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The Black Death in the Medieval World: How Art Reflected the Human Experience Through a Macabre Lens

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THE BLACK DEATH IN THE MEDIEVAL WORLD
HOW ART REFLECTED THE HUMAN EXPERIENCE THROUGH A MACABRE LENS

A senior project submitted to the faculty of Dominican University of California
in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Bachelor of Arts
in Humanities and Cultural Studies

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ABSTRACT

In the fourteenth century a devastating pandemic disease known as the Black Death was responsible for the tragic death of millions of Europeans. The wide ranging consequences affected Europe's culture, religion, and economic stability. These consequences can be seen most directly in the visual arts, notably with the prevalent motif of images of the dead interacting with humans. This interaction between the dead and the living can be found in the famous *Triumph of Death*, by Francisco Traini (ca. 1350) and the *Dance of Death*, by Bernt Notke (n.d.). These paintings are just a few of the many examples of the late medieval allegories of the universality of death. This thesis examines how the arrival of the Black Death in Europe created a void that was filled with art that reflected the human experience through a grim and macabre lens.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

*How many valiant men, how many fair ladies, breakfast with their kinfolk
and the same night supped with their ancestors in the next world!*

—Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Decameron*

The plague of 1347 known as the Black Death was considered a phantom enemy by most Europeans.¹ There was no known defense or earthly explanation for the cause of the pestilence that grew in strength as it swept relentlessly from one place to another annihilating nearly one third of Europe's population in a few short years.² No one could have imagined the wide ranging consequences that this dreadful pestilence would have on Europe's way of life, as the very foundation that their culture and religion was built upon had become unsettled.

Europe's visual arts had greatly altered as a consequence of the Black Death. This alteration can be seen in the motif where artists that once painted religious and joyous paintings began to paint in a more apocalyptic manner. This dark style of painting that grew out of the plague years became known as death art, and often depicted Death interacting with the living. For hundreds of years the central theme of Christianity had been the triumph over death, but due to great loss and devastation, Europeans had come to believe that the "triumph over death" no longer held their beliefs, but in fact the "triumph of death over life" had become their reality.³ The dramatic paintings of the *Triumph of Death* by Francisco Traini (ca. 1350) and the *Dance of Death*, by Bernt Notke (n.d.) reflected Europe's reality, as artists began painting the human experience through medieval allegories on Europe's walls and canvases in the most unusual grim and macabre ways.

NOTES TO CHAPTER ONE

1. Barbara W. Tuchman, "This is the End of the World: The Black Death," in *A Distant Mirror: The Calamitous 14th Century*, (New York: Alford A. Knopf, Inc. 1978), 101.
2. Tuchman, *A Distant Mirror*, 94.
3. Symbol Dictionary, "Symbol of Death and Time (Western)," Symbolictionary, *Net*, <http://www.symbolictionary.net/?p-2696.htm> (accessed January 15, 2015), 1.

CHAPTER TWO

THE BLACK DEATH ARRIVES IN EUROPE

Alas! Our ships enter the port, but of a thousand sailors hardly ten one spared. We reach our homes; our kindred ... come from all parts to visit us. Woe to us for we cast at them the darts of death!

—George Deaux, *The Black Death* 1347

It was in the month of October and the year was 1347 that trading ships from the Black Sea port of Caffa, Crime slowly arrived in the harbor of Messina, Sicily. Dock workers, family, and friends who went down to greet the ships looked on in horror, as many of the ship's crewmen were either sick or dead with some of the crewmen still holding on to their oars.¹ There had been stories told that there was an unspeakable plague that was spreading along the Silk Route by black rats (*Rattus rattus*) that was taking life both swiftly and cruelly, but until now, Europe had not known of a plague so deadly. According to Barbara Tuchman, "Rumors of a terrible plague supposedly arising in China and spreading through Tartary (Central Asia) ... told of a death toll so devastating that all of India was said to be depopulated ... no serious alarm was felt in Europe until the trading ships brought their black burden of pestilence into Messina."²

What came off the ships in Messina, Sicily in 1347 must have seemed dark and sinister to its townspeople. Many of the crewmen both dead and alive who were taken off of the ships had noticeable black swellings (buboes) that resembled enlarged boils the size of an egg and some as large as an apple. These buboes were mostly seen in the neck, armpit, and groin area where they would eventually rupture causing severe pain then death. According to Barbara Tuchman,

The sick suffered severe pain and died quickly within five days of the first symptoms. As the disease spread, other symptoms of continuous fever and spitting of blood appeared instead of the swelling or buboes. These victims coughed and sweated heavily and died even more quickly, within three days or less, sometimes in 24 hours.³

This was just the beginning of what was to become a pestilence that would start to infect people in multiple ways as it spread throughout Europe. The plague was not known as the Black Death in the medieval period, but was later given that name. According to Barbara Tuchman, “The phantom enemy had no name. Called the Black Death only later recurrences, it was known during the first epidemic simply as Pestilence to Great Mortality.”⁴ It is believed that the name, the *Black Death* was given to the pestilence due to the blackened tumors that spread over a victim’s body, but it was more likely a mistranslation of a Latin term known as *Atra mors*. The word *Atra* can be defined as black or terrible.”⁵

The Black Death swept across Europe showing no preference in its victims, as the plague infected all. In these terrifying times many people tried to get away from the over crowded and filthy cities to only discover that there were very few places where one could find comfort in their isolation. Those who could not afford to leave their homes, found themselves living in constant fear for themselves and those they loved. It was in Siena that a man named Agnolo di Tura recorded how the deep rooted fear of the plague left many people numb and coldhearted. As Barbara Tuchman points out, “‘Father abandoned child, wife husband, one brother another,’ he wrote, ‘for this plague seemed to strike through the breath and sight. And so they died. And no one could be found to bury the dead for money or friendship ... And I, Angolo di Tura, called the Fat, buried my five children with my own hands, and so did many others likewise.’”⁶

With no earthly explanation for what some people believed was the coming of the end of the world, communities and those in position of power began to isolate families and people whom they believed were infected with the plague. According to Molly Edmond, “Because no one was quite sure how the Black Death was spreading, many simply chose to avoid anyone with symptoms. Some towns built pestilence houses, where the sick could be taken to die. Others

boarded up entire houses as soon as someone inside took ill. Those who could afford to do so fled to the countryside.”⁷ As thousands of people in Europe began to succumb to the plague, many of them started to question their religious beliefs, as their prayers had gone unanswered. Europe no longer seemed familiar to many of those who managed to survive the plague, as they watched the demise of Europe’s culture, religion and economic stability.

NOTES TO CHAPTER TWO

1. Barbara W. Tuchman, "This is the End of the World: The Black Death," in *A Distant Mirror: The Calamitous 14th Century*, (New York: Alford A. Knopf, Inc. 1978), 92.
2. Tuchman, *A Distant Mirror*, 93.
3. Tuchman, *A Distant Mirror*, 92.
4. Tuchman, *A Distant Mirror*, 101.
5. Molly Edmond, "How the Black Death Worked," *How Stuff Works*, entry posted February 27, 2008, <http://history.howstuffworks.com/historical-events/black-death.htm> (accessed May 16, 2015), 3.
6. Tuchman, *A Distant Mirror*, 96.
7. Edmond, *How the Black Death Worked*, 4.

CHAPTER THREE

THE TRIUMPH OF DEATH

Shields of Knowledge and richness. Nobility and also gentleness. They are not able to parry her blows ... You must be always set, so She will not arrive in your mortal sin.

—*The Triumph of Death*

The *Triumph of Death* in the Camposanto Monumental, Pisa was envisioned and frescoed by Francesco Traini who was an Italian Gothic Byzantine style painter who painted between the years of 1321 to 1365 in Pisa and Bologna (Figure 1). In recent years some scholars have questioned whether Traini was the actual painter of the famous *Triumph of Death*, or another Italian artist named Buonamico Buffalmacco (active c. 1315 - 1336).¹ The question of whether Traini was the fresco painter of the *Triumph of Death* was raised due to the lack of a signature, documentation, and a multitude of other reasons. Moving forward this paper will refer to Francesco Traini as the fresco painter of the *Triumph of Death*. In 1948 the *Triumph of Death* was removed from the Camposanto Monumental for the damage it received during World War II, and has since been restored and returned to its original place.² Traini was educated and worked as an apprentice to Bonifazio Veronese who was also an Italian artist in Italy. Traini's medium was fresco painting, and he was known for his dramatic biblical themes that were common in Byzantine art where artistic importance was placed on transcendent time and place.³ Traini also acquired the skills to paint in a Gothic style where he used the element of mystical narrative storytelling of Biblical and secular legends.⁴ Traini's use of the combination of Gothic and Byzantine styles began to alter in the mid-fourteenth century, as Traini's artistic vision became more apocalyptic in nature. The change in Traini's style of painting can be seen in his

famous fresco the *Triumph of Death*, where medieval allegories of the universality of death grew out the plague known as...the Black Death.

The Camposanto Monumental which houses the *Triumph of Death* is also known as the holy field. Legend has it that the Camposanto Monumental was built upon soil that was bought from Golgotha (Cavalry). According to the Tuscany Co., “Camposanto Monumental,”

Accommodation & Travel Guide,

The Golgotha was a site reputed to be located right outside the walls of Jerusalem, where the Christ was crucified. The sacred soil was brought back by Ubaldo de Lanfranchi, who was the archbishop of Pisa ... The burial ground of the Camposanto Monumental in Pisa, is situated right above the remains of the old baptistery of the Church of Santa Reparata. The burial ground has a reputed legend, which claims that anybody buried in it will dissolve in only 24 hours.⁵

The Camposanto’s beautiful Gothic architecture and the legend of the “holy field” adds to the atmosphere that surrounds the *Triumph of Death*, and succeeds in complimenting the different scenes and legends that tell the allegories of the universality of death within the frame work of the *Triumph of Death*.

Francisco Traini’s *Triumph of Death* was painted during a time in history when Europeans feared the Black Death to the point of mass hysteria. From the years 1347 to 1351 the Black Death swept across Italy and the rest of Europe mercilessly killing with unimaginable speed. Traini knew firsthand what this plague was capable of, as he watched in horror the suffering and painful deaths of many of his family members and townspeople.⁶ One has to believe that the merciless omnipresence of Death that characterizes the scenes in the *Triumph of Death* came from Traini’s emotional reaction from his experience of having walked among the dead and dying, while Death brushed past him. One would assume that the harrowing personal trauma Traini experienced while walking among the victims of the Black Death altered his view on life and his style of painting, as Traini’s style and subject matter became increasingly

macabre. During the mid-fourteenth century macabre art (death art) became very common especially during and after the arrival of the Black Death.⁷ This dark style of painting can be seen in the *Triumph of Death* where grim and ghastly images of death and tortured souls cover the frescoed wall in at least seven scenes. The *Triumph of Death* is believed to be one of several frescoes that were among the first examples of macabre art in the Camposanto Monumental.⁸

The *Triumph of Death* is part of a cycle with three other frescos: the *Last Judgment*, the *Hell*, and the *Anacoreti nella Tebaide* (lives and deaths of saintly anchorites). This fresco cycle is considered to be the most famous and largest cycle of frescos in the Camposanto Monumental.⁹ The *Triumph of Death*, the *Last Judgment*, the *Hell*, and the *Anacoreti nella Tebaide* were commissioned by Simone Saltarelli, archbishop of Pisa between 1323 and 1342. The fresco cycle was painted on the inner sides of the Camposanto Monumental's large blank unarticulated walls that were prearranged for fresco decoration for the purpose of relating to the beholder. The allegories from the Old Testament, according to Lorenzo Carletti and Francesca Polacci, "*The Triumph of Death* and the *Thebais* are the iconographic exceptions of the whole program; in fact these stories are taken neither from the Old and the New Testaments nor from the lives of saints."¹⁰

The *Triumph of Death* is a narrative painting that is characterized by a complex combination of allegoric symbols that are represented by metaphysical time.¹¹ This metaphysical time can be seen in the fresco as a divider where the physical (external) world is arranged in the lower level and the spiritual (transcendent) world is arranged in the upper level of the fresco. The *Triumph of Death* is painted in what appears to be seven scenes, and all of these scenes depict the Black Death in one way or another. These seven scenes in the *Triumph of Death* are connected by the general theme of Death which is inescapable, and leaves the beholder with the

reminder for self-reflection. The scenes do not necessarily have a narrative connection, as the scenes tend to unfold in many different directions at once. According to Christine Boeckl,

For all its imbedded narrative, it does not claim unity of action or unity of space but offers a conceptual arrangement that organizes the many narrative units. The single episode is as real as the overall structure is abstract. The subject can be described as the power of death to dash all earthly hope.¹²

The unfolding of the seven scenes in the *Triumph of Death* speaks to the beholder through moral examples and with inscriptions on scrolls in vernacular (early Italian) and Latin.¹³

In the first scene, the *Three Living and the Three Dead* are in the physical world that is positioned in the lower left hand corner of the fresco. In this first scene, the young noblemen are facing to the left unaware of the beggars behind them in the lower center of the fresco. The lack of narrative unity between the noblemen and the beggars is very noticeable, and the beholder will find this style of scene separation between the seven scenes throughout the fresco, as it helps to individualize the allegories within the scenes. To the left and just above the *Three Living and the Three Dead*, a monk comes down from the mountain with an inscription on a scroll that is to be read by the noble hunters. According to John T. Paoletti and Gary M. Radke (translated) the scroll reads, “If your mind will be well aware, keeping here your view attentive, your vainglory will be vanquished and you will see pride eliminated. And, again, you will realize this if you observe the law which is written.”¹⁴ The monk acts as a mediator between the *Three Living and the Three Dead*, and this is the only place in the fresco where a figure from one scene approaches and connects to another scene. The monk makes this connection using a scroll. According to Lorenzo Carletti and Francesca Polacci,

If we look at the anchorite, [monk] his long scroll has an important function inside the painting, not only for the inscription that it bears: the diagonal scroll creates a kind of extension of the footpath, but it also plays an active role in the visual narration, connecting two different *loci*: and the direction of writing from left to right marks the same aspect ... whoever can decipher the inscriptions and understand their content is encouraged to think about the transience of earthly things.¹⁵

The *Three Living and the Three Dead* comes from a medieval legend, and according to Leslie Ross it was, “one of several themes concerning the inevitability of death, especially popular in the later Gothic period, the tale of the *Three Living and the Three Dead* was developed in French poetry of the thirteenth century...”¹⁶ The legend begins with a group of young noblemen that are out hunting, and they come across three infested corpses that are in different stages of decay in their coffins. The first corpse has recently perished and is dressed with an elegant hat and footwear; the second corpse is bloated and was a noble person, as he wears a crown upon his head; and the last corpse is a skeleton with his “skull” turned towards the beholder, as though to say to the beholder *memento mori* (reminder of death). The young noblemen are shocked and disgusted and one nobleman reacts by covering his face at the sight and smell of the three dead, while the noblemen’s horses respond in very similar ways.¹⁷ Traini uses naturalistic detail in the motif of the fresco. This can be seen in the prior scene where he describes the nobleman who is covering his face disgusted with the sight and smell of the three dead. The three dead admonish the noblemen and warn them, “what we were you are; what we are, you will be.” The representation of the corpses shows the growing fascination with death and decay and the *memento mori*. This representation of the three dead is also considered to be an old visual and literary tradition where the living are forced to confront their own mortality by an encounter with death. According to Paoletti and Radke, “Despite the naturalism and descriptive coloring of the figures, a moral allegory, not a simple narrative, is being presented here.”¹⁸

In the second scene, the beggars are also in the physical world and are positioned in the lower center of the fresco. They are just to the right of the *Three Living and the Three Dead*. Barbara W. Tuchman describes the beggars as, “A wretched group of lepers, cripples, and

beggars ... one with his nose eaten away, others legless or blind or holding out a cloth-covered stump instead of a hand, implore Death for deliverance.”¹⁹ The group of beggars held onto a scroll that reads in early Italian. In the words of Carletti and Polacci, “Since prosperity has completely deserted us O Death, you who are the medicine for all pain, come to give us our last supper.”²⁰ As the beggar’s scroll floats freely towards Death, the beggar’s gestures invokes Death to end their mortal life that has been filled with pain and suffering. According to Christine Boeckl,

The cripples in the Triumph of Death ... whose hard life on earth can only be relieved by death, look forward to their impending, just reward in heaven when they will be admitted into the presence of God, and experience the Beatific Vision promised in *Benedictus Deus*. The downtrodden are eager to die, because their lives resemble the suffering of Lazarus in the parable of the Rich Man, which Benedict XII had used as an *exemplum* to prove hell (Luke 16:24).²¹

The beggars that are just to the left of a pile of various dead create a division in the fresco by separating the hermits in their steep and rocky landscape on the upper left side of the fresco, from the noble women and men who are enjoying themselves in an orchard that is located in the lower right side of the fresco. This can be viewed as a turning point in the fresco where Traini shows the contrasting differences of lifestyle within the scenes through their landscape.

According to Paoletti and Rake,

Landscape plays an important metaphorical role in the fresco...The hermits’ landscape is severe and rocky, one of retreat and asceticism. By contrast, the courtiers’ landscape at the right is luxuriant, with its carpet-laid ground and fruit-bearing trees. One is a landscape of prayer, the other a landscape of pleasure.²²

In the third scene, the beholder will find various corpses that are amassed in the physical world and are positioned in the lower center of the fresco that is just right of the beggars. In the words of Barbara W. Tuchman, “In a heap of corpses nearby lie crowned rulers, a Pope in tiara, a knight, crumbled together with the bodies of the poor, while angels and devils in the sky contend

for the miniature naked figures that represent their souls.”²³ Once again the beholder is reminded that Death comes to all regardless of social status. The battle between the angels and devils for the souls of men rages on above and below the personification of Death.

In the fourth scene, the beholder becomes terribly aware of what Traini has depicted as the personification of Death in this fresco. Located just above the pile of various decaying corpses is what appears to be an unknown figure of Death brandishing a scythe while moving rapidly in a downward motion. Traini’s personification of Death that he so carefully chose and placed in the *Triumph of Death* was not a well-known symbol that many Europeans would have recognized in the early to mid-14th century. A more recognizable symbol used for Death during the early 14th century was that of a corpse holding an ancient weapon such as a crossbow or another weapon of death.²⁴ It was only later during the plague years of the mid-14th century that another personification of death other than Traini’s began to take form known as the Grim Reaper. The Grim Reaper became very popular in death art during the plague. It was viewed as a skeleton that was dressed in a black cloak and held a razor-sharp scythe.²⁵ Traini uses neither of these well-known personifications of Death in the *Triumph of Death*. Instead Traini uses something far more fear-inspiring and unknown to its beholders. According to Barbara W. Tuchman, “A strange personification of Death emerged from the plague years on the painted walls of the Camposanto in Pisa. The figure is not the conventional skeleton, but a black-cloaked old woman with streaming hair and wild eyes, carrying a broad-bladed murderous scythe.”²⁶ Upon closer examination of this strange personification of Death, the beholder will notice that this old woman that is black-cloaked is not human, but a creature that shares the characteristics of both human and the beast (devil). There are large dark wings that sit upon her back, and her hands that hold onto the scythe appear to be clawed as well as her feet. Although the

personification of Death pictured, as an old woman was rarely used by artists during the early to mid-14th century, Traini chose to paint this particular figure of Death among the seven scenes in the *Triumph of Death*.

Traini must have given considerable thought in painting this unusual personification of Death, as it deviates greatly from the known ones, and causes the beholder to question its symbolism. It is said that the personification of Death holding a scythe first appeared in Traini's *Triumph of Death*. Counterlight's Peculiars claims, "The figure of Death with a scythe makes the first appearance in art in this fresco."²⁷ The scythe plays an important part in the fresco, as it is first seen by the beholder as a murderous weapon that Death uses to cut down all who come into her view, but Traini may have also used the scythe as a metaphor for cycles of time. According to the Symbol Dictionary,

In ancient times, the emblem of the God Saturn (Chronos to the Greeks) was the scythe, which represented the nature of the cycles of time. The scythe symbolized not only impermanence (all things living will be cut down), but the nature of the life cycle-plants must die to feed animals, and the tool of the harvest depicts the necessity of death for the renewal of life. Thus, death was depicted as a natural part of the passage of time.²⁸

The personification of Death that is painted in the center of the right side of the fresco is not part of any one scene, but is connected to all scenes, as Death represents the plague that has infested man, and Traini paints the chaotic fight for victory in the triumph of (D) death over life.

In the fifth scene, seven young genteel women and three refined noblemen sit in the lower right hand corner in the external world. According to Barbara W. Tuchman, "a group of carefree, young, and beautiful noblemen and ladies who, like models for Boccaccio's storytellers, converse and flit and entertain each other with books and music in a fragrant grove of orange trees."²⁹ Unbeknown to these beautiful ladies and noblemen who are passing time entertaining each other, Death with her unmerciful scythe held high approaches preparing to

strike ending their lives all too soon. All the while just to the right of Death, two cupids each carrying a torch of love upside down are hovered directly over them foreshadowing an unfortunate event to come.³⁰

In the sixth scene the beholder will notice sinuous angels and devils in a furious battle that is taking place above and below the personification of Death. This furious battle between the angels and devils is for the human souls whose bodies are plagued ridden and laying amass upon the ground. There are very small naked figures that represent human souls that can be seen taken from the mouths of the just dead by devils, and are being carried up to the burning mountain on the upper left side of the scene to be thrown into the fires of hell. According to Lorenzo Carletti and Francesca Polacci,

The horrible lady of Death creates a sort of corridor between the lower and the higher level of the fresco in this space, delimited by the mountain cliff and the garden with the young brigade, devils are hunting down souls, and some of them climb up again with their prey: they bring them to the burning mountain on the left side. This is a visual synecdoche for Hell...³¹

An army of angels are equally swooping up the very small naked figures while also trying to disengage some of the souls from the grasps of the devils claws. Angels can be seen embracing these small naked figures while moving quickly towards the upper right side of the scene. The angelic movement upward and to the right can be seen as a page turner to prepare the beholder for the continuation of this story into the next frescoed story in the cycle known as the *Last Judgment* in the Camposanto Monumental. According to Lorenzo Carletti and Francesca Polacci, “Thinking that the following story is the *Last Judgment*, this dispute of souls is a prolepsis (flash forward) or another way to represent a similar theological concept (Le Goff and Baschet 1991; Le Goff 2003; Schmitt 2011).”³²

The small naked figures that the angels and devils are so furiously fighting over, and

appear to be pulling from the mouths of the plague victims, may not be as simple and clear of an act as shown. Could Traini have secretly included another symbolic meaning to this sixth scene in the *Triumph of Death*? During the Black Death in the mid-fourteenth century, Jews were often considered outsiders in the Christian communities. They were often seen as strangers, and became targets for expulsions and persecutions. During these plague ridden years where Christians feared the Black Death to the point of mass hysteria, Jews became easy scapegoats, as they were often blamed for the woes of Europe's deterioration during the plague years. The persecution of the Jews during this time was unforgettable, and to some people unforgivable, as many Jewish communities experienced great loss of life and property due to unfounded allegations of heinous crimes made against Christians. In the words of Barbara W. Tuchman,

In Savoy, where the first formal trials were held in September 1348, the Jews' property was confiscated while they remained in prison pending investigation of charges. Composed from confessions extracted by torture according to the usual medieval method, the charges drew a picture of an international Jewish conspiracy emanating from Spain...The messengers allegedly brought rabbinical instructions for sprinkling the poison in wells and springs...Duly found guilty, the accused were condemned to death.³³

With no obvious visual part to any one scene in the *Triumph of Death* in regards to the Jewish people, Jewish communities, or to the treatment of them, Traini may have secretly painted these small naked figures coming from the mouths of the just dead to show that not only Christians had fallen ill and died from the plague, but Jews were also becoming infected and died from the plague as well. According to Barbara W. Tuchman,

Christians who imputed the pestilence to the Jews had been 'seduced by that liar, the Devil,' and that the charge of well-poisoning and ensuing massacres were a 'horrible thing.'...by a mysterious decree of God' the plague was afflicting all peoples, including Jews; that it raged in places where no Jews lived, and that elsewhere they were victims like everyone else; therefore the charge that they caused it was 'without plausibility.'³⁴

Traini may very well have known that in Judaism there is a belief that when a human dies his soul leaves the body through the mouth. From the Jewish encyclopedia, "The soul escapes

through the mouth, or, as is stated in another place, through the throat; therefore the angel of death stands at the head of the patient. (Jellinek, l.c. ii. 94, Midr. Teh. to Ps. Xi.)”³⁵ The history of the expulsions and persecutions of Jews during the Black Plague of 1348 was an important and tragic part of Europe’s decline in all aspects of spiritually and worldly matters.

Although European art depicted many of these tragic events that the Black Death had on the lives of the Europeans, the lives of Jews or the persecution of them during this period of time would not necessarily be depicted in “commissioned” European art.

In the seventh scene the anchorites and hermits are represented by metaphysical time, as they are placed in the spiritual (transcendent) world in the upper left side of the fresco. The landscape is of a pictorial narrative where naturalistic accuracy can be seen in the harsh and rocky landscape, and where the anchorites and hermits are going about their daily movements by tending to the animals, praying, meditating, and living a contemplative life while they await their death peacefully. The beholder may view this scene as religious when compared to the fifth scene where seven young genteel women and three refined noblemen sit in the lower right hand corner in the external world. According to Paoletti and Radke,

Landscape plays an important role in the fresco, one aspect representing virtue, the other vice. The hermits’ landscape is severe and rocky, one of retreat and asceticism. By contrast, the courtiers’ landscape at the right is luxuriant, with its carpet-laid ground and fruit-bearing trees. One is a landscape of prayer, the other a landscape of pleasure.³⁶

In the *Triumph of Death*, the beholder will find, in the seven scenes images of the dead interacting with humans, and where scrolls are used to not only enhance the scene but to catch the beholder’s eye, as within the first scene. The *Three Living and the Three Dead* are approached by a monk who acts as a mediator between them and carries an inscription on his scroll that gives a warning to them. According to Lorenzo Carletti and Francesca Polacci, “... whoever can decipher the inscriptions and understand their content is encouraged to think about

the transience of earthly things.”³⁷ In scene two, according to Christine Boeckl the beggar’s scroll reads, “Since prosperity has completely deserted us O Death, you who are the medicine for all pain, come to give us our last supper.”³⁸ Traini places these two scrolls in scenes that are back to back showing the different stations in life each group is in, and how the scrolls speak to this difference. The young noblemen are warned through a scroll about transience, as their life is carefree with little worry, while the beggars offer a scroll to Death pleading to end their miserable life, as their lives have grown dark with no hope in sight.

Traini places a third and final scroll that is very different than the other two scrolls in the fresco, as it appears as a large banner that has a long inscription that has its rhymes in the vernacular, and offers an interpretation of the *Triumph of Death*. The scroll is held by two dark winged cupids that appear to be hovering in the center of the fresco amidst the battle for human souls, and where Death swoops closely by them. The message appears to be directed to the beholder, as it is unattached to anyone scene. According to Carletti and Polacci,

A long inscription is shown by two angels looking, like cupids floating in the air. They are “inside” the painting, but they are not part of any episode of the fresco. Also they are inserted in a very significant place, in the corridor where Death and her companions descend to the corpses and rise up with the damned souls.³⁹

The central scroll that is held by the dark winged cupids gives a warning to the beholder. According to Carletti and Polacci, “Shields of knowledge and richness / Nobility and also gentleness / They are not able to parry her blows. / Oh is it possible that you don’t find / Any argument against her reader? / Now your intellect doesn’t have to be off / You must be always set, so she will not arrive in your mortal sin.”⁴⁰

The *Triumph of Death* by Francisco Traini was frescoed in the Camposanto Monumental, in Pisa during the height of the Black Death from 1347 through 1351, and where death became a grim reality for millions of Europeans who lost their lives while suffering through short, but

frightfully painful deaths. Traini himself escaped Death's grip, but with great emotional pain he watched loved ones and friends lose their battle in their triumph over Death. It was because of the dark nature of the plague that sped through Europe that Traini's combination of Gothic and Byzantine styles of painting began to alter, as Traini's artistic vision became more apocalyptic and dark in nature. Traini used this alteration in his artistic style of painting to depict the medieval allegories of the universality of death during the plague, and he frescoed these allegories within the seven scenes in what is famously known as ... the *Triumph of Death*.

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CHAPTER FOUR

THE DANCE OF DEATH

*I call all and everyone to this dance: pope, emperor, and all creatures poor,
rich big or small. Step forward mourning won't help now! ... for you must
dance to my pipe.*

—*The Dance of Death*

The *Dance of Death*, also known as the *Danse Macabre*, hangs in St. Anthony's Chapel which is housed inside of the historic St. Nicholas' Church in Old Town Tallinn, Estonia (Figure 2). It is believed that the *Dance of Death* was painted in the 15th century by the Lübeck master Bernt Notke (ca. 1440 – 1509) who was considered one of northern Europe's most distinguished artists in the Late Middle Ages.¹ The *Dance of Death* painting in Tallinn has become somewhat of an unsolved mystery to some scholars, as these art historians have questioned the author, origin, and date of the painting due to the lack of signature, documentation, and a multitude of other reasons. Moving forward this paper will refer to the Lübeck master Bernt Notke as the author of the painting of the *Dance of Death* in Tallinn. This under-studied painting of the *Dance of Death* consists of only two surviving fragmented pieces of the original painting. This gives the beholder a limited visual of only seven and a half meters of the original painting that is believed to have been thirty meters long, and consisting of images of the personification of Death (skeletons) dancing with the living while inscriptions of their dialog are written on winding scrolls beneath the pictorial frieze.² The painting of the *Dance of Death* by Bernt Notke in Tallinn, first became popular during the fourteenth century when the Black Death ravaged through cities and countries of Eastern Europe and Europe bringing great loss of life and devastation to all, and particularly to those who felt Death's grip, and joined his *Dance of Death*.

It was during the Late Middle Ages and into the Renaissance that paintings of the *Dance of Death* became extremely popular in European countries where medieval life was invaded with images of death art that quickly moved towards the macabre and unnatural. The earliest recording of a painting of the *Dance of Death* (*Danse Macabre*) was in the form of a haunting mural in the gallery of the Cemetery of the Innocents in Paris in 1425, and unfortunately this mural is no longer in existence.³ The *Dance of Death* has dramatic roots that go back further than the first recorded painting in Paris in 1425. Some of the earliest introductions known of the *Danse Macabre* were conveyed to society not as a painting, but as story poems that spoke of encounters of the living and the dead interacting with one another. According to the Macmillan Encyclopedia of Death and Dying,

The earliest known appearances of the *Danse Macabre* were in story poems that told of encounters between the living and the dead. Most often the living were proud and powerful members of society, such as knights and bishops. The dead interrupted their procession: ‘As we are, so shall you be’ was the underlying theme, ‘and neither your strength nor your piety can provide escape.’⁴

Whether the name of the painting used is the *Danse Macabre* or the *Dance of Death*, often depends on the geographic location, and or the period of time in which a person makes reference to the painting. Further the beholder will come across the names of two different cities that are used when making reference to the *Dance of Death* in this paper, as the city of Tallinn, Estonia was once known as Reval, Estonia. The *Dance of Death* now hangs in the St. Anthony’s Chapel in Tallinn.⁵ Both of the names of the painting *Danse Macabre* and the *Dance of Death*, and the city’s names Reval and Tallinn are interchangeable in this paper, as well as they are in many of the scholarly writings on the subject of the *Dance of Death*.

The author of the painting of the *Dance of Death* in Tallinn is believed to be Bernt Notke who was born in the year of 1440 in Lassan, Pomerania near the Baltic Sea. Bernt Notke’s large

workshop was located in Lübeck, Germany where he spent many of his journeyman years in the low counties where he produced a varied amount of art works that would include altar pieces, wooden sculptures, and paintings.⁶ It was from this workshop in Lübeck that scholars believe that Bernt Notke first painted a panel painting of the *Dance of Death* in 1463, and the painting became known as the Lübeck *Dance of Death*.⁷ It is also believed that the Tallinn Dance of Death was painted later by the Bernt Notke, but the exact time and place are unknown. The similarities between the Lübeck *Dance of Death* and the Tallinn *Dance of Death* are “very similar”. With an inadequate amount of information available on the Tallinn *Dance of Death*, scholars began to speculate that the two surviving fragmented pieces of the Tallinn *Dance of Death* were possibly part of the Lübeck *Dance of Death* that was damaged in 1588.⁸

The painting of the *Dance of Death* that now hangs in St. Anthony’s Chapel in Tallinn is mentioned for the first time in 1603, and there are no other records indicating that the *Dance of Death* painting had arrived any sooner. As Estonia’s art historian Mai Lumiste points out, “...the *Dance of Death* is known to have been located in St Nicholas’ Church only as of 1603, and there is no mention of it in the church records that date from 1465 to 1520. It is possible that the work arrived at the church after the Reformation, and was previously located in Tallinn’s Dominican friary.”⁹ The painting is believed to have been commissioned from the workshop of the Bernt Notke. According to Mai Lumiste,

Tallinn’s Dance of death was commissioned in the late 15th or early 16th century from the workshop of the Lübeck master Bernt Notke, as an artist’s duplicate’ for the St Anthony’s Chapel in Tallinn’s St Nicholas’ Church. In Estonia, scholars have remained true to this position up to the present day. On the other hand, foreign researchers have offered various opinions regarding the original location, the authorship and dating of the work.¹⁰

The *Dance of Death* in Tallinn is a fragmented painting that has been joined together measuring 7.5 meters wide by 1.63 meters high, and is considered to be the only surviving

medieval painting of the *Dance of Death* that was painted on canvas in the world.¹¹ There are only thirteen life-size figures of what could have been up to forty or more figures in the original painting that has been preserved. It is through these thirteen life-size figures that the personification of Death in the form of skeletons interacting with the living tells the *Dance of Death* “poem” through images and text. The *Dance of Death* is not only a very interesting painting, but it is also a complex one. According to Elina Gertsman, “The surviving fragment of the painting reveals the complexity of the viewing process, informed by a written text immediately available to literate viewers and by oral discourses available to all.”¹²

The *Dance of Death* procession starts out with a message to the beholder from a Preacher that is standing in a pulpit giving an oral discourse. He is warning the rich, poor, old, and the young of the inevitability of death. This message can be seen in the first verse of the *Dance of Death* poem. According to Elina Gertsman,

Preacher to All: / O, reasonable creature, whether poor or rich!/ Look here into this mirror, young and old,/ and remember all/that no one can stay here./when death comes as you see here./If we do good deeds/ we can be together with God./We will get the reward we justly deserve./My dear children, I want to advise you/ not to lead your sheep astray,/ but to be to them a good model/ Before death suddenly appears a your side.¹³

The Preacher may be looked upon as the master of ceremonies where he gives a didactic performance that becomes translated into a visual language. There are several paintings that are similar to the *Dance of Death* in rhetorical codes, and one of the most famous is the *Triumph of Death* in Camposanto, Pisa.¹⁴ Next to the Preacher who stands in his pulpit sits a skeleton wearing a linen and turban while staring out at the beholder while he plays his bagpipes. There are some people who believe that playing the bagpipes has been known to “wake the dead.”¹⁵ This adds an eerie feel to the visual of skeletons moving in unrestrained grotesque ways with their heads jerking in unnatural ways. Just to the right of the skeleton playing the bagpipes, is

another skeleton draped in linen that is carrying a coffin upon his shoulder, and with his left hand he reaches out to grab onto the pope's red robes who is wearing a papal tiara to lead him into the *Dance of Death*. With the skeleton leading a frowning pope who holds a crosier, the procession of the Dance of Death begins. As Elina Gertsman points out,

A grinning skeleton follows, and after him comes the Holy Roman Emperor, with orb and sword. Death, covered in a torn shroud grabs his shoulder as well as the elbow of the Empress, who raises her left arm toward the sky in an exaggerated gesture of sorrow. Then follows another skeleton, who leads a Cardinal dressed in red, his hand reaching to his heart. The panel continues with Death, who turns toward the King with scepter, followed in turn by the remaining skeleton.¹⁶

The rest of the painting of the *Dance of Death* is unattainable, although it is believed that the Tallinn *Dance of Death* was mirrored from Bernt Notke's Lübeck *Dance of Death* that was painted in 1463. Despite the paintings differences, art historians have been able to guestimate the following order of the hierarchy of Tallinn's *Dance of Death*. The procession is believed to have continued on with the King being followed by a Bishop, Duke, Abbot, and a Knight. The order of the hierarchy of people continues down the line to a Craftsman, Hermit, and Peasant, and then followed by Youth, Maiden, and a Child in a cradle.¹⁷

The Tallinn *Dance of Death* with its figures of skeletons leading the living are placed in front of an autumn background where there is no landmarks of the city of Reval which leaves the beholder to wonder if the author Bernt Notke ever visited the city.¹⁸ According to Elina Gertsman,

For the Lübeck Dance, Notke provided an accurate view of the local cityscape ... doubtless intended to increase the impact of the message for German viewers. Aware that the same device would not function in Reval, he did not merely transpose the view of Lübeck onto the new painting, nor did he incorporate landmarks of Reval in the work, suggesting that he may not have traveled to the city.¹⁹

The Tallinn *Dance of Death* with its jesting skeletons is leading the living to their deaths, while they dance just above the inscriptions of their dialog that is written on winding scrolls. The

dialog that lies beneath the pictorial frieze is in verse form and is viewed as a poem. The *Dance of Death* poem consists of eight lines with each verse starting out with the living pleading in some way for their life. Death responds to the living in an eight line verse also with the last line being addressed to the next victim in the dance.²⁰ The verses are written in Low German in Gothic minuscule, so that everyone who could read would understand the importance of the images. It is through reading these verses that the lettered beholder is drawn closer to the Preacher and Death's messages. According to Elina Gertsman,

The text is a call for immediate repentance, a warning against the gravest sin that of superbia—pride. Death mocks the living, reminding men and women of all estates that they are nothing but guests in this world and urging them to atone for their sins, since all their wealth and power will be rendered worthless at death in one unexpected moment.²¹

The *Dance of Death* in Tallinn is a very interesting and complex painting, as the Preacher and Death's messages are not only communicated through visual and written language, but in a way where the beholder becomes connected to the painting in a physical way. The movement of the verses on the winding scrolls appears to run counter to the movement of the images, thereby reinforcing its message.²² The beholder who stands at almost eye level of these life size figures in the *Dance of Death* will start out at the beginning of the painting where the Preacher is standing in the pulpit at the far left side. As the beholder moves to the right to continue with the visual and written language he will begin to engage in a physical movement that brings him into a complementary dance of his own that will move him along in order to advance and take in the entire painting's message of *memento mori*.²³

The painting of the *Dance of Death* also known as the *Dance Macabre* was greatly influenced by the reoccurring cycles of the Black Death of 1348 which devastated Eastern Europe and Europe from the medieval period into the Renaissance. This style of painting known as death art became very popular during the fourteenth century, as artists who once painted

joyous scenes were now painting scenes of death and devastation, and the personification of Death became central, as can be seen in the *Dance of Death*. With Europe's preoccupation with death, art and literature became a societal allegory about mortality, as can be seen in the *Dance of Death* poem. In addition, Elina Gertsman shares the limited poem of the *Dance of Death* that lies beneath the pictorial frieze,

Text and Translation of the Reval Dance of Death

The text is transcribed exactly as it appears on the panel. Punctuation and spelling have not been corrected.

Preacher to All:

Och redelike creatuer sy arm ofte ryke
Seet hyr dat spegel junck vñ olden
Vnde dencket hyr aen ok elkerlike
Dat sik hyr nemant kan ontholden
Waneer de doet kumpt als gy hyr seen
Hebbe wi den vele gudes ghedaen
So moghe wi wesen myt gode een
Wy moten van allen loen vntfaen
Vñ lieven kynder ik wil ju raden
Dat gi juwe scapeken verleide nicht
Men gude exempel en op laden
Eer ju de doet sus snelle bi licht

Death to All:

To dussem dantse rope ik al gemene Pawes
keiser vñ alle alle creatu[...]
Arm ryke groet vñ kleine Tredet vort
went iu en helpet nen truren
Men dencket wol in aller tyd Dat gy
gude werke myt iu bringen
Vñ iuwer sunden werden quyd Went
gy moten na myner pypen springen

Preacher to All:

O, reasonable creature, whether poor or rich!
Look here into this mirror, young and old,
and remember all
that no one can stay here.
when death comes as you see here.
If we do good deeds
we can be together with God.
We will get the reward we justly deserve.
My dear children, I want to advise you
not to lead your sheep astray,
but to be to them a good model
Before death suddenly appears at your side.

Death to All:

I call all and everyone to this dance:
pope, emperor, and all creatures
poor, rich, big or small.
Step forward, mourning won't help now!
Remember though at all times
to bring good deeds with you
and to repent your sins
for you must dance to my pipe....²⁴

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CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

*I leave parchment to continue this work, if perchance any man survive
and of the race of Adam escape this pestilence and carry on the work which
I have begun.*

*John Clyn,
The Annals of Ireland*

It was fall in Messina, Sicily in the year of 1347 when trading ships from the Black Sea of Caffa anchored in Sicily's harbor. At that time no one could have imagined the scores of black rats that lurked about in the dark hulls of the ships. These black rats hidden from view carried a pandemic disease so contagious and lethal that nearly one third of Europe's population would perish within the course of a few years.¹ Later this pandemic disease would become known as the Black Death.

As the Black Death swept across Europe not showing indifference in its victims, life became intolerable, as those people who were not yet infected watched loved ones and friends lose their battle with Death. Life in Europe as most people knew it became unfamiliar, and to many it may have seemed like the end of the world. The wide ranging consequences from the Black Death affected Europe's culture, religion, and economic stability, but most noticeably was the alteration in the visual arts, as Europe's preoccupation with death started to become more apocalyptic in nature.

This dark style of painting that came out of the plague years became known as death art. Where ghastly and grim images of death and tortured souls, and the dead interacting with the living could be seen on frescoed walls and painted canvases across Europe. The prevalent motifs of images of the dead interacting with the living can be seen in the *Triumph of Death*, by

Francisco Traini (ca. 1350) and the *Dance of Death*, by Bernt Notke (n.d.). These artists' paintings are ideal examples of how the late medieval allegories of the universality of death were reflected through a macabre lens.

NOTES TO CHAPTER FIVE

1. Barbara W. Tuchman, "This is the End of the World: The Black Death," in *A Distant Mirror: The Calamitous 14th Century*, (New York: Alford A. Knopf, Inc. 1978), 124.

ILLUSTRATIONS



Figure 1. Francesco Traini, *Triumph of Death*, ca. 1350, Camposanto Monumental, Pisa.
Fresco, (5.64 x 15m), Web Gallery of Art, www.wga.hu/index1.html (accessed June 22, 2015).



Figure 2. Bernt Notke, *Dance of Death*, n.d., St. Nicholas' Church, Tallinn, Estonia.

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APPENDIX A

Text and Translation of the Reval Dance of Death

The text is transcribed exactly as it appears on the panel. Punctuation and spelling have not been corrected.

Preacher to All:

Och redelike creatuer sy arm ofte ryke
Seet hyr dat spegel junck vñ olden
Vnde dencket hyr aen ok elkerlike
Dat sik hyr nemant kan ontholden
Waneer de doet kumpt als gy hyr seen
Hebbe wi den vele gudes ghedaen
So moghe wi wesen myt gode een
Wy moten van allen loen vntfaen
Vñ lieven kynder ik wil ju raden
Dat gi juwe scapeken verleide nicht
Men gude exempel en op laden
Eer ju de doet sus snelle bi licht

Death to All:

To dussem dantse rope ik al gemene Pawes
keiser vñ alle creatu[...]
Arm ryke groet vñ kleine Tredet vort
went iu en helpt nen truen
Men dencket wol in aller tyd Dat gy
gude werke myt iu bringen
Vñ iuwer sunden werden quyd Went
gy moten na myner pypen springen

Death to the Pope:

Her pawes du byst hogest nu Dantse wy
voer ik vñ du
Al heuestu in godes stede staen Een
erdesch vader ere vñ werdicheit vntfaen
Van alder werlt du most my Volghen vñ
werden als ik sy
Dyn losent vñ bindent dat was vast Der
hoecheit werstu nu een gast

Pope:

Och here got wat is min bate al
was ik hoch geresen in state
Vnde ik altohant moet werden gelijk
als du een slim der erden

Preacher to All:

O, reasonable creature, whether poor or rich!
Look here into this mirror, young and old,
and remember all
that no one can stay here
when death comes as you see here.
If we do good deeds
we can be together with God.
We will get the reward we justly deserve.
My dear children, I want to advise you
not to lead your sheep astray,
but to be to them a good model
Before death suddenly appears at your side.

Death to All:

I call all and everyone to this dance:
pope, emperor, and all creatures
poor, rich, big or small.
Step forward, mourning won't help now!
Remember though at all times
to bring good deeds with you
and to repent your sins
for you must dance to my pipe.

Death to the Pope:

Pope, now you are the highest,
let us lead the dance, me and you!
Even though you may have been God's representative,
a father on earth, received honor and glory
from all men in this world, you must
follow me and become what I am.
What you loosed was loosed, what you bound was
bound,⁷⁷ but now you lose your great esteem.

Pope:

O lord God, of what use is it to me—
even though I reached a high position
I must here and now
become a handful of earth just like you.

Mi mach hocheit noch rickheit baten
wente al dink mot ik nalaten
Nemet hir excempel de na mi sit
pawes al[s]e ik was mine tit

Death to Pope, then to the Emperor:

[...]
her keiser wi mote d[...]

Emperor:

O dot du letlike figure vor andert my
alle myne nature
Ik was mechtich vñ hogest van machte
sunder gelike
Koninge vorsten vñ heren mosten
my nigen vnde eren
Nu kumstu vreselike forme van mi to
maken spise der worme.

Death to the Emperor, then to the Empress:

Du werst gekoren wil dat vreden to
beschermen vnde to behoden
De hilgen kerken de kerstenheit myt
deme swerde der rechticheit
Men houardie heft di vor blent du hef[t]
di suluen nicht gekent
Mine [...]kumste was nicht in dinem sinne
[...]u [...]er [...] h[...] [f]row
[k]eiser[inne?]

Empress:

Ich wet my ment de doet was [...] ny
vor vert so grot
Ik mende he si nicht al bi sinne bin ik
doch junck vñ ok ein keiserinn[e]
Ik mende ik hedde vele macht vp em
hebbe ik ny gedacht
Ofte dat jement dede [t]egen mi och lat
mi noch leuen des bidde ik di

Death to the Empress, then to the Cardinal:

Keiserinne hoch vor meten my duncket
du hest myner vor gheten
Tred hyr an it is nu de tyt du mendest ik
solde di schelden [qui]t
Nen al werstu noch so vele du most myt
to dessem spele

Neither esteem nor wealth can be of any use to me
for I have to leave it all behind.
Let this be an example to you, you who will be pope
after me as I was in my time.

Death to Pope, then to the Emperor:

[...]
Emperor, we have to dance!

Emperor:

O death, you ugly figure,
you completely change my nature.
I was rich and powerful,
the most powerful one without compare.
Kings, dukes and noblemen
had to bow before me and honor me.
Now you come, horrible apparition,
to make worm feed of me.

Death to the Emperor, then to the Empress:

You were chosen—ponder it well!—
to protect and guard
the holy church of Christendom
with the sword of justice.
But haughtiness has blinded you,
you didn't know yourself.
My coming you did not expect.
Turn you to me now, empress!

Empress:

I know it's me death means.
I've never been so terrified before.
I thought he was not in his right mind,
for I am so young and an empress, too!
I believed I had great power,
but of death I never thought
or that someone else would hurt me.
Oh, let me live a little longer, I pray you!

Death to the Empress, then to the Cardinal:

Utterly insolent empress,
it seems to me that you have forgotten me.
Come here! It's time now.
You believed I would spare you?
Not at all, however great you may be,
you have to follow me to this roundelay

Vnde gi anderen alto male holt an volge
my her kerdenale

Cardinal:

Ontfarme myner here salt schen ik
kan deme gentsins entflen
Se ik vore efte achter my ik vole den
dot my al tyt by
Wat mach de hoge saet my baten den
ik besat ik mot en laten
Vñ werden vnwerdiger ter stunt wen en
vnreine stinckende hunt

Death to the Cardinal, then to the King:

Du werest van state gelike en apostel
godes vp ertry[k]e
Vmme den kersten louen to sterken
myt worden vñ anderen dogentsammen
werk[en]
Men du hest mit groter houardichit vp
dinen hogen perden reden
Des mostu sorgen nu de mere nu tret
[...] vort her konnink here.

King:

O dot dyn sprake heft my vo[r]uert
Dussen dans en hebbe ik niht gelert
Hertogen rydder vñ knechte D[r]agen vor
my durbar gerichte
Vñ jwelick hodde sick de worde To
sprekende de ik node horde
Nu koms[t] vnuorsenlik Vñ berouest my
al myn ryk

Death to the King, then to the Bishop:

Al dynne danken heftu geleyt Na werliker
herlicheyt
Wat bate[t] du most in den slik Werden
geschapen my gelik
Recht gewent vñ vorkeren Heftu vnder
dy laten reigeren
Den armen [...] egene bedwank Her
bischoep nu holt an de hant

and all you others as well!
Stop, follow me, cardinal!

Cardinal:

Have mercy on me Lord, now that it has to happen!
There is no way for me to escape from you.
Whether I look before or behind
I always sense death close to me.
Of what use can the high rank be to me
which I attained? I have to leave it behind
and instantly become less worthy
than a foul stinking dog.

Death to the Cardinal, then to the King:

You were esteemed
like an apostle of God on earth,
that you may support the Christian faith
with words and other virtuous deeds.
But in your great haughtiness
you sat on your high horse.
Therefore now you have to worry even more!
Step forward now, noble king!

King:

Oh death, your words have scared me!
This dance I haven't learned.
Dukes, knights, and squires
serve me precious dishes
and everyone took heed
not to speak the words I disliked to hear.
Now you come unexpectedly
and rob me of my entire kingdom!

Death to the King, then to the Bishop:

All your thoughts were about
worldly splendor.
How does that help you now? You have to sink into the earth
and become like me.
You let bent and perverted laws
prevail during your kingship,
you wrought violence on the poor as if they were slaves.
Bishop, give me your hand!¹

APPENDIX B

An Innocent Merriment

A Medieval Song about the Plague

*"A sickly season," the merchant said,
"The town I left was filled with dead,
and everywhere these queer red flies
crawled upon the corpses' eyes,
eating them away."*

*"Fair make you sick," the merchant said,
"they crawled upon the wine and bread.
Pale priests with oil and books,
bulging eyes and crazy looks,
dropping like the flies."*

*"I had to laugh," the merchant said,
"The doctors purged, and dosed, and bled;
"and proved through solemn disputation
"The cause lay in some constellation.
"Then they began to die."*

*"First they sneezed." the merchant said,
"And then they turned the brightest red,
Begged for water, then fell back,
They waited for the flies."*

*"I came away," the merchant said,
"You can't do business with the dead.
"So I've come here to ply my trade.
"You'll find this to be a fine brocade ..."
And then he sneeze.²*

NOTES TO APPENDIX

1. Elina Gertsman, "The Dance of Death in Reval (Tallinn): The Preacher and His Audience," *Gesta*, 42, no. 2 (2003), 143-159, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25067083.htm> (accessed January 29, 2015), 143.

2. "An Innocent Merriment." in *The Effect of Black Death on Art and Artists in the Medieval Period*. Millard Mulch, 2011. <http://www.historyofpainters.com/plague.htm> (accessed March 28, 2015).

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