Death Takes A Grisly Shape

Medieval and Renaissance Iconography

It has become a historical commonplace to speak of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Europe as a society obsessed with death. Many reasons have been advanced for this "obsession": the violence of the age; the preaching of the mendicant friars, whose appeals to the emotions and whose continual cries of "memento mori" were designed to bring the worldly or heretical home to Mother Church; and the onslaught of the Black Plague, which left corpses piled in the streets or in huge communal graves. But valid as all these reasons may be for an obsession with death, to posit them as reasons is to beg the question—to assume that the obsession existed.

There is an old story about the traveler who stopped in a rural village where modern civilization had not yet spread its blessings. Appalled at the primitive conditions in the village, he asked a local resident, "My good man, what is your death rate here?" The villager thought for a moment and replied: "Hundred percent. Everybody dies."

The death rate of the human race has always been one hundred percent, and few societies have failed to notice the fact. Indeed, the very historians who speak of the late medieval "obsession" with death cannot help mentioning the extensive death literature of other ages; Johan Huizinga speaks of the long history
of the *ubi sunt* lyric, dating back to ancient Greece; Leonard P. Kurtz describes the "skeleton at the feast" used as memento mori in ancient Rome; Theodore Spencer deals at great length with the death literature of Graeco-Roman antiquity, as well as with the *contemptus mundi* literature of the early church fathers; and Willard Farnham traces death literature from Greek tragedy through Seneca and the early church fathers, and finally to the great twelfth-century *De Contemptu Mundi* of Pope Innocent III.¹

The "old, old fashion, Death," as Dickens calls it,² has never been far from the human mind. The question, then, is not why the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries were more concerned with death than was any other age, but how they chose to cope with a perennial problem: the hundred percent death rate of humankind.

The most prominent figures of death in this period, are, of course, the decomposed corpse and the skeleton. Indeed, we have grown so accustomed to this type of personification that we hardly recognize any other symbol; but other forms were occasionally attempted. At Pisa, in the Campo Santo fresco of the Last Judgment (ca. 1350), death is represented by a bat-winged woman shrouded in long veils, who flies over the world reaping groups of young people with her scythe.³ And in the late-fourteenth-century poem *Death and Life*, Death is a hideous old crone armed with a mace and darts:

> Her eyes farden as the fyer that in the furnace burns;
> They were hollow in her head, with full heavye browes;
> Her leres were leane, with lipps full side;
> With a marvelous mouth, full of main tushes;
> & the nebb of her nose to her navell hanged.
> & her lere like the lead that latelye was beaten.⁴

"Dame Death," in this poem, has a basilisk gaze from her hollow eye-sockets, and whatever she touches dies. "The greene grasse in her gate she grindeth all to powder" (193); the very birds of the air lose their power to fly, and the fish forget how to swim, "Ffor dread of Dame Death that dolefully threates" (198). As she approaches the field full of folk who are doing homage to Lady
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Liffe, she reaches for her weapons and slaughters thousands of them, much in the manner of the Triumphs and Dances of Death that were becoming popular at the time:

In the roughest of the rout shee reacheth forth darts;
There shee fell att the first fflappe fiftene hundred
Of comelye queenes with crowne, & kings full noble;
Proud princes in the presse prestlye she quellethe;
Of dukes that were doughtye shee dang out the braynes;
Merry maydens on the mold shee mightilye killethe;
There might no weapon them warrant nor no walled towne;
Crism-children in their cradle shee craddantly dighteth.

A debate ensues between Death and Life, during which Death claims to have vanquished all the great figures of the past, including Christ himself. Life replies that Death has not won but has, rather, brought about Christ's resurrection, the Harrowing of Hell, and Death's own damnation. Life then raises the slain, tells them that they need fear Death no more, and flies away with them.

Such a poem seems curiously out of place among the invincible Deaths of the period, not only because its shows a female personification, but because it has an unrealistic ending for the time. The people of the late-fourteenth-century England were in the midst of watching Death's darts strike down fifteen hundred "att a fflappe," but no Lady Liffe was stepping in to raise them up. These were the plague years, and they seemed to stretch on and on with no relief; proud princes and chrism-children in their cradles lay strewn about the countryside, rotting.

It may very well be, then, that these all too visible signs of death—the ever present rotting corpses—determined the course that death literature and art were to take for the next two centuries. The materials had been available earlier, of course; tomb inscriptions as early as the twelfth century had admonished passers-by to think of the body within because they too would one day be dust (Ariès, 218–20), and folklore spoke of revenants from the grave who summoned the living to death or warned
them to reform. Furthermore, the growing worldly attachments of medieval society had called forth de contemptu mundi treatises in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and the new orders of friars did indeed find the theme useful in reminding their flocks that there was another world to prepare for, and that death spares no one. In many of these sermons, according to Robert Potter, “death [was] actually depicted as the sergeant or bailiff of God, come to arrest an errant mankind.” Motivation by fear, yes; but ironically, it was this fearful personification that the later Middle Ages seized upon for comfort.

The first indication of the course that the image would take comes in the earliest known versions of the Legend of the Three Living and Three Dead, a series of French poems written toward the end of the thirteenth century. In these poems, three proud young men encounter three skeletons or corpses who warn them about the vanities of the world. After a brief dialogue, the young men depart, determined to amend their lives. The whole episode appears to be rather perfunctory and perhaps was modeled on the tomb inscriptions of the time, but in its later development in art and literature the theme acquires more symbolism, and much more drama.

In the fourteenth century, the Three Dead were often more differentiated from each other, particularly in their progress from corpse to skeleton. Part of the fresco in the Campo Santo shows three young men on horseback who have come upon three coffins lying in their path. In the first lies a body still bloated after a recent death; in the second, a partially decomposed corpse; and in the third, a skeleton. Over all three coffins are crawling long worms almost as large as snakes. In other such pictures of the time, the remnants of clothing on the corpses may indicate that the living are confronting themselves as they will someday be, the theme of the relentless passing of time being intensified by the progressive decay of the different corpses.

If these fourteenth-century depictions of the Legend owe much to the old warnings on the tombstones, the fifteenth-century versions generally come closer to the Dance of Death, which was then becoming popular. The corpses no longer lie quietly by
the roadside; they walk or run after the living, sometimes to warn, but more often (in the later depictions) to kill. One early picture is still symbolically balanced: the Three Dead are, as usual, in progressive stages of decay, but the Three Living are now differentiated in time as well. The youngest, a prince, holds a scepter; the middle-aged man, an emperor, is dressed for battle; and the eldest, a pope, has his hands clasped in prayer. The Dead wear the same headgear as the Living whom they face, and the most decomposed corpse faces the youngest of the Living. Oddly enough, the Dead, naked except for their crowns, do not hold weapons, but keep their hands crossed modestly over their genitals (Tristram, pi. 25).

Several things have happened to the Legend from the time of its first appearance to these latest ones. First, the figures of death take more and more initiative in confronting the Living. Second, the Dead progress from tomb warnings on someone else’s grave, through a still life of the individual’s own recognizable progress to dust, to an impersonal force rushing to capture the individual. Third, and perhaps most important, the figure changes from a warning about the future to an immediate danger in the present.

By this time, of course, the Dance of Death had become popular as well, and the two motifs no doubt influenced each other as they developed. According to Florence Warren, the earliest painted Dance of Death, at Klingenthal, Little Basel, may date from 1312; but the most famous, and probably the most influential, was the one at the Church of Holy Innocents in Paris. This elaborately rendered Dance, encompassing all classes and ages of society, is generally thought to have been painted around 1420-24, although Warren points out that there seem to be references to it as early as the reign of Charles V, who died in 1380.

The origins of the Dance are obscure—not in their paucity but in their superabundance. The influence of the friars’ sermons is immediately evident in the idea of death as a bailiff of God, with its hand on every person’s shoulder; the Legend, too, casts its shadow, particularly since early versions of the Dance make it clear that the corpse who comes for each person is that person
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as he or she will be. The concept of a progress or pilgrimage, a movement away to the grave, may also owe something to the medieval *vado morti* lyric, in which representatives of different classes announce that they are “traveling to death” in stanzas that begin and end with the chilling words, *vado morti*, or, in the English versions, “I wende to dede”:

I wende to ded, knight stithe in stoure,
thurghe fyght in felde i wane the flour;
Na fightis me taght the dede to quell—
i weend to dede, soth i yow tell.

I weende to dede, a kynge l-wisse;
What helpis honor or werldis blysse?
Dede is to mane the kynde wai—
i wende to be clad in clay.

I wende to dede, clerk ful of skill,
that couth with worde men mare & dill.
Sone has me made the dede ane ende—
bees ware with me! to dede i wende.¹⁰

But most significant of all is the evidence that the Dance may have originated in dramatic form, only later being translated into the media of paint and verse. The old Mummer’s Plays, indeed, generally contained some form of death-dance, probably based on pagan fertility rituals, during which a member of the company would be ritually “beheaded” and then resurrected, either with or without an intervening dance of mourning. Later, during the first decades of the great plagues that swept across Europe (ca. 1340–80), folk dances called “The Death Dance” or “Dance of the Dead” became popular throughout Europe. In these dances, one member of the dance would act as corpse while the others danced round him or her, pretending to mourn but actually taking liberties with the “corpse’s” person. In some cases, naturally, the dance was used as an occasion for horseplay and practical jokes; in other cases, even more naturally, it was used as an excuse for kissing and fondling the “deceased” (Warren, xiv–xv). Such dances lasted well into the seventeenth century,
although ecclesiastics frowned on the custom and tried to stop it—mostly, one imagines, because of the ribaldry of the action, but also because of the pagan associations of witchcraft, demon lovers, and fairy rings, to which the dances no doubt owed a good deal.

But the churchmen themselves had a dramatized version of the Dance. There are indications that sermons on death, so popular with the friars, may have been accompanied by pageants of antiphonal processions, much in the manner of the famous *Quem quaeritis*; and by the fifteenth century, the pageants seem to have grown into full-scale processions in fancy dress, just as the *Quem quaeritis* itself grew into the elaborate cycles of Mystery Plays. In 1449, a “danse Macabre” was performed at Bruges by a full company of players before Duke Philippe le Bon of Burgundy; and the cathedral records at Besançon for July 1453 show a payment of “four measures of wine” to players who performed the Dance of Death after Mass (Warren, xi).

It is interesting to speculate on how these players may have been costumed. Although we have descriptions of some skeleton costumes for use in the later Mystery and Morality Plays, Death in the early painted Dances was not always an impersonal skeleton, but more often “le Mort,” the dead person himself, come to claim the living. The paintings that survive show desiccated mummies, with the flesh rotted away but the skin still taut over the remaining bones and sometimes split open at the abdomen. In some pictures, the mummies are holding musical instruments; in others, they carry the many weapons associated with death; spears, arrows, spades, rakes, scythes, and maces. In some, they wear tatters of winding-sheets; in others, bits of costume appropriate to the living whom they have come to summon. In all the pictures, the dead seem to have more energy than the living; the mummies caper and cavort along the walls, while most of the living either stand rooted to the spot or hang back with sorrowful looks on their faces. There is little doubt as to who has the advantage in these Dances, and it is certainly not Lady Liffe.

The most telling evidence that the Dance was conceived of in dramatic terms lies in the nature of the verses that accompany...
the paintings. These are highly individualized addresses by Death to the living, each address directed to the estate or profession of the victim; and usually there is a reply in kind from the living to Death. In the great Dance at Holy Innocents, the individual dramas are made more pointed—and more poignant—by the almost infinitely varied responses of the characters: one is frightened, another puzzled, a third resigned, still another indignant, and so on. The impact of such individualized responses on the development of tragedy can hardly be stressed enough.

John Lydgate, who composed the verses for the famous Dance of Death in St. Paul’s, actually translated them from the verses at Holy Innocents, probably sometime before 1433. They are a remarkably accurate rendering, despite the modest disclaimer given in “Lenvoye de translatoure” at the end:

Owte of the frensshe / I drowe hit of entent
Not worde be worde / but folwyng the substantce
And fro Paris / to Inglond hit sent
Oneli of purpose / yow to do plesaunce
Rude of language / y was not borne yn fraunce
Haue me excused / my name is Jon Lidgate
Of her tunge / I haue no suffisaunce
Her corious metris / in Inglissh to translate.11

Although Lydgate’s verses remained in manuscript until 1554 (twelve manuscripts in all), they must have been quite well known to the many who were familiar with the Dance at St. Paul’s; and that many were in fact familiar with this Dance is indicated by Sir Thomas More’s casual reference, shortly before his death, to “the Daunce of Death pictured in Poules.”12 Tottel later printed the verses in his edition of Lydgate’s Fall of Princes (1554), during the vast popularity of such de casibus collections of the time, from which many dramatists drew material for their histories and tragedies.

The overriding theme of the Dance of Death is death’s leveling quality: all humankind will be taken, young and old, rich and poor, high and low degree. To people accustomed to seeing rich and poor tumbled together into vast burial pits during the
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rich and poor tumbled together into vast burial pits during the plague, this must have seemed real enough—and, Theodore Spencer adds, the element of satire implicit in such enforced equality must have been “one which the rising bourgeois class could contemplate with considerable pleasure.”

Death, in Lydgate’s verses, alters his tone according to the person addressed. To the lawyer, he speaks in legal jargon; to the wealthy man, he issues an order to leave his riches; to the powerful, he speaks of the power of death; to the pious, he offers compliments on their preparation to receive him; to the gamester, he says “check-mat”; and to the laborer he offers rest. His words to the “amerous Squyere” are as lovely as the delights of love, and as poignant as all the poetic laments for youth that sing through the lyrics of Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Marvell:

Ye that be Jentel / so fresshe & amerous
Of yeres yonge / floweryng in yowre grene age
Lusti fre of herte / and eke desyrous
Ful of deuyse / and chaunge yn yowre corage
Pleasaunt of porte / of loke & [of] of visage
But al shal turne / in to asshes dede
For al beaute / is but a feynyte ymage
Which steleth a-wai / or folkes can take hede.

(433–40)

To the Constable, Death speaks like an arresting officer: “Hit is my right / to reste & yow constrayn // With vs to daunce / my maiester Constable” (137–38). And to the Canon he utters the phrase later made famous by Everyman: “Dethe cometh ai / when men lest on hym thenke” (320).

The replies are as varied as the summonses. Some bid rueful adieus to their worldly pleasures, some realize that they have wasted their lives, others are frustrated at being interrupted in mid-career, and the Sergeant—like all such officials through the ages—is downright indignant:

How dar this dethe / sette on me a-reste
That am the kynges / chosen officere
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Which yesterdai / bothe este & weste
Myn office dede / ful surquedous of chere. . . .

(369-72)

The Juror, too, refuses to give in with good grace; as he is dragged off, he consoles himself with the thought that he has made men so miserable, they will be glad to see him go.

The Carthusian is more amenable to the summons, although, as he admits, no matter how good the preparation, every man “Dredeth to dye / be kyndeli mocioun // After his flessheli / Inclynacioun” (356-57). Still, he prays that God will accept his soul and his poor efforts, and closes with the audience-directed observation that “Somme ben to dai / that shul not be to morowe” (360). His ambivalence is echoed by the Laborer, who is not quite sure whether he really wants what he has prayed for:

I haue wisshed / after dethe ful ofte
Al-be that I wolde / haue fled hym nowe
I had leuere / to haue leyne vnsofte
In wynde & reyne / & haue gon att plowe
With spade & pikeys / and labored for my prow
Dolue and diched / & atte Carte goon
For I mai sey / & telle playnli howe
In this worlde / here ther is reste noon.

(553-60)

The Child, too, allows himself a plaintive, inarticulate cry before he resigns himself to the “wille of god”:

A a a / a worde I can not speke
I am so yonge / I was bore yisterdai. . . .
I cam but now / and now I go my wai. . . .

(585-86, 589)

But it is the Monk whose voice will ring through the dark tragedies of the Jacobean age. He will try to repent, he says, but even if he cannot, he will put a good face on things—and perhaps he is not the only one doing so:
God of his merci / graunte me repentaunce
Be chere owtewarde / hard to deuyce
Al ben not meri / which that men seen daunce.

(390-92)

These lines, it must be noted, are a dramatic improvement on the French, which conclude only, "Chascun nest pas joyeux qui danse." Although Lydgate may have added "that men seen" only to fill out his English meter, he has added a new note of isolation to the idea of the joyless dance. Now the soul is alone among a crowd of spectators who cannot apprehend his grief—a motif that will reach its apex in Calantha, dancing as her heart-strings crack in The Broken Heart.

Lydgate's Dance concludes with a set piece: "The kynge liggyng dede & eten with wormes" (LXXX, marg. note). And indeed it is the sense of bodily corruption that pervades the death-images of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century art. It is in the fifteenth century, for example, that the popularity of the double tomb-monument became most popular: above, the recumbent figure of the man as he appeared in life, and below, a rotting corpse crawling with worms. Even the ghostly revenant of the folk-ballad seems to have taken pleasure in showing off its worm-eaten remains, as in this variation of one of the countless "Sweet William" ballads:

"Gin ye be Clerk Saunders, my true-love
   This meikle marvels me;
Oh wherein is your bonny arms
   That wont to embrace me?"

"By worms they're eaten, in mools they're rotten,
   Behold, Margarete, and see,
And mind, for a' your mickle pride,
   Sae will become o' thee."

Through painting and prayer book the corpse dances or hunts, waving its rotted arms and displaying its split-open belly. In the early Legends and Dances, it is an image of the self to come—almost, one may say, an image of the self after selfhood
has departed. It shows up in the hunt, it hovers over the grave, and, as in the *Hours of Rohan* (1420), it may even enter the sickroom with a coffin on its shoulder. In almost all these cases, there is a one-on-one relationship: the individual facing his own end.

But there was another face of death as well. In the many Triumphs of Death that were pictured at this time, the old idea of Death as Conqueror, the Horseman of the Apocalypse, rides through towns on ox-drawn triumphal carts, mowing down everyone in his path, and apparently unstoppable. In some depictions, such as the one in the *Très Riches Heures de Duc de Berry* he leads vast armies of corpses against a town, and peasant and king alike fall before the invasion. Here, as Phillippe Ariès remarks, “Death is a symbol of blind fate, very different, apparently, from the individualism of ... danses macabres. ... The Death of the Triumphs comes without warning.”

There is a subtle but important distinction between these two types of portrayals. In the Legends and Dances, death is an individual confrontation between the self and its end; the individual has time, even as death lays its icy hand on his arm, to make preparation and resign himself to necessity. If there is fear involved in the encounter, there is also the comfort of the breathing-space and of the chance to reply to the summons, to utter a last affirmation of selfhood. For the audience, too, there is a distancing effect of watching the encounter and participating vicariously in the exchange, perhaps even of being able to approve or disapprove of a soul’s response to the summons.

But in the Triumphs of Death, there is no chance to participate actively or vicariously; the thousands overthrown by the armed and crowned corpse have no chance to talk back, no selection of possibilities open to them even at the moment of death. They are not even individuals any more; they are crowds. In a way, the piles of corpses that strew the ground in the wake of Death’s Triumph are like the damned in the Last Judgment paintings whose moment of judgment is past, leaving them no hope and no recourse.
And in this sense, another image of death, the “Drery Deth” who stands crowned and alone, grinning out of the frame or manuscript at the viewer, is a logical extension of the Triumph. The Legend is a warning, the Dance a summons, and the Triumph a final judgment; but they are all happening to other people. The Dreary Death puts the viewer into the picture, making him one of the Living in the Legend, who must now give his own answer to the warning or summons.

Certainly, the prevalence of so many faces of Death would seem to argue for the “obsession” that so many historians have seen in the late Middle Ages. And yet, was it really an obsession? Or was it rather an understandable attempt to deal with a very present danger: the inexplicable epidemics that entered a town and slew hundreds in the midst of their revelry; the corpses piled up along the streets; the uncertainty, as one put on one’s finest clothes in the morning, as to whether one would die in them before sundown?

When the human mind is faced with the incomprehensible, with chaos or destruction on too vast a scale to be absorbed, the natural impulse is to make the concept more familiar so that it can be dealt with; paradoxically, the closer a thing can be brought, the more it can be distanced. And much as Johan Huizinga has added to our knowledge of the late Middle Ages, his failure to recognize this impulse that lies behind the death art of the period has led him into misconceptions—even condemnations—of the societies with which he deals:

The dominant thought, as expressed in the literature, both ecclesiastical and lay, of the period, hardly knew anything with regard to death but these two extremes: lamentation about the briefness of all earthly glory, and jubilation over the salvation of the soul. All that lay between—pity, resignation, longing, consolation—remained unexpressed and was, so to say, absorbed by the too much accentuated and too vivid representation of Death hideous and threatening (135).

Nothing shows better the primitive character of the hyper-idealistic mentality, called realism in the Middle Ages,
than the tendency to ascribe a sort of substantiality to abstract concepts (199).

The key to Huizinga's conception of the age, of course, lies in his use of the word *primitive*, a word he uses frequently about people of the period, along with *savage, barbaric, and childish*. Such condescension indicates that the speaker has not thought of his subjects in fully human terms or has insisted that the only proper terms are his own. But each age, Huizinga notwithstanding, develops its own mental shorthand to deal with its own problems, and this shorthand, for the people who use it, implies all the things that "lie between."

In reality, the "pity, resignation, longing, consolation" were not "unexpressed"; we have seen them expressed in the words and attitudes of the participants in Lydgate's Dance of Death and the varied reactions of the Living in the Legend. Even the lyrics that seem to have been based on iconographic representations are remarkably complex in their simplicity:

> This lyfe, I see, is but a cherye feyre;  
> All thyngis passene and so most I algate.  
> To-day I sat full ryall in a cheyere,  
> Tyll sotell deth knokyd at m y gate,  
> And on-avysed he seyd to me, chek-mat!  
> lo! how sotell he maketh a devors—  
> and wormys to fede, he hath here leyd my cors.¹⁹

There is a certain universality in such a rueful confrontation with one's own end, and even the image of death knocking at the door seems to be a timeless one. To this day, many Orthodox Jews, during the week of solemn mourning after a funeral, do not knock at the door of the bereaved when paying condolence visits because the knock is associated with the Angel of Death who has taken the deceased.

The adaptations of the *vado mori* lyric are similarly imbued with the wistfulness of passing, as are the many versions of the *Timor mortis conturbat me*, a lyric originally describing the
reconciliation to one's own death, but combined by Dunbar with the *ubi sunt* and Dance of Death traditions into broader terms:

The stait of man dois change and vary,
Now sound, now seik, now blith, now sary,
Now dansand mery, now like to dee;

*Timor mortis conturbat me.*

On to the ded gois all Estatis,
Princis, Prelotis, and Potestatis,
Baith riche and pur of al degre;

*Timor mortis conturbat me.*

The insistent depiction, then, of death as a concrete object to be faced, and even faced down, is a method of seeking to define the unknown, to order chaos, and, by giving to airy nothing a local habitation and a name, to find comfort in familiar things, no matter how ugly. As Philippa Tristram has so keenly observed: "[I]t is sometimes more helpful to know that a nightmare is shared, than to be told that it does not exist. They were haunted by images of physical corruption, but by animating and confronting these figures, they brought themselves face to face with their own fears, and learnt what they could from them" (183).

In this regard, it is interesting to reexamine Chaucer's *Pardoner's Tale*, one of the most chilling in the annals of death literature. The three young men gladly run off in pursuit of a Death whom they hear personified as a "theef," because a defined figure is easy to deal with. The Pardoner's audience, however—and Chaucer's—would no doubt have been horrified at this evidence of pride in the young men, since Death is always pictured as invincible by all except Christ, and the listeners would have expected to hear a description of the usual grisly figure cutting the young men down in their tracks. Instead, the young men meet an old man who complains that he cannot die, and who directs them to a tree where he has just seen Death. Under the tree, the young men find gold, and in their avarice kill each other; they have found death after all—but in themselves.
We who are unused to taking fourteenth-century iconography seriously may absorb the moral correctly but miss the implications of the encounter with the old man. Chaucer’s audience would most likely have recognized this encounter as a modified version of the Legend, in which the Living are called to repentance by a vision of what they will become; and the old man, as a symbol of age, is also a symbol of mutability. In some pictures of the time, Age is indeed used as a substitute for the mummies of the Legend, or may be seen as a figure revolving to the bottom of Fortune’s wheel, while in *Piers Plowman*, Elde is the messenger of Dethe. Furthermore, the fact that the old man is immortal (much as he bemoans the fact) hints at a supernatural presence—and it must be remembered that Death was considered the one earthly being who could not die, at least until the Last Judgment. So the fourteenth-century audience would have seen a good deal more of the supernatural in the tale than we do today, and would have recognized the young men’s response as one of the many variants in the Legend. And, unlike the young men, they would have “learnt from” the encounter.

But symbols, as we have noted, are mental shorthand for accepted communal ideas, and when those ideas change, the symbols must change as well. Fourteenth- and fifteenth-century symbolic representations of death were built onto a particular theological framework, without which they lose much of their meaning. When theologians of the sixteenth century began restructuring that framework, new symbols had to be found to replace what now seemed like mere decoration, or as Huizinga called it too early, “the abused imagery of skeletons and worms” (135). A detailed analysis of what that framework was, and how it changed, will be given in chapter 2; meanwhile, let us examine the change in the symbol itself.

At the turn of the sixteenth century, two particularly significant changes became evident in representations of Death: first, the corpse or mummy virtually disappears, giving way almost entirely to the skeleton; and second, the skeleton begins to hide from its victims far more often than it did in earlier representa-
tions. It is possible, of course, that the change from decayed flesh to bare bones is simply a manifestation of increased Renaissance knowledge of anatomy, with a concomitant desire to show off this new knowledge, but the effect is to divorce the symbol one step further from the human, and to make the figure more impersonal. And by having the figure lurk in the background—behind trees, under tables, behind the subjects’ backs—early sixteenth-century artists diminished the medieval idea of confrontation and warning at the moment of death, substituting for it a sense of pervasive death—the intangible threat lurking in every corner.

The works of Dürer and Holbein may serve as examples of the symbol in transition. Dürer, in particular, shows Death in both medieval and Renaissance guises, as though he and his society had not yet come to terms with the new philosophy. His Fourth Horseman of the Apocalypse (ca. 1498) is an emaciated old man with a long beard and wild, rolling eyes, who rides an equally emaciated horse and wields a trident or rake. He and his companions gallop across the bodies of peasants and citizens much in the manner of the Triumphs of Death. In “The Promenade,” another early engraving, Death is a skeletonic mummy with an hourglass, who hides behind a tree in the background, laughing at two lovers. In a sketch made during the plague year of 1505, Death becomes a crowned skeleton with a scythe, riding a skeletal horse; but unlike the usual Dreary Death, which faces out at the viewer, this skeleton rides off at right angles to the viewer, paying him no attention whatsoever. And finally, in “Knight, Death, and Devil” (ca. 1513), although Death retains his medieval trappings—the crowned and bearded mummy with hourglass and full complement of worms—now it is the Knight who pays no attention. The significant point about this variation on the Legend is that the Knight is implicitly commended for ignoring Death; his faith has entitled him, not to meet it philosophically, but to pretend that it is not there. In the old Legend, it will be remembered, the Living who ignored Death’s message were the wastrels, like Chaucer’s three young men.
Holbein, too, puts the old symbols to new uses. His *Dance of Death* (ca. 1525) echoes the medieval form in showing all classes of people subject to Death, and in varying the responses of the victims to his summons. The monk, abbot, merchant, and abbess scream and try to break free of Death's grip; the bishop is resigned but not happy; the rich man is frantic over the loss of his wealth (Death is scooping up his gold); the child is puzzled; and the pedlar, frankly irritated at being interrupted in his journey. A singularly comforting Death, however, helps the old man into his grave, while a more questionably helpful Death drives the ploughman's horses quickly through the last furrow toward a setting sun.25

All these representations contain the subtle medieval nuances of the soul's confrontation with death. But in many of the other pictures in the series, Death (an impersonal skeleton) is invisible to the subject of his summons. The judge, advocate, and councillor go on taking bribes without noticing him; the countess continues to pick out clothing, unaware that Death has put a necklace of bones around her neck; the noblewoman smiles at her husband, apparently oblivious to the drumroll that Death is performing on a tabor hung somewhat obscenely between his legs; and the nun, turning from her prayers to look at a young man with a lute, does not notice Death dressed as a chambermaid, putting out the candles.

This fading of Death into the background, which paradoxically made it more frightening, became a common motif of sixteenth-century portrait painting. Holbein himself did some of these portraits with the subject gazing into space while a skeleton with scythe and hourglass grins behind his shoulder;26 and in the famous "The Ambassadors," even the viewer is tricked into overlooking Death from any but a certain angle. At the bottom of the picture, there is what looks like an off-white diagonal smudge, but when the viewer stands directly below and slightly to the left of the canvas, looking up, the "smudge" resolves itself into a skull.27

After Holbein, only a few attempts at the Dance of Death survive, and the change in viewpoint becomes more evident as
they progress. A 1569 broadside, “The Daunce and Song of Death,” shows the traditional circle of dancers, three skeletons and six people: a king, a beggar, an old man, a child, a wise man, and a fool. Oddly enough, the wise man and the old man seem the most reluctant to join the dance, while the king smiles bravely and the beggar, child, and fool kick up their heels. In the four corners of the sheet, tableaux show skeletons arresting a miser, a justice, a prisoner, and a pair of lovers, of whom only the prisoner looks Death in the face. The reluctance of the old man and the wise man to go with Death are novelties in themselves, but the most significant change in this Dance is that the Summons itself is issued not by Death but by a new figure: “Sycknes Deathes minstrel,” a figure with a skull’s head but fully fleshed body covered with sores, who sits on a chair made of bones, propped on a pick and shovel over an open grave. He plays a tabor and sings an invitation to the Dance—but except for their physical attitudes, no one answers.

Another broadside, published in 1580 and beginning, “Marke well the effect purtreyed here,” seems in many ways closer to the old tradition but also takes a new turn. In the background, gentlemen and ladies are feasting in an arbor, while Death (a skeleton) runs up to them with spear poised to throw. This is close enough to the hunting versions of the Legend to have the old flavor. Again, in the foreground, stand five figures: a bishop, a king, a harlot, a lawyer, and a “country clown.” Although an odd assortment of folk, it is representative of the variety featured in the Dance. The difference is that none of the five notices that Death has entered the picture from the right, one hand grasping a spear and the other reaching out toward the clown’s shoulder. The verses printed below the woodcut indicated that the five Living are thinking only of power politics in this world, while Death’s speech in the verses tells the reader that his power will soon destroy that of the other figures. The verses are summarized in mottoes printed under the six figures; those under the five Living clearly show that they do not realize that they have been joined by a sixth personage:
Bishop: I praye for yov fower.
King: I defende yov fower.
Harlot: I vanqvesh yov fower.
Lawyer: I helpe yov IIII to yovr right.
Cowln: I feede yov fower.
Death: I kill yov all.

This is the hidden death that offers no warning at the moment of arrest, and as will be seen in chapter 2, it is a logical outcome of the change in deathbed literature, which has turned from the moment of death and focused instead on the "death in the midst of life," the entire life span viewed as a preparation for death.

By this time, in fact, both the Dance and the Legend have lost much of their medieval quality of warning, retaining only the satiric note. As early as 1604, Samuel Rowlands's Looke To It: For, Ile Stabbe Ye, while ostensibly an address by Death to wrongdoers, is little more than a satire on those wrongdoers, with a refrain of "Ile stabbe ye" following each verse "character." Death, here, is almost an afterthought, and the giving of the warning only to malefactors makes death seem like a specific punishment for evil; the universal summons of death—and its occasional comfort—is no longer a part of the message.

Rowlands approaches the traditional Dance more closely in A Terrible Battell Betweene Time and Death (ca. 1606). Here, Time and Death discuss the people whom they have just taken, and although much of their discussion is given to satire against social types, they do present a "good" death as well as all the retributive ones: a divine who has lived a good life and can therefore accept death gracefully. However, Time and Death soon fall out over questions of each other's importance, and the ensuing slapstick and name-calling give the remainder of the poem an untraditional air of the comic grotesque, which will be discussed at greater length in chapter 10.

By the 1630s, the new satiric tradition was firmly in place. A 1631 ballad entitled "Deaths Daunce. To be sung to a pleasant new tune call'd Oh no, no, no, not yet or, the meddow brow," despite its woodcuts of skeletons, is not a Dance at all;
it is, rather, a satirical attack on roguery, much in the manner of Rowlands but in the conditional mood—as though there were a choice:

If Death would go to Westminster,
to walke about the Hall,
And make himself a Counsellor,
in pleas amongst them all,
I thinke the Court of Conscience,
would have a great regard,
When Death should come with diligence,
to have their matter heard.

(st.5)

And finally, Walter Colman’s La Dance Machabre, or Deaths Duell (1633), although a frequently moving poem, is neither dance nor duel but a combination of social satire and ubi sunt. The title page, to be sure, looks promising: eight scenes of daily life in varied classes of society line both sides of the page, four panels to a side. At the top of the center section sits Death, a skeleton armed with a spear; and at the bottom, Time, a bearded and winged old man with hourglass and scythe, kneels on a globe that represents the world. On the frontispiece, a skeleton holds a spade and leans on a broken column in a graveyard (looking a little bored), and beneath him is the traditional motto: “Behould fonde man I am what thou shalt be / And as thou art soe was I once like thee.”

Colman has obviously tried hard to recapture the atmosphere of the allegorical memento mori, but although the trappings are traditional, the flavor is modern. His theme is primarily the vanity of human wishes; he sees man as food for worms, and worms as gluttons of the graveyard, but the emphasis of the meditation is on the body; the afterlife of the soul is not addressed. The final effect, then, is an implication that death is the end of everything. Unlike both the medieval preachers and the Renaissance preachers and essayists, Colman does not see the other side of this “quintessence of dust”: the soul that is an image of God or that can redeem its own death by meeting death bravely.
So the Dance of Death has turned comic, or has gone back to the ubi sunt whence it came; but meanwhile, what has become of the memento mori? From the beginning of the sixteenth century, it almost seems as though the skeleton, in order to retain its meaning, had to be taken to pieces, and the skull alone, that age-old symbol of mortality, still holds its own as the dreadful warning—for a while.

Skelton, early in the century, was still able to abstract an old moral from the “deedmans hed” that a friend had sent him:

I haue well espyde
No man may hym hyde
From Deth holow eyed,
With synnews wyderyd,
With bonys shyderyd,
With his worme etyn maw,
And his gastly jaw
Gaspyng asyde,
Nakyd of hyde,
Neyther flesh nor fell.  

But in Holbein’s “The Ambassadors,” already discussed as perhaps the best memento mori device of the century, one of the ambassadors wears a death’s-head amulet; and in this amulet are the seeds of change.

During the latter half of the sixteenth century, while the animated skeleton behind the subject’s shoulder disappears in portraits, the skull begins showing up more often at the subject’s elbow or in his hand. It is difficult to account for this distinction between what must be hidden and what may be displayed or regarded, except to note that the skull is immobile. It has no legs on which to approach the subject, no hands with which to seize him; it is an end product, safely dead, that may aid contemplation but poses a warning only, not a threat.

By the end of the sixteenth century, the inanimate skull was so common that it had become first an item of fashion and then an object of derision. All classes of society began wearing death’s-head rings, much in the manner that people today wear religious
symbols: some as a genuine aid to prayer; some as an outward show of faith; and some, no doubt, as a matter of fashion, because everyone else had one. As the fashion spread, prostitutes began wearing the rings as well, probably as an effort to appear "respectable"; but as the sign became almost universal among members of the profession, it eventually came to be regarded as an advertisement of the wearer's trade. And over the years, the symbol thus became not a manifestation of the thing it was meant to symbolize but rather an object in itself—not a reminder of death but a protection against it, a lucky charm that would allow the wearer to forget about death.

In spite of this, however, one would think that the growing vogue of emblem books, at least, would maintain the old iconography of death, since they were based on story-through-symbol like the Legend and the Dance. But Geffrey Whitney's A Choice of Emblems (1586) presents only one emblem of death, and that one is a female Mors with wings, who is part of a classical joke: Death and Love accidentally exchange arrows, with the result that young people die and old people love. Death reappears in George Wither's A Collection of Emblemes, Ancient and Moderne, published in 1635 but probably written much earlier. The pictures were first printed at Utrecht in 1611 or 1613, in Nucleus emblematum selectissimorum, and Wither, who thought the verses clumsy, composed his own verses but did not tamper with the pictures themselves. In this collection of two hundred emblems, Death as a pictorial symbol occurs eleven times, once as an animated skeleton, once as a partial skeleton, and nine times as a skull. Oddly enough, the animated skeleton is used only as an advertisement for learning; the motto is, "By Knowledge onely, Life wee gaine, / All other things to Death pertaine" (1). The picture shows a scientist happily engaged in his studies, with the skeleton off to one side, playing with a tableful of jewels. This theme occurs again in a picture of a scholar climbing out of a skull-strewn grave toward sun and moon; the motto here is, "To Learning I a love should have, / Although one foot were in the Grave" (87). One can hardly quarrel with the sentiment, but the tradition seems to have gone astray.
Indeed, of the remaining nine skull emblems in Wither, only five represent a traditional memento mori. Of the other four, one skull is only a stage property lying near Vice, who is struggling with Virtue over a living young man (22); one is being spurned under the heel of a cherub rising to heaven (152); one has wheat growing out of its apertures to symbolize rebirth and eternal life (21); and the last is gnashing its teeth (one supposes) over two clasped hands whose motto is, “Death, is unable to divide / their Hearts, whose Hands True-Love hath tyde” (99). And four sets of verses on death have no skulls at all in their emblems.

It is possible that death’s traditional image began to disappear from emblems and be parodied in broadsides as it became more vulgarized in the ubiquitous death’s-head jewelry. But it is also true that the whole iconography of death was beginning to change as new symbols and ideas became current. By the 1570s, a new poetry had become popular in England: the Petrarchan conventions of the love sonneteers. Although death poems continued to appear for a while in such popular miscellanies as The Paradise of Dainty Devices and the Gorgeous Gallery of Gallant Inventions (1578), speaking of death’s “launce,”37 and “The daunce of death, which all must runne on rowe,”38 by the 1580s they were rapidly being overshadowed by poems in which death was to be suffered only through darts from a lady’s eyes; and by the 1590s, the traditional death poem had vanished from the miscellanies altogether.

But hiding from death, mocking death, and wearing death’s face as an amulet against death will not make death go away, and the human mind always needs symbols through which it can comprehend and grapple with the feared object. So as the corpse, skeleton, and skull ceased to be useful, poets were forced to seek new symbols.

One logical symbol for an event, of course, is the process that leads to it. And during a literary period of concern with love, youth, and beauty, Time as process is, logically, Time the destroyer. Throughout the poetry of the late sixteenth century, then, it is not Death but Time who carries the scythe, Time who places his hand on living flesh. In Spenser’s Faerie Queue, he is the
enemy in the Garden of Adonis, the destroyer whom not even the gods can halt:

Great enemy to it, and to all the rest,
That in the Gardin of Adonis springs,
Is wicked Tyme, who, with his scythe the addrest,
Does mow the flowring herbes and goodly things,
And all their glory to the ground downe flings,
Where they do wither and are fowly mard;
He flies about, and with his flaggy winges
Beates downe both leaves and buds without regard,
Ne ever pitty may relent his malice hard.

For all that lives is subject to the law:
Al things decay in time, and to their end do draw.\(^{39}\)

As a personification, Death still has his “grisly” face in The Faerie Queene, but he has become less substantial and, rather than an all-conquering force, only one to the actors that Mutabilitie calls forth in her pageant of the changing seasons:

And after all came Life, and lastly Death;
Death with most grim and griesly visage scene,
Yet is he nought but parting of the breath;
Ne ought to see, but like a shade to weene,
Unbodied, unsoul’d, unheard, unseen . . .

(VII.vii.46)

Further, in the great religious poetry of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, this is largely how death will appear: when invisible, as a mighty force struggling within the poet’s soul, but when given a shape or personification, as an ineffectual figure who is invoked only to be dismissed or patronized:

[Shakespeare:]
So shalt thou feed on Death, that feeds on men,
And Death once dead, there’s no more dying then.\(^{40}\)

[Donne:]
One short sleepe past, we wake eternally,
And death shall be no more, Death thou shalt die.\(^{41}\)
[Herbert:]
Death thou wast once an uncouth hideous thing,
   Nothing but bones,
   The sad effect of sadder grones,
Thy mouth was open but thou couldst not sing. . . .

. . . But since our Saviours Death did put some blood
   Into thy face;
Thou art growne fair and full of grace,
Much in request, much sought for as a good.42

Death as an event, then, is no longer symbolized by the moment of arrest, the hand on the shoulder. The new symbols are the process leading to the event and, as in the late Middle Ages, one of the event's end products. But the end product has taken a new form. There is no inherently logical reason, after all, for a corpse or skeleton to symbolize the moment of death; the decayed body is only an aftermath, retrospective evidence that death has come and gone. If the artists of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries seized upon this particular image because it was the most familiar sight in the plague-strewn streets of Europe, there was no reason for a later age to continue mimicking them. As the corpse began to be hidden, and Time gained ascendancy as a process-symbol for the event, it was more logical to choose an end product more appropriate to the process. And with Time so often depicted as a mower-down of fields, a changer of seasons and destroyer of earthly beauty, what better end product could there be than the withered flower?

It is perhaps better to delay a discussion of the faded or withered flower until we have traced the progress of philosophical and religious views on death through the seventeenth century. For my purposes now, it is sufficient to observe how the moment of death—the event itself—was realigned into symbols of process and end product in Renaissance art and poetry. Only on the stage did the Summons of Death—the moment of arrest—continued for a time; and even on stage, symbol was to give way to sensationalism by the Caroline years.