Sheldwich (Kent). Photo: © Cameron Newham



Figure 7 Brass with figure *au vif* and *au mort* to Bernard Brocas (d. 1488), Sherborne St John (Hampshire). Photo: © Martin Stuchfield



commemorated could be shown both in life and in death. At Sherborne St John (Hampshire), for example, a brass to Bernard Brocas (d. 1488) shows him depicted kneeling in prayer while below him is a shrouded skeleton (Fig. 7).

Overall, the volume thus presents a more authentic and comprehensive approach to the *Danse* and its historical and artistic context than earlier editions. It is mostly well written in an accessible style which generally enables the reader easily to

navigate the complexity of issues discussed. Those less expert on the *Danse Macabre*, however, may at times find themselves struggling in understanding arguments and technical terms. I occasionally found myself reaching for a dictionary, but not frequently. This is a remarkable achievement given the intricacy and technicality of many problems examined. The authors' exemplary knowledge and grasp of the literature is amply demonstrated by the extensive bibliography. They have helpfully added a useful glossary of terms. The index is thoughtfully constructed, extending well beyond names and places as is found in too many publications these days; I always found it easy to locate whatever subjects I needed. The volume includes many illustrations. Most, including the woodcuts and manuscripts, are of good quality but the matt paper does not do some of the photographs of large scenes justice. Those that do not allow for adequate study of the detail include Fig. 2 Wickhampton (England), Fig. 10 Koper (Slovenia) and Fig. 16 Kermaria (France). Moreover, Fig. 30 Kernascléden (France) lacks crispness and Fig. 17 Rosslyn chapel (Scotland) appears partly out of focus. Given the high cover price one might have hoped for better here. In contrast, however, the cover design, of Death and the Archbishop, the sole remaining panel of the glazing scheme at St Andrew's church, Norwich (Norfolk), is stunning. Yet such criticisms as have been identified are minor in the general scheme of things. Overall, this volume is a tour-de-force and there can be little doubt that it will stand the test of time and be widely accepted as a standard work. 🐼