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## 10, Danse Macabre

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*Danse Macabre*  
Stefano Paparo

In the years following the plagues of late 14<sup>th</sup>-century Europe, it seems almost inevitable that the *Danse Macabre* would become a popular theme in medieval art. The *Danse Macabre* (the Dance of Death) is a 15<sup>th</sup>-century conceit, both pictorial and textual, of the humbling power of death—it is a kind of *memento mori*. A *memento mori* is an object kept as a reminder of the inevitability of death, such as a skull. The *Danse Macabre*, however, is aesthetically more elaborate, as it depicts people from all social stations dancing to, or around, the grave with Death as their guide. My research not only aims to provide a brief analysis and description of the *Danse Macabre* specific to Thielman Kerver's printed Book of Hours, but also aims to contextualize it in a post-plague Europe, as well as in the political climate of late-medieval Paris.

The *Danse Macabre* in Thielman Kerver's printed Book of Hours (1507) is depicted in a series of marginal, metalcut illustrations in which Death, who is seen as a decomposing corpse, or a *transi*, accompanying 66 "dancers" to the afterlife. This *Danse* was printed using Simon Vostre's (fl. from 1488-1520) metalcut figures, which were inspired by the earliest known depiction of the *Danse Macabre*—*Les Innocents* mural at Cimetière des Innocents (Holy Innocents' Cemetery) in Paris, painted between 1424 and 1425.<sup>1</sup> Though this mural might have been the earliest pictorial evidence of the *Danse* in Europe, the idea of the *Danse* existed in Europe decades beforehand. For example, the line "I did the dance of the macabre" appears in the 1376 poem, "*Le respit de la mort*," by Jean le Fèvre.<sup>2</sup> Vostre also took inspiration from artists and publishers such as Jean Pichore, Antoine Vérard, and Guy Marchant.<sup>3</sup>

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1. <sup>1</sup>Oosterwijk, "Of Dead Kings", 131-38.

2. <sup>2</sup>Aries, *Images of Man*, 157-60; Kinch, "Image", 48-51; Oosterwijk, *Mixed Metaphors*, 10-20.

3. <sup>3</sup>Oosterwijk, "Muoz Ich Tanzen", 151-52.



Kerver's *Danse Macabre* spans three sections of the Book of Hours; it begins on sig. o1 of "Office of the Dead," including the entirety of "Penitential Psalms and Litany," and ends on sig. q2 of "Hours of the Holy Spirit." This three-section scope is unusual, as the *Danse* is typically restricted to "Office of the Dead." There are two figures or "dancers" per page, and all the dancers are arranged in hierarchical order, beginning with the Pope (the highest), and ending with the Fool (the lowest).

Below each figure is written a short, proverbial moral in Latin. Some dancers seem to speak in first person. For example, the text below the Carthusian monk translates as: "Dead to this world, I endure now the death of the flesh", whereas some of the texts seem to be commentaries made by Death himself or by an authorial narrator. For example, the text below the Fool translates as: "The Fool as well as the Wise Man are doomed/locked in the same fate".<sup>4</sup> This later quote is characteristically "witty" and subversive for a *Danse*, and succinctly exemplifies the *Danse's* controlling idea: Death equalizes all.

The headings of the text, i.e., the ranks or titles of the individual dancers (e.g. Pope, Emperor, King, etc.) are printed in red (fig 1. & fig.2). Three skulls in a row are depicted just below the text accompanying the bottommost *Danse* illustrations on each page. However, beneath the illustrations/text of the Emperor and the King, the skulls are not printed, but drawn in pencil, as if Kerver forgot to include them in the original printing. These seem to be the only

4. <sup>4</sup>"Mortuus en mundo: nunc perfero funera carnis"; "Stulta quidem et sapiens fato clauduntur eodem." Original Latin texts translated by Dr. Maud Simon-Pérez. See fig.5 & fig.18.

penciled-in details in the *Danse*. It's possible that Kerver intentionally left the skulls out to allow space for something else, but, for reasons unknown, never filled in the space with other adornment. Perhaps Kerver intended the blank spaces to remain as such.

In typical *Danse* scenes, Death appears on both the left and the right of the dancers regardless of their rank, yet in Kerver's *Danse* Death appears always to the left of the dancer, except when it is the Pope and the Emperor, in which case Death appears on the right. Not only does Death appear to the right of the Pope and the Emperor, but Death does not engage them physically, does not appear to be dragging them away to the afterlife against their will, as Death does with the other dancers.<sup>5</sup>

Though the *Danse Macabre* served as a *memento mori* in the wake of the plagues that had claimed millions of lives, it quickly became a medium by which artists and their patrons could potentially subvert attitudes toward certain figures of power, simply by including them in the *Danse Macabre*. Unlike its contemporary Spanish and German versions of the *Danse Macabre*, Kerver's *Danse* does not include the figure of the Duke (otherwise positioned within the first 12 ranks).<sup>6</sup> The omission of the Duke in Kerver's *Danse* is likely because the Duke was omitted in the original mural at *Les Innocents* on account of the tumultuous political climate in Paris, in which certain parties might have resented such a public depiction of "the Duke" in an

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5. <sup>5</sup>There are 31 male dancers and 35 female dancers in Kerver's danse macabre. The first 26 ranks, beginning with the Pope and ending with the Hermit (fig.7), alternate between clerical ranks and ranks of the layperson and are comprised of only male dancers. For the first 26 ranks, members of the clergy are always at the top of the page. The Queen (fig.8) initiates the remaining 40 ranks, which are comprised mostly of female dancers, save for the following male dancers: the Physician (fig.9), the Franciscan Monk (fig.12), and the Fool (fig.18). These remaining 40 ranks do not follow the same alternating pattern between clerical ranks and layperson ranks as they do with the first 26 dancers (i.e. clerical, layperson, clerical, layperson, and so on). Unlike the first 26 dancers, the remaining clerical positions are placed at both top and bottom of the page. In fact, here (from Queen to Fool) there seems to be no pattern at all in the ordering of male, female, clerical, or layperson dancers.
  6. <sup>6</sup>Oosterwijk, "Of Dead Kings", 146. Though Kerver's *danse* omits the Duke, the figure of the Duchess (fig.8) remains. The decision to keep the Duchess without the Duke seems odd. Additionally, the figure of the Bailiff is replaced by the Provost (fig.4), yet the figure of the Bailiff's Wife (fig.12) remains—another anomaly.

allegorical scheme ripe for satire.<sup>7</sup> Considering that Kerver's engravers such as Vostre borrowed illustrations and accompanying texts from much earlier periods, it seems questionable whether his *Danse* contains biting, political subtexts pertaining to specific figures of power in early 16<sup>th</sup>-century Paris.

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7. <sup>7</sup>Oosterwijk, "Fro Paris to Ingland", 80-82.

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