THE PERSONIFICATION OF DEATH IN
MIDDLE ENGLISH LITERATURE

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THE PERSONIFICATION OF DEATH IN MIDDLE ENGLISH LITERATURE

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Fig. 1--Dancing Death
CHAPTER I

DEATH IN THE MIDDLE AGES

Middle English literature is no exception to the rule that a study of any literature depends a great deal on the historical backgrounds of its period. This study, which concentrates specifically on the personification of death in Middle English literature, requires a knowledge of the extent to which the people in all of Western Europe were concerned with death during every day, every moment, of their lives.

For this study, the commonly accepted dates for the later Middle Ages will be used, 1150 to 1500. These are the dates of a period in which religion was the most notable feature. In all the Christian world of the Middle Ages, the church held unchallenged dominion over all aspects of life,¹ and the powers of the next world were held supreme over the real world.² More certain than anything in the visible world were the conflicts between God and the Devil, angels and demons, and between the saved and the damned.³ The church kept constantly before every man, woman, and child the idea that the world-to-come was of chief importance, that the world in which they lived was useless and barren and only a means to achieve a better

²Ibid., p. 39.
³Ibid.
world after death. They were not allowed for one moment to forget the joys of Heaven or the tortures of Hell, the only alternatives. They were taught that their earthly existence was mere "trial and preparation for the future, which might descend upon mankind at any moment in the fury of the Judgment Day." A glance at almost any medieval sculpture or mural will reveal the attitude of the age, a period when art served as a reminder of man's vulnerability. All sermons were designed for one purpose: to remind mankind of his inevitable end. As a result of this constant teaching, a man's chief task in life became the preparation for eternity.

The characteristic lack of scientific experiment and exploration in medieval England can be traced to this preoccupation with the other-worldly. Scientific theory, based on tradition, depended upon the classical authors, especially Aristotle, for most of its source material. The church was often the enemy of originality in research and learning, persecuting those who dared to experiment. One example of this is Roger Bacon of Oxford, who is considered to have been the one original student of science during the Middle Ages. He lived during the reign of Henry III, and spent the last part of

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5 Ibid.
7 Ibid., p. 15.
his life in prison for his experiments, which had offended the church.\(^8\)

These general tendencies of society to concentrate on death and minimize the importance of living can be seen in the development of medieval English society. Anglo-Saxon civilization before the Norman Conquest had been that of warrior and priest. After the Normans conquered England, this society was replaced by the feudal system, a system under which every acre of land and every person in the kingdom belonged to the king.\(^9\) Under the Normans the Anglo-Saxon "earl" became the knightly "baron," and a "churl" became a "serf," or "villein," both subordinate to the king. This system made the king the owner and ruler of all England.\(^10\) He distributed his kingdom among his most deserving nobles and expected them to repay his favor in the forms of money and other tangible recompense, such as military service, whether for defense or aggression.\(^11\) Those nobles thus honored, in turn sub-distributed their assigned lands among lesser noblemen, requiring of these the same services for which they were obligated to the king. In a feudal society, then, everyone except the king owed tangible recompense as well as obedience to an earthly overlord. The king himself


\(^9\)Woods, p. 74.

\(^10\)Ibid.

\(^11\)Ibid., p. 75.
was obligated for spiritual homage to the worldly sovereign of Christendom, the Pope. In effect, then, the Pope was the overlord of all during the Middle Ages.\footnote{12}{\textit{Ibid.}}

In medieval England the class structure was simple enough, nobleman and serf. However, one further distinction was made between clergy and laity, though the dividing lines were not always clearly drawn. In these two divisions there were corresponding levels: the Pope and king were in similar positions; the prelates, that is bishops, abbots, and priors, had corresponding rank with the noblemen; the regular clergy, that is monks and friars, were in similar positions with the very small, but emerging, class of traders; and the parish priests and chaplains were similar in position to the laboring serfs.\footnote{13}{Salzman, p. 33.} So, when one speaks of a simple class structure of noblemen and serfs, he is including the clergy in their various classifications. This structure was existent for a long time after the Norman Conquest. Then, about the middle of the thirteenth century, as industry and commerce gradually became more important, changing the prevailing agricultural scheme, commoners, or serfs, occasionally were able to rise above the masses, either by accumulation of wealth or by becoming freemen as recompense for some special service to a feudal lord.\footnote{14}{Woods, p. 76.} This slow process gradually began to change English society.
As England became more industrial, the importance of cities grew, and tradesmen became more powerful and more numerous. An increase in industry and commerce created a middle class, which before the end of the thirteenth century had not existed. The gradual development of the middle class culminated in its being represented in the Great Council of Parliament of 1295, in a separate house from the House of Lords, the House of Commons.15

As the class of tradesmen developed, so did their organization. They learned that they were more effective socially and in their trades if they were banded together according to trade; thus were formed guilds, organizations which, as we shall see later, came to play a significant role in the development of medieval drama.16

The feudal system was based on the issuance of land in exchange for pledges of military and monetary returns, a necessity for one major reason, to protect the king and his noblemen in time of war. Fighting was the profession of the upper classes, so there was always a war.17 It was part of the normal condition of life in the Middle Ages, not unusual or alarming, though always brutal and costly in terms of human life. Medieval warfare, with its seemingly romantic array of swords, shields, and arrows, was devastating to that majority of soldiers who could not afford heavy armour.

15Ibid.
16Ibid.
17Salzman, p. 86.
Even for the wealthier soldiers who had armour, war was incredibly cruel because weapons more often maimed and crippled rather than killed. Often, when more soldiers were needed than the nobles could accumulate from their lands, the prisons were emptied of the healthier, sturdier inmates. It is recorded that in a single year Edward I pardoned 450 murderers for military service, along with countless lesser offenders. Then, as well as now, organized and casual forms of cruelty were very much a part of war, and war was very much a part of life. The nearness of war with its death tolls and cruelties is one factor contributing to the preoccupation of the people of the Middle Ages with death and the afterlife.

Another factor contributing to this preoccupation was the religious teaching of the time. People of the Middle Ages relied, for social stability, on the authority of the church as the basis for all thoughts and action. The medieval church constantly impressed upon Christians the belief that the only reason for living was that it offered time to search for salvation and to prepare for death, which, if one were saved, would transfer him to a better world. The fact that a man might at any moment be smitten with unbearable pain or even snatched from life could not be ignored. This was perhaps one of the reasons for such a strong belief in the

19Salzman, p. 198.
20Woods, p. 75.
21Evans, p. 208.
physical reality of a Hell-fire which the lurid eschatology of the medieval church proclaimed. So far as Heaven and Hell were concerned, the Bible was accepted in its strictest literal sense.\textsuperscript{22} The medieval Christian believed that his destiny for all eternity was determined by his spiritual state at the moment of death.\textsuperscript{23} He might either be marked for an eternity of unspeakable bliss or of torment beyond mortal conception, depending on his religious or theological belief at his last moment. Consequently, every person hoped that when he died it would be with Christ's name on his lips. To the medieval Christian, then, the whole earth was Death's kingdom "... and human life, with its ambitions and struggles was only a macabre dance that led to the grave."\textsuperscript{24}

Part of the reason for the belief in the imminent approach of death can be found in the conditions of society. As a result of their worldly ways, people of the Middle Ages seemed always tormented by God with one punishment or another. Epidemic sickness was well known in England in the Middle Ages. The great famine of 1315 and 1316 was followed by one pestilence after another, so that the Black Death of 1348 and 1349, in which two-fifths of the population are said to have perished,\textsuperscript{25} seemed just another, if more deadly plague, in a long chain of epidemics.\textsuperscript{26}

\footnotesize
\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{22}Coulton, p. 18.
  \item \textsuperscript{23}Ibid., p. 20.
  \item \textsuperscript{24}Evans, p. 206.
  \item \textsuperscript{25}Woods, p. 76.
  \item \textsuperscript{26}Kenneth H. Vickers, \textit{England in the Later Middle Ages} (London, 1921), p. 183.
\end{itemize}
Cities and towns had no systems of sanitation; consequently, when an isolated case of a contagious disease occurred, it quickly spread to all parts of the town. When the plague was brought to England in 1348, the dead were at first buried as usual, but as the number of deaths increased so rapidly, the bodies were carried in carts and buried in mass graves or merely abandoned by those fearing contamination. Mortality was highest among the poor and among the clergy, who were probably infected while tending the dying or dead. The old and infirm were seemingly immune, while the young and strong were among the hardest hit. During the plague years, when death was so constant and real, fantasies concerning death multiplied, the products of strained imaginations. These fantasies showed up most in the art works in which individuals were depicted in various stages of decomposition, a reminder of what death held in store for all. Perhaps visual representation made the dreadful nightmare easier to face.

There were other cruelties besides disease. Children often died very young as a result of exposure or undernourishment. Many who survived childhood were deformed because of the poor conditions they had endured. Another threat to life was the medical practice of the time. If one were fortunate enough to be wealthy, but unfortunate enough to contact some disease, his chance for survival was slim.

27 Evans, p. 209.  
29 Ibid.  
30 Evans, p. 230.
if doctors were called in and paid to cure him. A poor man with a mild disease who could not afford professional medical treatment was probably more likely to recover. In addition to less harmful preliminary remedies, doctors frequently performed surgery, which was certain to involve intolerable pain and was unlikely to be successful. During these times pain, peril, and death were ever-present companions of all levels of society; life was hard and short.

The Black Death of 1348 and 1349 had two opposite effects on the minds of men: in hopeless abandon, some turned to worldly wickedness; others turned in desperation and fear to a more serious concern with religion. After the universal terror of the plague, one of many religious movements began in Flanders, and later was brought to England. This was the movement of the Flagellants, who believed that God had sent his judgment and punishment upon man in the form of the plague and that only desperate measures, in this case self-torture, could save men from the ravages of the judgment.

The constant presence and threat of death caused a turning to the church for explanation and rationalization. Clergymen met this challenge with vivid biblical descriptions.

31Ibid., p. 209.  
32Hearnshaw, p. 39.  
33Salzman, p. 110.  
34Sidney Painter, A History of the Middle Ages: 284-1500 (New York, 1953), p. 419. (Since most Englishmen considered them religious madmen, the Flagellants' numbers never grew very large in England, according to Vickers, p. 186.)
of the next world, both Paradise and Hell. From Dan Michel's
_Agenbite of Inwyt_, a homily of about 1340, we read this
description of Paradise:

Todel pine gost urain pine bodye / be posite / and be
wylninge. guo out of wise worlde steruinde. guo in-to
pe londe of pe libbynde / per non ne sterfe / ne
yealde. pet is ine paradys. per me lyerne wel to
libbe / and wyt / an corteysye. uor per ne may guo in:
no uyleynye. per is blisfolle uelagrede of god. and
of angles. and of halzen. per opwexep alle guodes.
wayrhele. richesse. worpsippe. blisse. uirtue. loave.
wyt. ioye wypropote ende. per ne is non ypocrisle. ne
barat. ne blondinge. ne discord. ne enuye. ne honger.
ne porst. ne hete. ne chele. ne kuead. ne zorge. ne
drede of vyendes. ac alneway festes and kinges bredales.
zonges. and blisse wypoute ende. [Separate thy soul
from thy body by thought and by desire. Go out of this
world dying; go into the land of the living where none
die or grow old. That is in paradise; where one learns
to live well in wisdom and courtesy. For there no
villainy may enter; there is blissful fellowship of God
and angels and saints. There springs up all goodness,
beauty, riches, worship, bliss, virtue, love, wisdom,
and joy without end. There is neither hypocrisy, fraud,
flattery, discord, envy, hunger, thirst, heat, chill,
evil, sorrow, or dread of enemies; but always feasts
and the bridals of kings, songs and bliss without end.]

The inducements used were not always of such a positive
nature as this, however. Men were also warned against what
they would find if their lives had not been good enough to
merit an eternity of paradise. In an early homily entitled
_Sawles Warde_, the following description of Hell appears. The
speaker is Fear, the Reminder of Death:

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35Dan Michel, _Agenbite of Inwyt_, or Remorse of Conscience
(London, 1895), pp. 74-75. This and following translations
into modern English are my own.
Hell is wide without measure, deep without bottom, full of intolerable fire, full of stench without comparison. There is no order, and there is groaning without end. There is no hope of good and no lack of evil. Each one therein hates himself and all others. I saw all manner of torments. The least of them all is more than all the torments that may be done in this world. There is weeping and gnashing of teeth. There I went from chill into great heat of fire and both intolerable. There all shall be consumed by fire.

Belief in a physical paradise in the next world or in the physical tortures of Hell-fire provided the subject for a vast number of literary works. This was not the only theme, however; the literature of the later Middle Ages was varied in nature, with various subjects and forms belonging exclusively to particular levels of society.

The knights and their ladies had their forms of literature, the courtly lyric and the metrical romance, such as the Arthurian legends. The clergy used exempla or stories to enliven almost all of their sermons, and they eventually developed a kind of moral romance or anti-romance, such as tales of the quest for the Holy Grail from which the saintly Sir Galahad emerged as the personification of a spiritual idea. They also had drama, saints' lives, hymns, and debates.

36 Ibid., pp. 264-265.
as well as prose homilies. The common folk had their popular ballads and lais, their narrative folk songs, and the fabliau. Another important part of the literature of the common people was medieval drama, which had emerged from its beginnings in the church.

At its beginning, English medieval drama was entirely sacred and didactic. There was no dramatic structure or plot, only the enactment of some familiar episodes of biblical lore. These brief enactments were used as a part of the sermon on certain special occasions, such as Corpus Christi Day, Christmas, and Easter. These first dramas were enacted by priests who chanted in Latin at the base of the chancel in the church. The audience consisted mainly of commoners who did not understand Latin, but who were to receive some spiritual up-lifting as a result of the dramatic action which accompanied the Latin chants.

Medieval drama evolved slowly into what have been later called miracle and mystery plays. Miracle plays, dealing with the lives of saints, naturally retained their religious nature; however, the mystery plays underwent great changes. As the enactments by the priests of the mystery plays changed from a dignified and sacred mood to one of more

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37Woods, pp. 89 and 94.
38Ibid., p. 89. 39Ibid., p. 90.
contemporary spirit, the laity slowly began to take the place of the clergymen, and the Latin chants were changed to the vernacular. Gradually the plays became more comic and satirical. The stage was moved from inside the church to the market place or a public square. The trades guilds, which have already been mentioned, gradually began to take over enactment of the mystery plays. In fact, the two main factors contributing to the development of English drama during the thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth centuries were the increasing importance of guilds as the towns grew larger and the establishment by the Church of certain festival days such as that of Corpus Christi, which was established in 1264. Since Corpus Christi day fell in late spring when outdoor celebrations were most suitable, drama soon became a part of the festival.

By the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries the mystery plays had developed into series, or cycles, performed by the guilds of a given town. At this time in England there were at least three major cycles: the York, with forty-eight plays; the Wakefield, or Towneley, with thirty-two plays; and the Chester, with twenty-five plays. The plays were based on biblical stories from the Old and New Testaments. They were enacted on flat wagons called pageants, from which is

41 Woods, p. 90.  
42 Ibid., p. 91.  
43 Ibid.
taken the modern name for the enactment of certain biblical scenes. 44

Mystery plays from Bible stories and miracle plays from saints' legends became the two most widespread and popular forms of medieval entertainment, 45 but there was another kind of medieval drama which was allegorical in nature and was based on the teachings of the clergy, possibly growing out of the homilies. 46 This was the morality play, which has been defined as "... the dramatic phase of medieval preaching and teaching, for it presents the struggle between the forces of good and evil for the precious guerdon of man's immortal soul, and it is designed to assist the wavering to keep their feet in the straight and narrow way. . . ." 47

Morality plays date only from the last of the fourteenth century and did not thrive long beyond the fifteenth century. The formula for these allegories was fairly constant, with only a few variations in their later years. They dramatized man's progress from the cradle to the grave and beyond. The basic formula shows how man is born graceless and in sin; how his mortal career is a constant struggle against his human failings. The characters are personifications of such abstract qualities as virtues and vices, and the hero always progresses through a succession of advances and repulses. Death always

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44 Ibid., p. 92.
46 Craig, p. 345.
47 Woods, p. 93.
overtakes him, but in the end his soul is judged and saved from eternal Hell-fire.⁴⁸

Unlike the miracle plays, the morality plays have a strong dramatic conflict, the struggle between good and evil for the possession of man's soul. A direct relationship can be seen between the morality plays and the drama of Sophocles or later English drama of the Elizabethan stage.⁴⁹ They all deal with the same universal moral conflicts.

One of the most constant themes running through the literature of the later Middle Ages is that of death. It can be found in didactic tales written by the clergy, in Chaucer's work, in medieval drama, and even in the lyrics. Perhaps the knowledge of the nearness of death to the lives of medieval people can help to explain the death theme in their literature. Harder to explain is a recurrence of the more specific personification of death which appears in all forms of medieval literature. One might expect to find death personified in the moral plays, which are allegorical by nature and by definition, but its appearance in poetry needs further examination.

There was perhaps a tendency during the Middle Ages for men to think in allegorical terms in all aspects of life. There are, in fact, some who would say that medieval poetry is by nature allegorical because of this tendency.⁵⁰ This is

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⁴⁸Ibid.


indeed evident in most medieval poetry, from the earliest lyrics to Chaucer's work. The most widely used form of death's personification in medieval literature and the fine arts is the Summons of Death theme, a motif based on the older French and German versions of the Dance of Death, which was itself originally in Latin. The popular portrayal of the Dance of Death was that of a skeleton, representing Death, playing a fiddle, as emperor and commoner alike move uncontrollably to his tune. This Dance of Death was to remind all that there was no other tune to which one could ultimately dance; Death had the only melody. This idea that Death minglees with all sorts, from pope to commoner, had an irony about it which appealed to fifteenth-century artists. 51

Two of the medieval English lyrics in which the Dance of Death theme is developed are "Death's Wither-Clinch" and "The Ten Stages of Man's Life." These two early poems are good illustrations of this motif and have, in addition, some other characteristic medieval themes.

In "Death's Wither-Clinch," the Dance of Death motif is used to illustrate that Death summons everyone, of all classes. This can be seen in the first two stanzas of the poem:

51 Chambers, p. 153.
Man mei longe him lives wene,
ac ofte him liyet pe wreinch;
fair weder ofte him went to rene,
an ferliche maket is blench.
par-vore, man puce biczenth,
al sel valui pe grene.
wela-wey! nis Kine ne Quene
pate sel drinke of deth-is drench.
Man, er pu falle of pi bench,
pu sinne aquech.

Ne mai strong ne starch ne kene
a-slye deth-is wiper-clench;
ysung and old and brith an-siene,
al he riueth an his stren.
vox and ferlich is pe wreinch,
ne mai no man par to-genes,
wei-la-weil ne iweeping ne bene,
mede, liste, ne leches dreinch.
man, let sinne and lustes stench,
wel do, wel gench!

[Man may expect a long life,
But often in it there lies a trick;
Fair weather often changes to rain,
Or suddenly makes it sunshine.
Therefore, man, think on yourself,
Everything shall fade your youth.
Wellaway! There is no King nor Queen
That shall not drink of death's draught.
Man, before you fall from your bench
Quench your sin.

Neither powerful nor strong nor keen
Escapes death's hostile grasp;
Young and old and bright together,
He breaks everyone and his strength.
Ready and sudden is the trick,
No man may go against it,
Wellaway! No weeping, nor prayer,
Reward, skill, or doctor's potion.
Man, leave the stench of lust and sin,
Do well, think well.]52

52 Carleton Brown, editor, English Lyrics of the Thirteenth Century (Oxford, 1932), pp. 15-16. Further reference to this poem will be from this volume. The line numbers will appear in parentheses at the end of the quotation.
The idea of Death's imminence is seen in the third stanza, as it says: "par deth luteth in his swo / to him for-do" (lines 28 and 29). The third characteristic medieval theme which appears in this poem is the fascination with the putrefaction of the body after death: "of felthe pu ert isowe, / weirmes mete pu selt ben" (lines 33 and 34).

The second poem, "The Ten stages of Man's Life," contains the Dance of Death theme and two other characteristic motifs. The Dance of Death is seen in stanzas six through nine. As in the other poem, the central idea is that Death takes everyone, whatever his worldly goods or degree may be:

\[
\text{Al mi lif ic sorwe & care,} \\
\text{for det comit sone, pat noman wil spare.} \\
\text{Lore you hast, bope tonge & minde:} \\
\text{as tou hast liuid, you ssalt sone finde.} \\
\text{Al pis wor[\ld you ssal forsake,} \\
\text{for det is comun, pat wil pe take.} \\
\text{[All my life I grieve and care,} \\
\text{For death comes soon, that no man will spare.} \\
\text{Counsel you have, both of tongue and mind:} \\
\text{As you have liyed, you shall soon find.} \\
\text{All this world shall forsake you,} \\
\text{For death is coming that will take you.}\]
\]

In speaking of the temporary comfort afforded by riches, this poem says in stanza four, "Nou hastou fondin pat tou hast sout: / be wel war; it lastit nout" (lines 7 and 8).

\[\text{53 Frederick Furnival, editor, Political, Religious, and Love Poems (London, 1903), p. 267. Further reference to this poem will be from this volume. The line numbers will appear in parentheses at the end of the quotation.}\]
Finally, this poem also uses the idea of the decaying body's wormy fate. In stanza ten this is seen: "Of lif nou litel lete, / for pou art tornid to wormis mete" (lines 19 and 20). These poems are examples of the characteristic medieval preoccupation with death. In each one Death is considered, in personification, as a force in itself, rather than an abstraction.

The Dance of Death motif illustrates the personification of Death during a time in England when death was everywhere. The frequency of the death motif has been noted in the fine arts and in poetry. The personification of death in other medieval literary works will be studied in later chapters.
CHAPTER II

DANCE OF DEATH

Death has always been a prominent theme in literature, and the reason is obvious: it is the one thing which happens to all men. Because of the universality of dying, there developed during the Middle Ages a literary and artistic motif based on the idea that death respects no man. This motif is the Dance of Death, or danse macabre. The expression is the same as the French Danse des Morts and the German Totentanz.\(^1\) The same term, Dance of Death, is used to describe certain mural paintings, moral verses of the same theme, and later, series of woodcuts and engravings depicting the theme.

This chapter will study the personification of Death in the Ellesmere manuscript of the Middle English poem bearing the title, "The Dance of Death," written about 1430. To understand fully the poetic development of the motif, which was apparently the last stage of the evolutionary process of the Dance of Death, one must first briefly study the first stages. During the Middle Ages, especially after the Black Death of the fourteenth century, there was a craze for dancing, much greater than in former times.\(^2\) The dances, of various lewd natures, were practiced in the streets and in

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\(^2\) Ibid., p. xv.
the churchyards. The origin of the Dance of Death motif is a matter of speculation, but one theory is that it grew out of directions by the clergy to the people to replace their obscene dancing with more decorous forms, of a more moral nature.³

The Dance of Death was sometimes performed as a masque, with men dressed as skeletons dancing with figures, both men and women, who represented various levels of society.⁴ Even before these masques became popular, there is evidence that a Dance of Death was performed in which only men appeared. In this early form the grotesque figure representing Death was intended not as a representation of Death in the abstract, but of the dying man himself in a future state, usually that of a decomposing corpse rather than a skeleton.⁵ The use of the skeleton was probably derived from the widespread use of sanctified human relics by the early Christians in their religious rites.⁶ When the skeleton replaced the decaying corpse, the concept changed from the individual man to Death personified.

During the plague years on the Continent, it is known that social forms of dancing were encouraged to dispel pervading

³Ibid., p. xiii.
⁵Warren, p. x.
gloom. There is specific evidence of this in Flanders, Germany, Hungary, and the Slavic countries.\textsuperscript{7} In Germany, out of this developed a sect who wandered about dancing half nude in groups of three, falling down at the end of the dance to be trampled by the others. Their belief was that by this means they would be cleansed of disease. In Hungary there existed a dance wherein a man pretended to be dead while others danced around him mourning in a jesting way, picking him up and dancing him about. The fellow playing dead remained rigid in whatever position the dancers arranged him. A greatly similar dance is known to have existed in the Slavic countries.\textsuperscript{8}

From these actual dances evolved the art works depicting them and the poetry describing or dramatizing them. It is difficult to know which came first, the art works or the poetry. Perhaps the first manuscript was illustrated with drawings, making their origin coincidental. Perhaps the poetry was inspired by a mural depicting the dance. One cannot know for certain. The word \textit{macabre} itself gives some clues as to the date of origin and perhaps the order of development as well. It first appeared with its present connotation in France about 1376,\textsuperscript{9} in connection with a mural at the cloisters of the Holy Innocents at Paris.\textsuperscript{10}

The most widely accepted theory of the origin of the word

\textsuperscript{7}Warren, p. x. \hfill \textsuperscript{8}Ibid., p. xiv.
\textsuperscript{9}Evans, p. 241. \hfill \textsuperscript{10}Warren, p. xvi.
is that it was the surname of the author of the original text which the mural illustrated.\textsuperscript{11}

Also at the church of the Innocents in Paris are some carvings depicting the theme. These were ordered by Jean de Berry, a French nobleman, whose great concern with death can be seen in the elaborate arrangements he made for his own burial chapel.\textsuperscript{12}

In France, however, the best surviving representations of the Dance of Death are the wall paintings at La Chaise-Dieu and at Kermaria Nesquit in Brittany.\textsuperscript{13} In England, depictions of the Dance can still be seen on the walls of village churches, such as the one at Widford in Oxfordshire, and in manuscripts, such as the Lisle Psalter.\textsuperscript{14}

There are two well-known series of woodcuts which helped to popularize the term Dance of Death; they are by Guyot Marchand and Hans Holbein.\textsuperscript{15} The earliest, by Marchand, was published in 1485. The more widely known series, that by Hans Holbein, first appeared in 1538, in a book called \textit{Les Simulachres et Historiees faus de la Mort}.\textsuperscript{16} In the woodcuts of both Holbein and Marchand the only dancing figure is Death himself, giving the series the characteristics of a procession rather than a dance.

In the manuscripts, as in the visual depictions and the early dances, all levels of medieval society are represented,\textsuperscript{17}\textsuperscript{18}\textsuperscript{19}\textsuperscript{20}\textsuperscript{21}

\textsuperscript{11}Ibid.\textsuperscript{22}
\textsuperscript{12}Evans, p. 241.
\textsuperscript{13}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{14}Ibid., p. 242.
\textsuperscript{15}Warren, p. xvii.
\textsuperscript{16}Ibid.
each character being lead unwillingly by Death. The first written Dance of Death was probably composed in Latin by an ecclesiastic; and the earliest printed versions are in German. There are three distinct ideas presented in the literary Dance of Death of the fifteenth century: first, the equality of all men in the presence of death; second, the confrontation of the living with the dead; and third, the actual dance.

The second idea, the living being confronted with the dead, is probably the basis for the theory that the Dance of Death, as it appears in medieval literature, is derived from a late thirteenth-century poem in French, Le Dit des Trois Morts et des Trois Vifs. It is this subject which appears in the fresco at La Chaise-Dieu in France and in the carvings at the church of the Innocents. Thus, there are actually two depictions of the motif, both based on the same literary theme, but on different aspects of it.

One translation of the Dance of Death from French into English was made by Lydgate in 1426. He was apparently employed to write the verses for a mural on this theme which is at St. Paul's in France. There are twelve manuscripts of the English version of the Dance of Death, and one early printed version from Tottel's press, dated 1554.

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17 Ibid., p. x.
18 Ibid., p. xii.
19 Evans, p. 241.
20 Warren, p. xxii.
21 Ibid., p. xxiv.
manuscripts date from the middle to the end of the fifteenth century, with one exception, the Vespasian manuscript, which is dated later than the fifteenth century.

The twelve manuscripts are arranged in two groups, divided according to the general arrangements of the characters. They are labeled Group A and Group B, each group including six manuscripts. Group A contains the Selden Supra MS, the Ellesmere MS, the Harleian 116 MS, the Trinity College MS, the Laud 735 MS, and the Bodley 221 MS. Group B contains the Corpus Christi 237 MS; the Bodley 686; the Lansdowne 699; the MS Leyden, Codicem 9, catalogi Voss. g g 4; the Lincoln Cathedral C.5.4; and the Vespasian A 25.

The Ellesmere manuscript from Group A, John Lydgate's translation from the French, will be used for this study. The manuscripts in Group A follow the French versions; those in Group B change the order of characters and add six. The characters of the Ellesmere manuscript appear in this order: Death, Pope, Emperor, Cardinal, King, Patriarch, Constable, Archbishop, Baron, Lady of Great Estate, Bishop, Squire, Abbot, Abbess, Bailiff, Astronomer, Burgess, Canon, Merchant, Chartereaux, Sergeant, Monk, Usurer, Poor Man, Physician, Amorous Squire, Gentlewoman Amorous, Man of Law, Juror,

\[^{22}\text{Ibid.}\]

\[^{23}\text{Ibid., pp. 2-76. Further reference to this work will be taken from this volume. The line and stanza, or merely the stanza when applicable, will appear in parentheses at the end of the reference.}\]
Minstrel, Tregetour, Parson, Laborer, Friar Minor, Child, Clerk, Hermit, dead King, and Machabre the Doctor. These thirty-six individuals from all classes of society are summoned by Death. Death uses four distinct approaches: he is courteous to a few; he is sarcastic and mocking to others; he is vengeful toward some of the characters; and with some he defiantly states facts which speak for themselves.

There are also four distinct ways in which Death is received by the thirty-six characters. Some are ready for him; others regret bitterly that they must leave behind their worldly lives, lamenting that nothing can gain them a reprieve; some lament that their various professional skills can do them no good when Death comes and despise being powerless; and there are a few who show great fright or dismay. Two individuals defy classification in their unique replies to Death. They are the Sergeant and the Minstrel, who will be studied along with the others later in the chapter.

The first group is made up of nine characters whom Death approaches with more courtesy than the others. This group can be divided further into three parts: those whose station and character Death respects; those for whom he shows pity; and those to whom he extends an invitation rather than the expected summons. The characters who are arranged in this group are, in the order they appear in the poem, the Pope, the Emperor, the King, the Chartereaux, the Monk, the Minstrel, the Labourer, the Friar Minor, and the Child.
The Pope is the first person whom Death approaches in the poem. Death's words show his respectful attitude, a result of the Pope's high earthly office and his manner of carrying it out:

Vp-on thi s daunce/ [3e] firste beyun shal
As moste worthi lorde/ and gouernowre
For al the worship/ of owre astate papal
And of lordschip/ to god is the honoure (VIII, 61-64).

A similar form of respect is shown to the Emperor whom he addresses as "Sir Emperowre/ lorde of all the grounde /
Souveren Prince/ and hyest of noblesse. . ." (X, 73-74). Death uses titles ironically to some of the other individuals, but here he seems to be sincere in his respect.

Death is respectful to the character called Chartereaux, who is a monk. In this case, Death tells the man to give him his hand and to avail himself unto the dance. Death seems to want to comfort the man when he says: "Lenger to lyve/ sette not owre memorie / Thowg I be lothsome/ as yn apparence /
Above al men/ deth hath the victorie" (XLIV, 350-352). Then, to the character identified as the Monk, Death shows a similar form of respect, as he seems to feel compelled to point out the worthlessness of life and its inevitable end: "To erthe and asshes/ turneth everi floure / The life of man/ is but a thynge of nowght" (XLVIII, 383-384).

The Friar Minor is approached courteously, as Death extends his own hand to him: "Sire Cordelere/ to ow my hande is rawght / To this daunce/ ow to conveie ande lede. . ." (LXXI, 561-562).
In a different tone, but still with great consideration, Death approaches the Child. He offers a comforting thought to the Child: "Who lengest leueth/moste shal suffre wo" (LXXIII, 584).

To the Minstrel and to the Labourer Death appears sympathetic and even apologetic. He says to the Minstrel, "By the right honde/anoone I] shal the gripe/With these other/to go vp-on my daunce/Ther is no scape/nowther a-woydaunc" (LXIII, 499-501). Death seems not only sympathetic to the labourer, but indeed explains why he has come for him. This explanation is the only one Death gives to any of the characters.

And cause whi/that I the assaile
Is wonli this/from the to disseuere
The fals worlde/that can so folke faile
He is a fole/that weneth to lyve euere (LXIX, 549-552).

There are several characters to whom Death mentions a change of dress for the dance; they are the Cardinal, the King, the Abbess, the Burgess, and the Hermite. In most cases, the suggestion is a mocking request. The only one to whom a change of dress is suggested in a respectful manner is the King. Death tells him he must give up his rich clothes and wear only a single sheet, i.e. a shroud: "Who most haboundeth/herenyn grete richesse/Shal bere with him/but a sengle shete" (XIV, 111-112).

The second group is the largest, being made up of those individuals toward whom Death is sarcastic and mocking. In this group are, in the order of their appearance in the poem,
the Cardinal, the Patriarch, the Baron, the Lady of Great Estate, the Squire, the Abbot, the Abbess, the Bailiff, the Astronomer, the Burgess, the Physician, the Amorous Squire, and the Gentlewoman.

Death mocks the Cardinal's vanity in his dress: "Sowre grete a-rai/ al shal be-leue here / Sowre hatte of rede/ Sowre vesture of grete coste..." (XII, 93-94). Sarcastically, Death approaches the Patriarch with a list of the virtues which will not help him escape death (stanza XVI). He addresses the Baron with a mocking tone, telling him to forget trumpets and clarions and dancing with ladies in the shade (stanza XXII). Similarly mocking the Lady of Great Estate, he calls her to join the dance since none of her lover's tricks will help her now (stanza XXIV). Death not only mocks the squire's being freshly horsed, but he is sarcastic about the young man's knowing all the new earthly dances:

Come forthe Sire Squyer/ right fressh of Sowre arai
That can of daunces/ al the newe gyse.
Thow\q\se bare armes/ fressh horsed Sisterdai..." (XXVIII, 217-219).

The rotund Abbot is approached in almost a jesting manner as Death says: "Grete is Sowre hede/ Sowr beli large & fatte /
se mote come daunce/ tohw\q\se be nothing light..." (XXX, 235-236).

Exhibiting the strange fascination with putrefaction which medieval people seem to have had, Death points out, "Who that is fattest/ I have hym be-hight / In his grave/ shal sonnest putrefie" (XXX, 239-240).
Speaking more sarcastically about the Abbess' luxurious life, Death says she must leave behind her furred mantels, her veil and wimple, her great riches, and soft beds (stanza XXXII).

The next four individuals are taunted for having had power in life, but no defense against Death. They are the Bailiff, the Astronomer, the Burgess, and the Physician. To the Bailiff, Death points out the irony of their change of positions (stanza XXXIV). He mocks the Astronomer's knowledge of the stars and all his instruments, none of which is of any further use to him (stanza XXXVI), and scolds the Burgess for trying to tarry (stanza XXXVIII). The recurring theme of the lost fortune is used here when Death tells the latter that his huge treasure will now go to strangers. He calls him a fool who does not know for whom he is stuffing his garners. The same theme appears again in The Castle of Perseverance, to be studied in a later chapter. Death approaches the Physician in much the same manner as the Astronomer, pointing out that none of the physician's knowledge or skill will help him now (stanza LIII).

Similar approaches are used for the Amorous Squire (stanza LV), and the Gentlewoman (stanza LVII). He mocks their youth and points out that their beauty has been arrested.

The third group, of seven individuals, is made up of those toward whom Death is vengeful: the Bishop, the Canon, the Usurer, the Man of Law, the Juror, the Parson, and the Clerk.
Death's vengeance toward the Bishop is seen here: "For to accounte/ He shul be browst to lure / No wight is sure/ that clymbeth ouer hye" (XXVI, 207-208). The theme which appears in Everyman, studied in Chapter III, of Death's coming when he is least expected, is seen when Death approaches the Canon (stanza XL). Death's vengeful attitude toward the Canon appears in the same stanza: "And Se Sire Chanoun/ with many grete prebende / Se mai no lenger/ haue distribucioun/ Of golde & silver largeli to dispende. . ." (XL, 313-315).

Death tells the Usurer that none of his greed or covetousness will help him at death (stanza L). As with the Bailiff, Death points out to the Man of Law how the tables have been turned against him. He tells him that the only council now is truth: "But my fraunchise/ is so large & huge / That councieli noon/ a-vail mai but trouth. . ." (LIX, 469-470).

Death accuses the Juror of basing decisions on bribery and vindictively says: "But now lete see/ with thi teynte face / To-fore the Juge howe thow cannest the quyte" (LXI, 487-488). The Parson is accused of thinking only of tithes and offerings, forgetting his major concerns. Death tells the Parson, vengefully, that his reward will match his desert (stanza LXVII). Death is also vengeful when he approaches the Clerk, who, he says, thought himself out of the reach of Death. Death warns, "Who clymbeth hyest/ somme-tyme shal dessende. . ." (LXXV, 597).
Toward the fourth group Death acts as a firm summoner only. The individuals in this group are given the facts of the summons, but are not ridiculed, accused, or shown especial respect. This group includes the Constable, the Archbishop, the Merchant, the Sergeant, the Tregetour or Magician, and the Hermit.

Death asserts his right to call the Constable to dance with him when he says: "Hit is my right/ to reste & yow constrayn / With vs to daunce/ my maister sire Conestable. . ." (XVIII, 137-138). Death tells the Archbishop that he should not withdraw from Death's nearness. He points out his close-ness: "For dai be dai/ ther is none other geyne / Deth at honde/ pursueth eueri coost. . ." (XX, 157-158). The Merchant is asked to give Death his hand and to dance, leaving all vainglory and worldly riches (stanza XLIII). The Sergeant receives a warning not to rebel (stanza XLVI); there is no champion, Death points out, so sturdy that another cannot take him.

The Tregetour, or magician, holds the unique position of being the only one called by name. Death notes his talent, but summons him to join the dance just the same:

Maister Jon Rikelle/ 24 some tyme tregetowre
Of nobille harry/ kynge of Ingelonde
And of Fraunce/ the myghti Conqueroure
For alle the sleightes/ and turnyng of thyn honde
Thow moste come nere/ this daunce to vnderstonde (LXV, 513-517).

The Hermit receives a very plain summons, which tells him to dress for the dance: "Atte laste yitte/ ye mote yow dresse/ . . ."

24Although Rikelle is here named, he cannot be identified historically.
Of my daunce/ to haue experience / For ther-a^eyne/ is no resistence / Take now leve/ of thyn Ermytage. . . " (LXXVII, 611-614).

The four categories of Death's attitude or approach do not reveal a pattern which might group the individuals according to profession. Death has varying attitudes toward men of the church, depending upon the individual. It is the same with all other professional divisions. It might be noted, however, that he is sarcastic or accusing to all three women who appear in the poem. It must be remembered that the Dance of Death was originally an all male masque. The women may have been added for their vulnerability to a mocking Death.

It is interesting now to note how the various individuals react to Death's summons. Only three show dismay or fright: the Bailiff, the Usurer, and the Child. The Bailiff is distressed because he has been caught unprepared, and he says: "O thou lorde god/ this is an harde Journe / To which a-forne/ I toke but litel hede" (XXXV, 273-274). The Usurer is grieved to die: "Now me behoueth/ sodynly to dey / Which is to me/ grete peyne & grete greuaunce" "(LI, 401-402). The Child is frightened and regrets having to leave the world to which it has so recently come. The infancy of the Child is poignantly clear: "A a a/ a worde I can not speke / I am so yonge/ I was borne yisterday" (LXXIV, 585-586).
The next group is made up of those individuals who are ready to accept Death: the Pope, the Bishop, the Abbot, the Man of Law, the Chartereaux, the Juror, the Labourer, and the Hermit. The Pope's acceptance of Death is based on his knowledge of its inevitability:

But for al that/ deth I mai not flee
On his daunce/ with other for to trace
For which al honoure/ who prudently can see
Is litel worthe/ that doth soo sone pace (IX, 69-72).

The Bishop is not happy, but he too sees the inevitability (stanza XXVII). The Abbot does not fear Death's threats, but does regret dying a cloisterer and laments that it is too late to change his profession (stanza XXXI).

The Man of Law, realizing there is no further appeal, gives in willingly: "For al my witte/ and my grete prudence /
To make appele/ from his dredeful sentence / No thyng yn erthe/ mai a man preserue. . ." (LX, 476-478).

The Chartereaux is ready to die and says that he has long been dead to the world by his own choosing (stanza XLV). The Juror's attitude is one of resignation to the unalterable. He notes that there will be many who will rejoice at his death (stanza LXII). The Labourer is not so passive, having often wished for death. His attitude is summed up in this statement: "For I mai sey/ & telle playnli howe / In this worlde/ here ther is reste noon" (LXX, 559-560). The last member of this group, the Hermit, thanks God for all his gifts and is ready to die, but does regret that even life in the desert could not save him from Death (stanza LXXVII).
Another group of individuals laments leaving their worldly possessions, ranging from gold to beauty. Among them are the Cardinal, the Patriarch, the Archbishop, the Squire, the Abbess, the Burgess, the Monk, the Amorous Squire, and the Parson.

The first, the Cardinal, reveals his shallow nature when he answers Death:

I have great cause/ certis this is no faile
To be a-basshed/ and gretli drede me
Sithen dethe is come/ me sodeynli to assaile
That I shal never/ here after clothed by
In gris ner hermyn/ like eke yn distresse
Bi which I have/ [lerned] wel and se
How that al ioye/ endeth yn heuyness (XIII, 97-105).

It is evident that Death's mockery of the Cardinal is fully justified.

The Patriarch's attitude is one of regret that his worldly possessions have deceived him, but he also laments that all his happiness is now sadness: "Worldli honowre/ grete tresowre and richesse / Haue me deceyued/ sothfastli in dede / Myne olde Joies/ ben turned to tristesse. . ." (XVII, 129-131).

The Archbishop replies to Death's summons with great distress, but his major concern is saying adieu to his treasure, his pomp and pride, his painted chambers, and his good looks and freshness (stanza XXI). Similarly, the Squire says a final goodbye to mirth and solace, the ladies, his beauty, and to pleasure. He then gives a warning which is found again and again in Medieval literature: "Thynketh [on] owre sowles/ or that deth manace / For al shal rote/ & no man wote what tyme"
(XXIX, 231-232). In *Everyman* and in *The Castle of Perseverance* that same warning is heard.

The Abbess replies to Death in a resigned tone, noting only that she is leaving behind all that she has enjoyed: "Thus cruel dethe/ doth al estats fyne / Who hath no ship/ mote rowe yn bote or barge" (XXXIII, 263-264).

The Burgess says he is greatly displeased to leave behind his house rents and treasure, and gives the characteristic warning that a man is a fool who sets his heart on goods which are only lent to him and which will be given to a stranger at his death (stanza XXXIX).

The monk's reply is humble, but he says he regrets leaving his book and his cloister. He then gives a unique warning: "Al be not meri/ which that men seen daunce" (XLIX, 392). This is a particularly appropriate reply to Death's summons to join the Dance of Death.

The Amorous Squire responds as several others have, bidding farewell to what he loved in life. He says goodbye to the lusty, fresh flower of youth, to vainglory of beauty and pride, to the service of Cupid, and to his ladies (stanza LVI). The last member of this group who lament leaving their earthly possessions also says goodbye to what has been his chief interest: the Parson says farewell to his tithes and offerings (stanza LXVIII).

The next division of reactions to Death has similarities to the preceding one, chiefly regret at leaving their possessions
behind. Although the individuals in this group do indeed regret leaving their worldly loves, they are more greatly distressed at being completely powerless before Death. Each was accustomed in life to some degree of authority or power, which Death strips away. In this group, a large one, appear the Emperor, the Canon, the Tregetour, the Merchant, the Constable, the Clerk, the Gentlewoman, the Physician, the Astronomer, the Lady of Great Estate, the Baron, the King, and the Friar Minor.

The first one in this group, the Emperor, states very succinctly the idea most frequently expressed by them all: "Ther-Vp-on sore/ I may compleyne / That lorde grete/ haue litle a-vauntage" (XI, 87-88). The Canon says: "Dethe hathe of me/ so grete a-vantage / A'l my richesse/ mai me not dis-porte" (XLI, 323-324). He also gives the warning that men should prepare to die well.

The Tregetour laments simply that there are no tricks he can use against Death, and bids farewell to his craft (stanza LXVI). The merchant warns, characteristically, against over-valuing earthly treasure. He says that he regrets that all his travels and experiences have no power to help him against Death (stanza XLIII).

The Constable gives in more readily than the others, but he says it is because he sees, regrettably, that no worldly powers have sway over Death (stanza XIX). On the other hand, the Clerk's attitude is fairly unique in that he
is convinced there must be a better way than Death's summons: "Is there no geyne/ ne protection / Dethe maketh al weie/ a short conclusion" (LXXVI, 603-605).

The Gentlewoman is saddened to realize that Death is indifferent to old and young. She laments that Death has checked her beauty, which was her major concern in life (stanza LVIII). The Physician says he has devoted his life to finding cures, but regrets that he is powerless against Death (stanza LIV). The Astronomer replies in a similar way when he says all his knowledge is of no help at the end (stanza XXXVII).

Like those in the preceding group, the Lady of Great Estate bids farewell to what she has treasured, her beauty and freshness, but she also notes the inability of anyone to sway Death:

And on his daunce/ sitte moste I nedes fote
For ther [n]is quene/ Countesse ne duchesse
Flouryng in beaute/ ne yn feirnesse
That she of dethe/ mote dethes trace sewe (XXV, 195-198).

The Baron remarks that though he was never beaten by anything worldly, Death's one stroke has made him lame (stanza XXIII). The King's comment is notable; he says he does not know how to dance:

I haue not lerned/ here-a-forne to daunce
No daunce in sothe/ of fotynge so sauage
Where-fore I see/ be clere demonstraunce
What pride is worth/ force or hye lynage
Deth al fordoth/ this is his vsage... (XV, 113-117).

Last in this group is the Friar Minor who sums up the general
attitude in his reply: "In grete astate/ ne yn pouerty / In no thynge founde/ that mai fro dethe defende..." (LXXII, 573-574). He closes his reply with one last brief sermon: "Wise is that synner/ that dothe his lif a-mende" (LXXII, 576).

The two individuals not included in any of the groups discussed above are unique in their replies. The Sergeant's reply is defiant, making him appear comic in comparison to the other characters in their gravity:

How dar this dethe/ sette on me a-reste
That am the kynges/ chosen officere
Which yesterdai/ bothe este & weste
Myn office dede/ ful surquedous of chere
But now this dai/ I am a-rested here
And mai not fle/ thowgh I had hit sworne
Eche man is lothe/ to dye ferre and nere
That hath not lerned/ for to dye a-forne
(XL VII, 369-376).

The Minstrel's response is unusual in that he analyzes the dance which Death proposes:

This newe daunce/ is to me so straunge
Wonder dyuersc/ and passyngli contrarie
The dredful fotyng/ dothe so ofte chaunge
And the mesures/ so ofte sithes varie
Which now to me/ is no thyng necessarie
Syt hit were so/ that I might asterte
But many a man/ if I shal not tarie
Ofte daunceth/ but no thyng of herte
(LXIV, 505-512).

In retrospect, it may be said that generally the characters in Dance of Death respond to Death in a way similar to that in which he approaches them. Death knows the individuals well and knows how they will react; consequently, the individuals are greatly affected by the tone of the summons.
The *Dance of Death* is important not only as a work in itself, but also as the representation of a motif which recurs wherever Death is personified in later Medieval English literature. This poem from the Ellesmere manuscript is an important stage in the development of the motif. Further use of the motif, as it appears with Death personified, is studied in the next two chapters.
CHAPTER III

MORAL PLAYS

Chapter I has already examined the macabre preoccupation of the Middle Ages with death, because of the great mortality rates from pestilences, human cruelty, and general poor health conditions. This concern with death is evidenced in all art forms, especially sculpture, painting, and literature. As a result of this preoccupation there were formed various religious cults during the plague years. In addition to the Flagellants, already noted, there existed another, more popular cult, the cult of Death. It was very prominent in England,¹ and, according to some theories, played a significant role in the development of the morality play.²

Death had always figured prominently in Christian doctrine, but in the fervently religious fifteenth century it reached a much greater intensity.³ Traditional literary forms by clergymen included, during the fifteenth century, many instructive treatises on the art of dying. There was detailed information on preparing for the final hour of life, and explanations of death, judgment, heaven, and hell.⁴

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²Ibid.
³Ibid.
⁴Ibid.
The special advice on how to die well was based not so much on fear of death itself, but rather on the fear of dying unprepared. If a man were prepared for death by the means recommended by the church, he would have been in a state of grace, and he needed to have no fear of undergoing the tortures of purgatory. ⁵

The means of preparing oneself were very explicit, and the subject matter with which one should be familiar was definite. It included a knowledge of the Ten Commandments, the Articles of the Faith, the Pater Noster, the Seven Deadly Sins, the Seven Cardinal Virtues, and the Seven Sacraments of the church. Of great importance too was a familiarity with the *ars moriendi*, the art of dying. ⁶ Knowing this matter presumably allowed one to live in such a way that death would not hold pain.

The fine arts of the fifteenth century abound in highly realistic portrayals of the horrid physical effects of death. A recurrent subject was the consumption of the decaying body by worms, a realistically carved or painted reminder of human mortality. The Dance of Death motif was very popular during the fifteenth century and can be seen in the fine arts as well as in poetry and drama. ⁷

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⁶ Ibid.
There is a basic connection between the morality play and the Dance of Death motif. Both grew out of the same psychological atmosphere, man's recognition of the inevitability of death and its consequences.  

In all medieval treatments of the Dance of Death, including Holbein's series of woodcuts illustrating this theme, the summons of Death is used, presenting the warning that Death comes when least expected and is no respecter of persons. This theme had abundant allegorical possibilities which the medieval artists and writers recognized and used extensively. There are some who believe that the early dramatic versions of the Dance of Death in French, German, and Spanish are really morality plays lacking only the abstraction of man as hero to be complete.

Two of the extant fifteenth century moral plays in English, of which there are only six in all, are based on a theme similar to that of the Dance of Death; they are the fragmentary Pryde of Lyfe and Everyman. A third morality play, The Castle of Perseverance is based thematically on the conflict between good and evil for the soul of mankind,

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8 Williams, p. 147.
11 Chambers, p. 155.
but it contains, secondarily, a similar theme of the summons of Death. In all three plays in which this theme occurs, Death appears in personification.

Mystery plays, based in their beginnings on Scripture, arose from services on particular occasions in the liturgical year. Miracle plays, on the other hand, treat the lives of the saints and martyrs. Both originated from the same artistic impulse within the church, and in exactly the same way. The "moral play," or morality, is dramatized allegory. The term and the form itself have existed since the fifteenth century and connote ethical and religious purpose. The English moral plays have one universal plot: the microcosm of man regarded as the epitome of the world. The mystery and miracle plays were more representative of the macrocosm. The mysteries in particular were the most characteristic type of medieval drama and were the most popular dramatic form in the Middle Ages. However, Death was not allegorized in either the mystery or the miracle plays.

During the fifteenth century, religious emphasis shifted away from institutionalized forms to salvation of individual man. This shift brought the laity much closer into the framework of religion and made the moral play a pertinent form of drama, since it delivered universal ethical messages which might be applied individually.

12 Craig, p. 320.  
13 Ibid., p. 343.  
14 Ibid., p. 344.  
15 Chambers, p. 149.  
16 Williams, p. 147.
The development of the moral play is hard to trace since the form seems to have sprung forth fully developed. One theory is that it is an extension of the miracle play in the direction of allegory.\(^{17}\) The changes would have been great, however, to shift not only from the specific to the abstract in terms of the characters, but also to change the dramatic purpose from establishment of faith to religious education.

The strongest theory concerning the origin of the moral play is that it is a dramatic treatment of the Dance of Death,\(^{18}\) with man's struggle for salvation a dominant theme.\(^{19}\) This chapter will study two moral plays as they use the theme of Death in personification. The character of Death himself will be the basis for comparison of the two plays. The first to be studied will be *Everyman*, the second will be *The Castle of Perseverance*. The other extant moralities from this period are of a different nature and will only be mentioned here. They are *Wisdom*, a play built on the temptation of a monk; *Mankind*, which is really a comedy in the framework of a morality;\(^{20}\) and *The World and the Child*, which traces a man's progress from cradle to grave.

The moral play has certain characteristic themes which were used individually or together, depending on the writer's particular purpose. When only one theme is used, the form is

\[^{17}\text{Chambers, p. 151.}\]  \[^{18}\text{Craig, p. 345.}\]  
\[^{19}\text{Ibid., p. 348.}\]  \[^{20}\text{Baugh, p. 285.}\]
called partial; when all are used, it is called full-scope. Everyman is an example of the partial; The Castle of Perseverance is full-scope. The most characteristic themes of the moral plays are the Summons of Death; the conflict of Vices and Virtues for supremacy in man's life and for his soul; the battle between a good and a bad angel for man's soul; and the Parliament of Heaven, or the Debate of the Four Daughters of God. All of the themes are centered around the problem of man's salvation and the living of life to achieve salvation.

The moral play Everyman is believed to have been written during the fifteenth century, probably early in the century, though the extant versions are dated at the beginning of the sixteenth century. As we have seen, the theme of Everyman is the Summons of Death, a theme which appears as only part of the whole scheme in The Castle of Perseverance, the longest and most comprehensive of the moralities.

Everyman covers only the last day in the hero's life. In a prologue the messenger warns of the imminence of Death to all men and says that the play is going to tell how God called Everyman to a reckoning. The play starts with a speech by God on the sinfulness of mankind. He calls on Death to deliver a summons to Everyman to prepare for his great reckoning, and Death obeys. Everyman, who is first

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21 Williams, p. 144. 22 Baugh, p. 283.
23 Craig, p. 349.
seen walking alone, is greatly shocked by Death's delivering the summons. Declaring his unreadiness, Everyman tries to bribe Death to forestall, but Death refuses the bribe and urges Everyman to get ready his book of accounts.

Everyman then approaches his friends to find someone to accompany him on his journey. He confronts and is turned down by Fellowship, Kindred and Cousin, and Goods. At last, Good Deeds says she would gladly go, but she is too weak. She says her sister Knowledge will give him advice and help him make his reckoning. Knowledge appears and offers to be Everyman's guide. They first go to Confession, who gives Penance to Everyman. After Everyman scourges himself, Good Deeds is able to rise and walk. Everyman then puts on the robe of contrition.

Good Deeds advises Everyman to seek Discretion, Strength, and Beauty to accompany him. Knowledge tells him to call on Five Wits as counselors. Everyman calls them all together and each agrees to go with him on the journey. Everyman receives the last sacraments and extreme unction; then he begins to die. As he dies, first Beauty leaves him, then Strength, then Discretion, then Five Wits; only Good Deeds remains with her sister Knowledge, but even Knowledge cannot go to the grave with Everyman.
Everyman then dies and goes to his grave accompanied by Good Deeds. Knowledge says she hears the angels, and from within the grave an angel speaks, welcoming Everyman.  

Everyman is sub-titled, "Here Begynneth a Treatyse How Ye Hye Fader of Heuen Sendeth Dethe to Somon Evey Creature to Come and Gyue Acounte of Theyr Lyves in this Worlde, And is in Maner of a Morall Playe." One theory is that it was not considered a stage-play, but rather, as the sub-title says, a treatise in the framework of a moral play. There is no proof that Everyman was ever performed before the nineteenth century. There are no instructions for staging, costuming, or action in the extant manuscripts. In other medieval moralities these things were included, even diagrams in the case of The Castle of Perseverance.

Everyman is known to be much older than the extant manuscripts of it, which are dated from 1509 to 1535 by various scholars. Two editions of the manuscripts, printed by Richard Pynson, are only fragmentary, but two, printed by John Skot, are complete. There is controversy over the question of Everyman's origin. It is not known whether it is the original or a translation of the Dutch play Elckerlijc,  

25 Joseph Quincy Adams, Chief Pre-Shakespearean Dramas (New York, 1924), pp. 288-303. All further references to the play Everyman will be taken from this edition and will be identified by the line numbers, in parentheses, taken there-from. All bracketed material is Adams'.  

26 Williams, p. 160.  

27 Cawley, p. 205.
which it closely resembles. A third possibility is that both dramas have a common source.28

Whichever came first, the play is, according to most theories, a product of all Catholic Europe, not of any one country in particular.29 The fear of death is universal, and Everyman's spiritual victory over death, or over the fear of death, is obviously a common expression of Christian doctrine. Everyman does have an unusual moral theology for a morality play. The author, obviously an imaginative churchman, is not concerned with the conversion or saving of non-Christian souls. His aim is apparently to speak to an audience who are already members of the church.30 In the play it is assumed that Everyman is already a baptized Christian, but that his life has not been lead as it should. The play is concerned with the means by which he is restored to grace.

The generalized hero and the happy ending are the products of the play's demonstrating the possibility of salvation for all of humanity, which is representative of a Catholic theological perspective.31 Later, when the theology shifted

28 The leading argument that Everyman is the original is Henry de Vocht's Everyman (Germany, 1963); J. M. Manly, in "Elckerlijc - Everyman: The Question of Priority," Modern Philology, VIII (October, 1910), 269-277, leads the opposing argument.

29 Cawley, p. 205.

30 Lawrence V. Ryan, "Doctrine and Dramatic Structure in 'Everyman'," Speculum, XXXII (October, 1957), 723.

to Protestant perspectives, the emphasis was put on individual dilemmas, as in Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus*. Whatever the theological basis may have been, the fact that *Everyman* avoids any serious conflict between good and evil for the soul of mankind is irrelevant to this study. The important thing is that the entire play is based on a preoccupation with death, from the first line of the prologue, which is a warning, to the last line of the epilogue, which delivers the concise moral. This preoccupation takes form in the personified Death who is presented as a well developed character in the play.

Death appears in *Everyman* as God's business-like subordinate and messenger, unlike his appearance as the malicious avenger in other morality plays. *Everyman* is actually one form of the *ars moriendi* already mentioned. The play shows the elements of Death personified in a particular situation wherein a particular man, representing all men, is summoned to give account of his life before the all-high judge. Though the entire play shows what Everyman had to do in preparation for death, it points out indirectly how he should have lived in order to avoid the last minute rush to set accounts in order.

In keeping with the tradition of the *ars moriendi*, *Everyman* deals specifically with the church sacraments directly connected with death: Penance, the Eucharist, and Extreme Unction.  

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33 *de Vocht*, p. 194.  
34 *Thomas*, p. 103.  
The universe depicted in *Everyman* is one ruled by a benevolent God who has complete control and who gives the sinner every chance to redeem himself. Here Death is presented as the inevitable event which all men must face, not a diabolical force; the demonic element is kept safely at a distance. However, the depiction of Death in the Dance of Death motif is usually different from the dignified messenger of *Everyman*. He is usually a mocking, sadistic character who enjoys the advantage of playing the only tune, of being inevitable. In this difference lies the individuality of the character Death in *Everyman*. In lines 80 through 181 of the play, Death and Everyman are speaking to each other. Death does not relent in his summons, he does not make any apologies, nor does he flaunt his power or act jubilant at his dominance over Everyman. He, in fact, seems to pity the ignorant, unready Everyman:

Loo, yonder I se Everyman walkynge.  
Full lytell he thynketh on my comynge;  
His mynde is on flesshely lustes, and his treasure;  
And grete payne it shall cause him to endure  
Before the Lorde, heuen[']s Kynge (lines 80-84).

Death in *Everyman* is not depicted as a force independent of God, but only as a respectful servant of God. His respect for his master is seen in his ways of referring to God, such as "In grete hast I am sende to the / Fro God out of his Mageste" (lines 90-91), and again in his reference to God as "...the Chefe Lorde of paradyse" (line 110).  

36 Kaula, p. 11.
On the other hand, Death's opinion of himself is interesting: "I am Dethe, that no man dreadeth; / For every man I rest, and no man spareth" (lines 115-116). He is final and impartial in serious dignity. He fears and respects no one and seems to consider himself a kind of official of the law of God. The word *rest* in line 116 might mean not only "to stop," but actually "to arrest," in the sense of a police officer's duty.

Everyman's attitude toward Death shifts. He at first takes him very lightly, trying to stall for time, even offering a bribe: "Yet of my good wyl 1 gyue ye, yf thou wyl be kynd; / Ye, a thousand pounde shalte thou haue, / And [thou] dyfferre this mater tyll an other daye" (lines 121-123). He becomes more serious as he realizes the situation more fully:

> Alas! shall I haue no longer respyte?  
> I may saye Deth geueth no warnynge!  
> To thynke on the it maketh my herte seke,  
> For all vnredy is my boke of rekenynge  
> (lines 131-134).

The next change is still in desperation, but he has at last realized that Death cannot be put off: "For though I mourn it awayleth nought; / The day passeth, and is almoost ago. / I wote not wel what for to do" (lines 193-195). By the end of his search for company for the journey, when he has had the advice of Knowledge and the true companionship of Good Deeds, Everyman is no longer desperate in his attitude toward Death:
Into thy handes, Lorde, my soule I commende.
Resceyue it, Lorde, that it be not lost.
As thou me boughtest, so me defende,
That I may appere with that blessyd hoost
That shall be saved at the day of dome
(lines 880-885).

The Dance of Death motif then is used in that Everyman proceeds on his way to the grave at the summons of Death and dances to the tune of Death. There are no alternate routes for Everyman. The character Death in this play, however, is not in keeping with Death in the usual Dance of Death motif. This difference is apparently the cause of one scholar's saying that the Dance of Death is not actually the major motif, but rather that the pilgrimage motif, known in other later medieval non-dramatic works, is the dominant theme.  

It is possible to see this point also, since Everyman does indeed consider his way to the grave a journey or a pilgrimage on which he wants company, as he states: "Alas! I may well wepe with syghes depe! / Now have I no maner of company / To helpe me in my iourney and me to kepe" (lines 184-186). The two opposing theories need not be reconciled, however, since they can exist side by side, and give a double meaning doubtless intended by the author.

The effectiveness of Everyman is in its highly serious tone, unmarred by comic interlude, and in the simple plot, the immediate approach of Death.

The second morality play in which Death is personified, The Castle of Perseverance, is greatly different from Everyman

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37 Williams, p. 161.
in its full-scope treatment of the traditional themes. Whereas *Everyman* presents only one theme, the Summons of Death, *Castle* presents all themes except, according to one scholar, the pilgrimage motif which is present in *Everyman.*

*Castle* is dated c. 1405 and is the most extensive and complete of the English moralities, containing not only action and costuming instructions, but diagrams of the staging. *Castle* contains a full range of themes: the Struggle of the Virtues and Vices for the soul of Mankind; a Good and a Bad Angel battling each other for man's soul; the World, the Flesh, and the Devil, assisted by the Seven Deadly Sins, fighting against Confession, Penitence, Absolution, and the Six Heavenly Graces; and the Parliament of Heaven or the Debate of the Four Daughters of God, in which Justice and Truth prosecute and Mercy and Peace defend Mankind.

*Castle* has a somber evenness of structure which gives it a funereal aspect, but Death's summons is not the dominant motif, as we have noted. The battle between the forces of good and evil make up most of the action. In *Castle,* as in *Everyman,* Death is represented as giving a warning lesson to humanity by killing Mankind.

The play begins with the traditional banns; then the World, the Flesh, and the Devil all state their positions.

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38 Craig, p. 348.  
39 Ibid., p. 343.  
40 Ibid., p. 349.  
41 Williams, p. 153.
Next Mankind appears, bemoaning the fate of being born into this world. He introduces his Good and Bad Angels. The Good Angel speaks, then the Bad Angel, each giving Mankind advice. The former advises him to follow God and be saved; the latter says to follow evil and be rich. Mankind characteristically chooses to be rich. The Good Angel pleads with him to reconsider, to think of his dying day and the welfare of his soul, but Mankind goes off with the Bad Angel.

Lust and Folly then join Mankind and the Bad Angel in going to the World, who tells Mankind he must give up all service to God and be wholly in service to the World alone, thereby making himself rich and attractive to pretty ladies. Mankind is then approached and enticed by all of the Seven Deadly Sins, all of whom he gladly accepts.

He is then approached by Shrift and Penance, who persuade him to give up his sins. He asks to be given a place safe from the Seven Deadly Sins, and is taken to the Castle of Perseverance. The Seven Moral Virtues who reside therein welcome him.

After he has lived there for a time, the World, the Flesh, and the Devil, with the help of the Seven Deadly Sins, prepare to attack the Castle. The Virtues defend it and drive off the first attackers, the Devil and his followers, by bombarding them with roses, symbolizing Christ's passion. Next, the Flesh and his followers attack and are beaten back. As a last resort, the World has Covetousness approach Mankind alone. He appeals
to Mankind's old age, and in his greed Mankind relents, leaving the Castle and adopting the motto, "More, More."

At last Death enters the action and decides it is Mankind's time to go. When he delivers the summons, Mankind appeals for help first to World, who refuses him. He laments on and on, only at the last appealing to God; then he dies. The Soul leaves the body and addresses it in an upbraiding tone. The Bad Angel reappears to take the Soul off to Hell on his back, but since the Soul had cried for mercy at the last, God's daughters Mercy and Peace debate with their sisters Truth and Justice on whether Mankind should go to Hell. The judge, God, decides in favor of Mankind and allows him into Heaven. 42

The character of Death in Castle is much nearer the tradition of the Dance of Death motif. According to the stage directions, Death enters the scene carrying a dart. This is in keeping with the usual visual depiction of a spear-carrying Death in the Dance of Death motif. He is not a dignified messenger, but an arrogant, mocking, full-fledged force in himself. This arrogance can be seen in this speech:

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\begin{align*}
\text{Whanne I com, iche man drede forthi,} \\
\text{But yit is ther no geyn [i]-went,} \\
\text{Hey hyl, holte, nyn hethe.} \\
\text{Ye schul me drede, every-chone;} \\
\text{Whanne I com, ye schul grone!} \\
\text{My name in londe is left a-lone:} \\
\text{I hatte "Drery Dethe". \ldots (lines 2785-2791).}
\end{align*}
\]

42 Adams, pp. 265-287. All further references to lines from this play will be from this edition. All bracketed material is Adams' except for the modern English translations.
[When I come, each man shall therefore dread,  
And yet is there no help hoped for,  
High hill, holt, nor heath.  
You shall fear me, everyone;  
When I come, you shall groan!  
I am called "Dreary Death"...]

In *Castle*, Death appears as an avenger bringing agony:

I schal hym prove of myn empryse;  
With this poynt I schal hym breche,  
And wappyn hym in a woful wyse;  
No body schal ben hys bote (lines 1236-1239).

[I shall prove my intent to him;  
With this spear I shall break him,  
And beat him in a woeful manner;  
Nobody can help him.]

In contrast to Death in *Everyman*, Death in *Castle* flaunts his power. This is apparent when he approaches Mankind:

I schal thee schapyn a schenful schappe:  
Now I kyle thee with myn knappe!  
I reche to thee, Mankynde, a rappe  
To thyne herte rote! (lines 2840-2843)

[I shall you shape a sorry shape:  
Now I kill you with my blow!  
I reach to you, Mankind, a rap  
To your heart's root!]

Mankind's attitude toward this arrogant avenger is, as one might expect, immediate despair. Whereas in *Everyman* Death had used a firm but quiet summons and Everyman had not taken him seriously, in *Castle*, Death boasts and threatens and Mankind immediately is convinced.

Death, as a character, does not remain long in the action of *Castle*. He makes his summons clear and quickly is gone, though his presence is still felt until the end of the play. In this play, Death seems more a messenger of the Devil
than of God, though he should probably be considered impartial. His arrogant manner, his warnings and his threats, seem more characteristic of the messenger from Hell. This aspect of his character is much closer to the Dance of Death motif than are those of Death in *Everyman*. Death in *Castle* refers repeatedly to physical horrors and pains. In *Everyman* he keeps urging Everyman to set straight his accounts. The former suggests the tortures of Hell; the latter implies the possibilities of Heaven.

In comparison, the character of Death in *Castle* fits more neatly into the traditional medieval attitude toward Death than does Death in *Everyman*. Although they serve different purposes, the outcome is the same. In *Everyman*, Death's purpose, as a character, is to force Everyman to come to a realization of the true God and to make his life right. In *Castle*, the purpose of Death is to frighten Mankind and to catch him off guard.

Thus, the Summons of Death theme is used in two different ways, one personifying Death as God's messenger, the other personifying Death as the malicious force itself, as seen in the Dance of Death theme in all the arts, including medieval drama.
CHAPTER IV

THE PARDONER'S TALE

The common medieval theme of Death was at first most prevalent in ecclesiastical literature, but by the end of the fourteenth century was widely used in popular literature as well.¹ In The Canterbury Tales, the chief masterpiece of popular literature, Chaucer skillfully uses all forms of medieval literature, from didactic stories and exempla to bawdy fabliaux, by allowing the tales to be told by persons of every level of society. The Pardoner's Tale, which this chapter will study, is an example of Chaucer's use of the exemplum, a moralized tale used by medieval preachers to illustrate doctrine. The moral point of this exemplum is that Avarice must always lead to an evil end, or in the words of the Pardoner, Radix malorum est Cupiditas.²

This study will not deal with the various ironic features of the Pardoner himself, his confessions, or his sermon, but only with the tale itself and the use of the Death motif in that tale, specifically with the personification of Death.


²F. N. Robinson, editor, The Works of Chaucer (New York, 1933), pp. 181-187, line 334. Further references made to The Pardoner's Tale will be taken from this edition; only line numbers will be cited and those will be given in parentheses after the quotation.
The Pardoner's Tale has no one direct analogue, but several sources were apparently used, the first recorded being of oriental origin. Chaucer, however, obviously used later Western versions as his sources, chiefly various novelle and exempla, but he did not limit himself to those sources only. Various aspects of The Pardoner's Tale seem to have been taken from several different and largely unidentifiable sources. It is well known that Chaucer used current oral and written folklore as sources for The Canterbury Tales. Traditional motifs appearing in The Pardoner's Tale are the grouping in three's; the dicing; the quest for death; the symbolic personification of Death; and the pledge of secrecy.

In brief summary, The Pardoner's Tale is a story of three young men who have devoted their lives to drinking and merrymaking. In their drunkenness, they are enraged to learn of the death of a friend, and they swear oaths of brotherhood to seek out and kill the scoundrel, Death, who was responsible for their friend's untimely demise. As they set out on their search for Death, they meet an old man who is himself looking for Death, in vain. He is, however, able to direct the three revelers to the place where he says they will find Death.

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3 W. F. Bryan and Germaine Dempster, editors, Sources and Analogues of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales (Chicago, 1941), pp. 415-416.

The three are directed up a crooked path to a grove of trees where under an oak tree they find a large quantity of gold florins. Forgetting their search for Death, they begin to decide on a plan for taking away the gold. Since the most sensible plan is to wait until night to transport the gold to their homes, they draw lots to see who is to bring food and drink to sustain them until nightfall. After the youngest of the three has gone for food and wine, the other two plot his death so that the gold need only be divided in half. The young roisterer sent for food buys poison for the other two so that he can have all the gold for himself. Thus avarice leads to the deaths of all three, for after the two who remained with the gold have murdered the third, in celebration they drink the wine which he has poisoned and are soon dead also.

There are several ways in which the theme of Death appears in this story. The setting and time of the story are closely linked with Death. Further, the three revellers in their drunkenness assume Death to be a literal being. The old man whom they encounter is very much a part of the motif of Death as are the oak tree, the gold, and the very sin of avarice.

The scene is set during plague time in fourteenth century Flanders, an area notorious in the Middle Ages for drinking and an abandoned style of living. The fourteenth century, a time during which the Flemish merchants held great power and fought
constantly among themselves for ever more power, was a time of recurring outbreaks of the Bubonic Plague all over the Continent as well as in England. Chaucer's personal knowledge of the ravages of the plague made his descriptive power even more keen - in The Pardoner's Tale. England had large-scale outbreaks of pestilence four times during the reign of Edward III, in 1348-49, 1361-63, 1369, and 1375-76. The three revellers in The Pardoner's Tale are among those all over England and continental Europe who believed in making the most of life while there was still time, of taking as much food, drink, and physical pleasure as possible. The Pardoner's Tale has an intensity and impressiveness not again reached in English literature for two hundred years, chiefly because of the theme of revelry, drunkenness, and foul speech set against the sordid background of the Black Death.

A familiar theme of the literature of Chaucer's England was that of the three Messengers of Death: Sickness, Disaster, and Old Age. Chaucer uses this motif as part of the scheme of The Pardoner's Tale by first introducing Sickness in the form of the Bubonic Plague; then Old Age, characterized by

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6 Dorothy M. Norris, "Chaucer's Pardoner's Tale and Flanders," *PMLA*, XLVIII (June, 1933), 636.


9 Marie P. Hamilton, "Death and Old Age in 'The Pardoner's Tale'," *Studies in Philology*, XXXVI (October, 1939), 573.
the old man, who is for the three revellers an advance agent of Death; then Disaster, through the sudden, violent end of the three revellers.\(^\text{10}\)

The basic concern of the Pardoner's exemplum, however, is Death itself. It is the literal result of all the aspects of \textit{cupiditas} presented in the tale.\(^\text{11}\) The Pardoner is trying always to shock his listeners with the profound reminder of the suddenness and imminence of Death.

Death is first introduced by the tinkling of a bell heard by the three revellers as they drink in a tavern. The bell is being carried with a corpse. "And as they sat, they herde a belle clynke / Beforn a cors was caried to his grave" (lines 664-665). The tavern boy identifies the dead man as a friend of the three and then names also the murderer, "Ther cam a privee theef, man clepeth Deeth, / That in this countree al the peple sleeth" (lines 675-676). This is the first personification of Death. After the boy has warned them to beware of Death, the tavern keeper furthers the personification:

\begin{quote}
The child seeth sooth, for he hath slayn this yeer, Henne over a mile, withinne a greet village, Bothe man and womman, child, and hyne, and page; I trowe his habitacioun be there (lines 686-689).
\end{quote}

The revellers swear an oath of mutual faith that they will find and kill the "false traytour Deeth" (line 699). This oath

\(^{10}\)Ibid., p. 574.

foreshadows their own deaths and marks them for that inevitable end.\textsuperscript{12} Their deaths follow swiftly after their breaking of the vow of brotherhood, thus making the false swearing of oaths at least partially responsible for their deaths.\textsuperscript{13}

The three revellers, having set out on the road in search of the personified Death, come upon an old man about whom there is great critical disagreement. This old man is himself in search of Death, as he admits in the following lines:

\begin{quote}
Ne Deeth, alaas! ne wil nat han my lyf.
Thus walke I, lyk a restelees kaityf,
And on the ground, which is my moodres gate,
I knokke with my staf, bothe erly and late,
And seye "Leeve mooder, leet me in!" (lines 727-731).
\end{quote}

This old man's search for death is in great contrast to the search by the three young revellers. They are drunk and excited, impatient to find the foe; he is seeking in a mood of calm, philosophic meditation.\textsuperscript{14} The old man is called by one critic the "one who remains perhaps the most tragic and mysterious figure ever created in an equal number of lines in any literature."\textsuperscript{15} The enigma of the old man's character has led some to believe he is a personification of Death.

The chief critic among those who consider the old man as representative of Death says, "The Aged Wayfarer whom the three rioters encounter, and whom they treat with such rudeness,

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{12}Root, p. 229. \hspace{1cm} \textsuperscript{13}Miller, p. 194. \\
\textsuperscript{14}Root, p. 229. \\
\textsuperscript{15}Manly, \textit{New Light}, p. 290.
\end{flushright}
is undoubtedly Death in person." The principal evidence
given to support this theory is that the old man says, "I
moot go thider as I have to go" (line 749). As one critic
points out, the old man must be on his way, just as Death
must be about its business during plague time. The old man
as a personification of Death is confident that the three are
already his because he knows that coveting the gold to which
he has directed them will be their deaths. Other theories
exist, however, concerning the old man. One of these is that
the old man is possibly representative of Death's messenger,
Old Age. Another is that the old man is symbolic of Death
in that he points the way to the grove of trees, even to an
oak tree, rather than merely pointing them toward Death itself.
All of the studies which identify the old man as Death personi-
fied use principally three pieces of evidence: that he is
described as wrapped up except for his face, "Why artow al
forwrapped save thy face?" (line 717); that he is called
Death's spy by one of the three revellers, "Thou spak right
now of thilke traytour Deeth, / That in this countree alle oure
freendes sleeth. / Have heer my trouth, as thou art his

17 Ibid.
18 Robinson, p. 836.
19 Barakat, p. 212.
espye, . . ." (lines 753-755); and that he directs the three up a crooked path to an oak tree in a grove:

To fynde Deeth, turne up this croked wey, 
For in that grove I lafte hym, by my fey, 
Under a tree, and there he wolde abyde; 
Noght for youre boost he wolde hym nothyng hyde. 
Se ye that ook? Right there ye shal him fynde 
(lines 761-765).

Among the scholarship which disagrees with the interpretation of the old man as Death, one specific rebuttal calls the theory inadequate because the old man himself cannot effect the deaths of the three, but can only direct them to where they can find it. In this argument it is suggested that the gold itself might easily have accomplished the deaths of the three had the old man never appeared. One wonders, of course, whether the three would have found the gold without directions from the old man.

Another, more tenable argument is that it seems unlikely that Death himself would be, by his own admission, seeking death. Further disagreement with the theory that the old man is Death personified is based on the fact that there is insufficient textual evidence to support it, and that, further, such an interpretation spoils much of the irony of the tale's Death motif.

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The old man can be interpreted as Old Age, one of the three Messengers of Death. The accusation by one of the three revellers that the old man is the spy of Death can be used as supportive evidence for this interpretation.24 This motif was widely used in other poems of the same time; it is likely that Chaucer too would employ the theme of the three Messengers. The theory is basically that the old man is "...clothed as it were in his master's Death's livery, and hence resembles Death."25 He is described very clearly by Chaucer, seven times being called "old man," once "old churl," and four times "age," meaning Old Age. In this interpretation, the old man's lack of love for money, or his lack of greed, in his agedness makes him the perfect one to direct the greedy, lustful young men to the gold, which he recognizes as useless to himself but which he knows will bring death to the three young men.26 The gold is useless to him not only because he has no more youth on which to spend it, but also because he has outlived greed, the only way by which gold can lead to death.

Further evidence in support of this interpretation is the idea that the old man must live on and on, thus representing endless Old Age. If he were simply an old man, he would die, as the aged die, but Age or Old Age always remains as a perpetual reminder of Death.27

25 Ibid., p. 572.  
26 Ibid.  
27 Ibid.
The evidence used to support the interpretation of the old man as Old Age and the idea that the old man must live on forever is used equally as effectively to support the theory that the old man is symbolic of the Wandering Jew. The legendary figure known as the Wandering Jew is today identified with the Jew who refused rest to the weary Jesus as he made his way to Calvary and who was condemned for this to wander eternally over the earth waiting for the second coming. However, if the Wandering Jew represents Death's opposite, immortality, and if Chaucer used the Wandering Jew legend as his source, the old man is not likely to represent Death.

It is possible that Chaucer did make use of an actual model from contemporary tradition, if not the Wandering Jew, then another. One critic sees a link between Chaucer's old man and the legends of Odin, the Norse god. This connection is made in part on the basis of the references to the oak tree which often is used to imply Death. Odin's legendary relationship with death is certain. He appears in folk literature as a stranger with a wide-brimmed hat and cloak or as a wild huntsman. He is known also as the father of the slain, the leader of souls, and as the god who leads his army of the homeless dead through the air. Being the oldest of the Norse gods, Odin is often portrayed as an old man and is known by

28 Bushnell, p. 452.
29 Barakat, p. 212.
other names which suggest a close link with Chaucer's old man: Hackeberg, or Hakolberend (mantle-wearer); Skidskegg (long-beard); Vafud, or Vegtam (wanderer); Viatorindefessus (Unwearied traveler); Grimr (hooded); Ganglier (way-weary); Gondlir (staff-bearer); and Vidforull (far-traveler). 30

If Chaucer did not use an existing tradition as the source for his old man, and if the old man is not Death personified, one must assume he might be literally intended as an old man, as at least one study has noted. 31 This study says that one must accept a literal interpretation of the old man because there is no real evidence that the old man is an allegory of death. In fact, there is strong evidence to the contrary. The evidence in support of this theory is much like that of other theories. First, Chaucer's old man is himself seeking Death. 32 Further, there is textual proof, seemingly, that the old man is not immortal. After begging Mother Earth to let him in he says, "But yet to me she wol nat do that grace" (line 737). The word "yet" implies that she will presumably allow him in later. 33 The very fact that the old man wishes to be allowed to return to Mother Earth is further proof used in the argument. The line, "No lenger thanne after Deeth they soughte" (line 772), is pointless if the old man characterizes Death, for if he does, the three have indeed already found Death when they meet him. 34

30 Ibid., p. 213. 31 W. J. B. Owen, p. 50.
32 Ibid. 33 Ibid.
34 Ibid.
As for the interpretations of the old man as Death's messenger, this study points out that it is highly inappropriate that a messenger of Death in the form of Old Age should appear to three young men. It is suggested that the only appropriate Messenger of Death to this tale would be Disaster, which is most likely and which in fact does occur.\textsuperscript{35}

The interpretation in the same study of the old man's association with the gold is rather unusual and highly questionable:

The old man is seeking death not fleeing from it, for he does not know it is in the grove; he does not know where it is, much as he would like to know. He does not, indeed cannot, lead the revellers to the gold and point it out to them, for as far as he knows there is nothing there.\textsuperscript{36}

According to this study, the old man does not warn them against what they will find there, as the tavern boy has warned them of encountering Death, because he thinks they will find nothing. The explanation of this interpretation is that since the old man is still seeking death when he meets the revellers, he must not have seen the gold himself and must not really know it is there. If he knew of the gold and of Death's waiting under the tree, he would logically have stayed there rather than go on.\textsuperscript{37} The only reason that the old man sent the three revellers to the oak was

\textsuperscript{35}Ibid., p. 51. \hfill \textsuperscript{36}Ibid. \hfill \textsuperscript{37}Ibid.
that he wanted to be rid of them and be on his way after they had threatened him:

Thou partest nat so lightly, by Seint John!
Thou spak right now of thilke traytour Deeth
That in this contree alle oure freendes sleeth
Have heer my trouthe, as thou art his espye,
Tellè where he is, or thou shalt it abye,
By God, and by the hooly sacrement!
For soothly thou art oon of his assent
To slee us yonge folk, thou false theef!
(lines 752-759).

There is a theory which accounts for the old man's not staying with the gold to find his death; greed causes death, not actually the gold, and the old man has no longer any feelings of greed.38 If the old man literally seeks death, why should he fear the threats of the young men and send them on a useless errand? Would he not more logically submit there and then and find his long-sought-after rest? In the argument that the old man is not Death personified, it is asserted that if the old man is in any way allegorical, he knows the meaning of his own words and consequently the dramatic irony and allegory fail.39 It also points out the weakness of the irony in the accusation that the old man is a spy of Death if he is intended allegorically as that.40

Chaucer leaves unanswered many questions about the old man: who he is; where he comes from; where he is going; whose gold is beneath the tree; how it got there. All of these points Chaucer has deliberately obscured; they are what

38 Hamilton, p. 572. 39 W. J. B. Owen, p. 52.
40 Ibid.
have led scholars to call the old man mysterious.⁴¹ He is seen from the limited point of view of the three revellers, who consider him totally unimportant.⁴² They notice only that he is old, and they immediately forget him when they see the gold. He is ironically of great importance to the three, since he shows them exactly the place to find what they have sworn to find.

This macabre tale clearly shows a fascination with death on the part of the teller of the tale, the Pardoner.⁴³ One critic has said that the Pardoner and the old man are symbolically the same, and that the Pardoner is representative of vetus homo, or the "old man" of the flesh, as contrasted with novus homo, or "new man" of the spirit, and that likewise the old man in the tale is also representative of vetus homo and appropriately directs the three young revellers up the crooked way.⁴⁴ The three revellers find their own deaths by following the advice of vetus homo, in the form of the old man, and not that of the novus homo, who is in this tale represented by the tavern boy, a symbolic opposite of the old man.⁴⁵ He initiates the search by the three for Death and the old man terminates it.⁴⁶ Further symbolism existing in the implied relationship of the tavern boy and the old man is that both refer to their mothers. One critic believes that the theory of the womb-tomb

⁴¹Ibid., p. 50. ⁴²Ibid., p. 49. ⁴³David, p. 42. ⁴⁴Miller, p. 197. ⁴⁵Ibid. ⁴⁶Todd, p. 35.
cycle is implied here, that is, that the mother is the first world of the child and the last world of the adult. He believes this implication can be found in the text: "And on the ground, which is my moodres gate, / I knokke with my staf, bothe erly and late" (lines 729-730). The words "erly" and "late" are the key, corresponding to the womb-tomb theory.

However the old man may be interpreted, he is connected either directly or indirectly with death. As some critics point out, his pointing the way to the oak tree is specifically symbolic of his connection with death. In some folktales there is the belief that Death is excluded from sacred groves; therefore, the old man, representing Death, can only direct the three revellers there, but he can not go there himself. This theory, however, ignores the fact that the old man has just been in that grove; he says to the revellers, "For in that grove I lafte hym, by my fey" (line 762).

The single oak tree itself is sacred to all Aryan nations in Europe as "the tree of the dead and the abode of the departed spirits." There was a ceremonial ritual performed in various parts of Europe in connection with the coming of spring in which an effigy of Death was buried under an oak tree so that

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47Ibid.  
48Barakat, p. 212.  
49Ibid., as quoted from Maria Leach, editor, Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology and Legend (New York, 1950), II, 806.
he would depart from the people.\footnote{Frederick H. Candelaria, "Chaucer's 'Fowle Ok' and The Pardoner's Tale," Modern Language Notes, LXXI (May, 1956), 321.} That ceremony established an association between the oak tree and death. In other folk legends the oak tree symbolizes death by its association with the cross, the gallows, and the stake.\footnote{Todd, p. 38.} According to one scholar, there is a parallel between the "oak" of the \textit{Pardoner's Tale} and the tree bearing forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden. Both trees change from being life-giving plants to sources of everlasting death, both as a result of sin committed at their bases.\footnote{Ibid.} The "oak" symbolizes \textit{cupiditas}, for it is the tree of evil or of death, at whose roots the three revellers find earthly treasure, not the treasure of Heaven for which they should have been seeking.\footnote{Miller, p. 196.}

The symbolic advice of the old man to the three revellers enables them to find Death, but not to \textit{slay} Death as they had vowed. The symbolism in his words is explained by one scholar who believes the "croked wey" is symbolic because of its being the opposite of the straight and narrow; the words "in that grove" really mean in that false paradise of cupidity; and "under a tree" is symbolic because that is where Adam and Eve first found Death.\footnote{Ibid.}

In another interpretation of the Pardoner's story, the gold florins found at the base of the oak are the symbolic
fruit of the great Mother Earth as is the wine which poisons two of the revellers. Thus, if the "mother" about whom the old man speaks is Mother Earth, she has brought death to the three by her fruits.

The deaths of the three are foreshadowed by the line, "No lenger thanne after Deeth they sought" (line 772), which appears in the tale after they find the gold and forget their vow to slay Death. They need no longer seek Death; though they do not realize it, they have found him. Although the old man directs them to where he says Death is waiting, the gold they find there is not itself Death; Death lies in the avarice of men. One specific form of avarice is pointed out which might be significant, though it would be difficult to decide if Chaucer intended the implication. Since the laws of that day allowed that "treasure" belonged not to the finder, but to the king, the revellers, in their plan to use the gold themselves, also committed thievery.

The Pardoner's Tale is not only a tale about physical life and death, but also about spiritual life and death in the Christian sense. The three revellers are physically but not spiritually young, and they represent what has already

55 Todd, p. 38.


58 David, p. 41.
been called the \textit{vetus homo} or old man, the man of sin not yet reborn in Christ. Their spiritual blindness prevents their recognizing Death when they find it under the oak. They do not notice that they break the oath of brotherhood and become full of greed. The contrast between the quest of Death personified and what the three find, actual physical death, emphasizes the spiritual death which the revellers suffer when they allow greed to overcome them. "Physical death comes to all; but spiritual death is the root of all evil." The quest of the three to slay Death is not entirely meaningless; in Christian belief, the virtuous man should slay Death, which is the inheritance of the \textit{vetus homo}, or the old man of flesh.

The \textit{Pardoner's Tale} has many strong examples of dramatic irony which develop the theme of Death. Since dramatic irony requires that a character not recognize the full impact of what he says or does, the eagerness with which death is sought by the revellers is in perfect contrast with the ease with which it is found. Concerning the old man, there is dramatic irony in his haste to be on his way in search of Death, a haste which leads him away from his goal. This irony is existent only if the old man is considered literally.

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59 Miller, p. 195.  
60 Ibid., p. 196.  
61 Ibid.  
62 Ibid., p. 194.  
63 Root, p. 227.  
64 W. J. B. Owen, p. 52.
by his portrayal as having outlived all ordinary human desires and weaknesses, including the vice most characteristic of old age, the love of money.\(^{65}\)

Death is allegorized in several possible ways in *The Pardoner's Tale*, but the theme of the Dance of Death is most clearly seen if the old man is considered a personification of Death. It is obvious that he fits rather neatly into the characterization of the shrouded figure in the early depictions of the Dance of Death. He does not in any way deliver a summons, but he does lead the revelers to their deaths. The characteristic moral idea that all mortals must eventually meet Death is carried out through the personification of Death in the minds of the three young men. The idea is carried farther to point out that Death is in different forms for different individuals, from the plague to avarice.

The use of three young men by Chaucer may have been related to the *Trois Vifs* of the Dance of Death motif. They, however, fail to see that the gold under the tree is actually themselves dead, or their deaths.

As a tale of Death, *The Pardoner's Tale* is perhaps both symbolic and literal, for Death is presented on many levels and in many ways. Chaucer artistically displays all of these symbols of Death against a background of literal death resulting from the universally recognized horror, the Bubonic Plague. All of these images combine to make an intensely macabre tale.

\(^{65}\)Hamilton, p. 512.
CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

A study of the personification of Death in later Middle English literature makes some conclusions clear. Not only did the preoccupation with ever-present death lead to its thematic use in literature, but its frequent use in literature must surely have nurtured that preoccupation. Although the death theme itself doubtless lost some of its impact in repetition, causing a shift of attention to the physical changes undergone by the body after death, the universal inevitability of death kept it a foremost fear.

When death became personified, some fairly constant trends were developed, the character Death himself being one example. In The Dance of Death, Everyman, Castle of Perseverance, and The Pardoner's Tale, Death appears with various personalities, but he is always a messenger.

The Dance of Death is the basis for the development of the character Death. Although portrayed in various ways in various depictions, he is basically a partially shrouded figure, usually a skeleton, carrying a spear, who delivers his summons to everyone. He appears at times sympathetic, at times vengeful, but always unrelenting.

In the moral plays, personified Death is once again a messenger or the deliverer of a summons. In Everyman Death is a compassionate but firm messenger from God. In The Castle
of Perseverance he is mocking and sarcastic, as though on an errand for the Devil, but he is nevertheless a messenger.

In The Pardoner's Tale the character of Death is not so clear-cut. First introduced through the conversation concerning his recent ravages, he is characterized as a vengeful thief. Further in the tale the three revellers come upon an old man whom they assume to be Death because of his appearance: he is old, dressed in a shroud, and going about the countryside. He delivers what may be considered a message when he directs the three to the gold and to their deaths.

Besides the character Death himself, there is another aspect of the personification which is always developed even more obviously. That is the idea of Death's ultimate power over all men. This idea is fully developed in The Dance of Death, in which all social levels are portrayed, from Pope to Hermit. In the morality plays all levels of society are represented in the single characters of Everyman and Mankind, both of whom represent all men.

In The Pardoner's Tale Death's summons is more subtle and the tale is more complex, but it is still present. In the tavern boy's warning there is the threat of death even for three men still in their youth. The medieval idea that no one is safe underlies the general theme of pestilence and mortality in this tale.
One further development of Death's personification, one seen in all the works studied here, is the motif of the procession following Death or moving toward Death. The basic theme is again The Dance of Death, in which a dancing Death leads a procession of unwilling individuals to their inevitable ends, a motif also apparent in the morality plays studied. Everyman is making a journey to the grave, but it is a procession only in the sense that he is obeying the unavoidable call to follow Death and is accompanied by a decreasing host of followers. Mankind's procession is momentarily delayed several times, but it leads ever to the inescapable conclusion.

A procession is begun in The Pardoner's Tale when the three revellers leave the tavern in their search for Death. They proceed straight to what they seek, although enroute they forget what they are seeking. The concept of Death which they carry in their minds is the leader in their procession. Thus, the personification of Death in later Middle English literature follows a clearly traceable pattern, which has its source in several continental versions of The Dance of Death.
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