Sarah Schell

Image and the Office of the Dead in Late Medieval Europe

Regular, Repellant, and Redemptive Death

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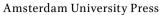
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For J.
'con la forza di mille soli'

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Introduction

Abstract: This book examines images at the Office of the Dead in Books of Hours. It approaches the topic through three conceptualizations of death which dominate the imagery of the Office: social death, bodily death, and non-death. The social engaged the reader in contemplation of death's connotations for and in the community. Bodily death considers images responding to the physical consequences of death, such as dissolution and identity loss, as well as engaging with the rhetorical power of the visible corpse. Images of non-death provided visual evidence of the Christian promise of redemption through death and the reunification of body and soul. These images are contributors to, as well as reflections of, the socially and culturally constructed idea of medieval death.

Keywords: medieval, ritual, church, experience of death, imagination

When thy face pales
and thy strength decays
and thy nose become cold
and thy breath falters
and thy breath fails,
and thy life goes away;
then shall they stretch thee on the floor
and place thee on a bier
and sew thee up in a clout,
and put thee in a pit along with the wormes.[1]

So go the 'signs' of death in a thirteenth-century miscellany describing the faltering body – going, going, gone. It is at once practical and mysterious. What does it mean

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1   A Middle English 'Song of Death'. MS 29, Miscellany, English, 13th century, fol. 189r. Oxford: Jesus College. Richard Morris, ed. *An Old English Miscellany Containing a Bestiary, Kentish Sermons, Proverbs of Alfred, Religious Poems of the Thirteenth Century, from Manuscripts in the British Museum, Bodleian Library, Jesus College Library etc.*, Early English Text Society Original Series 49 (London: Trübner & Co., 1872), 101.

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when 'thy life goes away'? Even now, with all the scientific and medical developments of the last six hundred years, we do not really know. There are ongoing medical and philosophical debates about 'heart death' versus 'brain death'; we struggle to deal with situations in which a person is physically missing but not verifiably dead, or with those who are mentally gone but physically alive. We say of those who are socially shunned that they are 'dead' to us and speak of our beloved dead as present or 'alive' through us. Death and deadness (and life and aliveness) connote many things. Not only are these inseparable ideas (you cannot be dead if you are not first alive), we also use them remarkably flexibly considering the purported absolute nature of the distinction between death and life. In the twenty-first century, death is habitually understood as a moment of personal annihilation. In the Catholic world of the medieval period, death marked a change, but not an end, to an individual existence. It is, of course, more than either of these: it is a condition of life, a terminal event, a perceived threat, and a beginning, among other things. 'Death' can thus be inflected with different meaning depending on the circumstance of its use. The thirteenth-century poem above describes a body in the moments before and after the death of the body, and this is its most common association. But it is only one part of what death can mean.

What did it mean to medieval people? The famously plentiful and diverse imagery of death produced in this period indicates not only that it was a question people deliberated through images but also that they did so in a range of ways, considering (and imaging) different aspects of death at different times and places. This book arose out of a curiosity about the dense weave of overlapping ideas that make up this familiar and essentially human concept during the late medieval period and represents an effort to untangle some of these threads by examining one space for the visual manifestation of medieval death culture, the Office of the Dead in Books of Hours. It approaches the topic through three different conceptualizations of death which dominate the imagery of the Office: social death, bodily death, and non-death. The articulation of these themes is not exclusive of other death concepts, nor are they exclusive of one another (images could and often do engage with more than one of these ideas). Rather, this articulation highlights the multifaceted conceptualization of death in the visual culture of the period, which is responding to the lived experience of proximity to death, to the anxieties surrounding the knowledge of one's own death, and to the theological structures that framed the medieval experience of death in various ways.

Death embraces within itself socially and religiously constructed ideas about what it should be, as well as the idiosyncrasies and peculiarities of each encounter with it. The Office of the Dead in a Book of Hours is a vibrant space in which to examine the intersection of these cultural definitions and personal experiences of death because of its own flexibility of form and use. It could be used with others

and alone, out loud and silently. It was present at the performance of the Office in church, and it accompanied its reader into the private spaces of the home. The text and images of the Office in the Book of Hours both physically and metaphorically travelled between cultural definition and individual experience. Between the two, the reader crafted an engagement with death that responded to both, and which could be flexibly amended as life (and death) unfolded around them.

The medieval period has long been associated with death, themes of *memento mori* and the macabre, and has traditionally been situated in contrast to the supposedly 'lively' Renaissance. Johan Huizinga's evocation of a morbid society stalked by the spectre of death has itself stalked the scholarship on medieval death for nearly a hundred years since the publication of *The Waning of the Middles Ages*.[2] Recent scholarship has seen a surge of interest in areas ranging from the religious and liturgical framework that surrounded death and the social implications caused by mass or violent death to the day-to-day business of death and burial in medieval communities.[3] The work of these scholars has attempted to divest medieval death of its association with the geist of a decaying age. Rather than approaching attitudes to death in broad epoch-defining sweeps as Huizinga and Philippe Ariès[4] have done, this work grounds the discussion within localized cultural and religious spaces, examining individual agency and motivation vis-à-vis death within communities. It situates medieval death culture as a productive aspect of medieval civic and religious life, incorporated into and impacting areas such as corporate and individual identity, gender, and community support systems (such as charitable or civic foundations), among others. Amy Appleford's reassessment of the *ars moriendi* tradition in the context of public life and governance in London, for example, recharacterizes this so-called 'morbid' genre as a generative force with positive implications for the regulation of public as well as private life in the late medieval city.[5] This book

2   Johan Huizinga, *The Waning of the Middle Ages: A Study of the Forms of Life, Thought and Art in France and the Netherlands in the XIVth and XVth Centuries* (London: E. Arnold, 1927).

3   This literature is extensive. On the religious and liturgical framework, see Frederick S. Paxton, *Christianizing Death: The Creation of a Ritual Process in Early Medieval Europe* (London: Cornell University Press, 1990); Knud Ottosen, *The Responsories and Versicles of the Latin Office of the Dead* (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 1993). On ordinary death, see Steven Bassett, ed., *Death in Towns: Urban Responses to the Dying and the Dead* (London: Leicester University Press, 1992); Bruce Gordon and Peter Marshall, *The Place of the Dead: Death and Remembrance in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Roberta Gilchrist and Barney Sloane, *Requiem: The Medieval Monastic Cemetery in Britain* (London: Museum of London Archaeology Service, 2005).

4   Philippe Ariès, *Images of Man and Death*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985); Philippe Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death*, trans. Helen Weaver (London: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981).

5   Amy Appleford, *Learning to Die in London, 1380–1540* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015).

likewise argues that reader engagement with death culture as expressed in Books of Hours was consistent with and encouraged positive social and religious outcomes for the individual and the community.

At the same time, there has been much recent work on devotional lives in the late medieval period, and particularly on reading practices and lay engagement with devotional texts, many of which highlight the importance of imagination and of immersive reading.[6] These works highlight methods used by devotional readers seeking to move themselves closer to divine truths, often via embodied experiences of imagined states. Such a method is particularly applicable to any effort to understand death. Not only did death in the medieval period have its part in those divine truths, but it is also, for the living, necessarily and thus essentially an imagined state. It is only in the imagination that the living can experience or prepare to experience death. Images, whether external or internal to the reader, played an important role in this process, as they prompt the viewer to see through them to the worlds they evoke. The power of sight to instigate somatically experienced spiritual states was a characteristic aspect of late medieval devotional reading, and one that was supported by texts and images that invoked and promoted it. Nicholas Love called readers to 'see in the eye' the events he described in text as though they were 'bodily' witness to the events of Christ's passion. Aquinas was convinced that the path to understanding required the use of the senses, including 'phantasms' (imagination), in order to reflect on knowledge. Image and imagination were important tools providing the devout with methods they could use in pursuit of greater understanding of divine mysteries.[7] As Michelle Karnes succinctly puts it, 'the most important cognitive task assigned to medieval imagination was the discovery of truth.'[8] This book applies the palpable and invitatory quality of

6   See Laurel Amtower, *Engaging Words: The Culture of Reading in the Later Middle Ages* (New York: Palgrave, 2000); Jennifer Bryan, *Looking Inward: Devotional Reading and the Private Self in Late Medieval England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008); Joyce Coleman, *Public Reading and Reading the Public in Late Medieval England and France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Laura Sterponi, 'Reading and Meditation in the Middle Ages: Lectio Divina and Books of Hours', *Text & Talk: Interdisciplinary Journal of Language, Discourse Communication Studies* 28, no. 5 (2008): 667–89; Sabrina Corbellini, 'Creating Domestic Sacred Space: Religious Reading in Late Medieval and Early Modern Italy', in *Domestic Devotions in Early Modern Italy*, ed. Maya Corry, Marco Faini, and Alessia Meneghin (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 295–309; Heather Blatt, *Participatory Reading in Late-Medieval England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018); Michelle Karnes, *Imagination, Meditation, and Cognition in the Middle Ages* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

7   Michael Camille, 'Before the Gaze: The Internal Senses and Late Medieval Practices of Seeing', in *Visuality Before and Beyond the Renaissance*, ed. Robert S. Nelson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 212–13. Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle's De Anima*, trans. Kenelm Foster and Sylvester Humphries (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1951), Book 3, Chapter 8, Lectio 13, accessed April 1, 2023. https://isidore.co/aquinas/english/DeAnima.htm#313L.

8   Karnes, *Imagination, Meditation, and Cognition in the Middle Ages*, 4.

imaginative medieval reading and seeing that was often evoked in devotional writing of the medieval period to the images of death examined here. Through embodied imagination, these images offered readers and viewers ways to engage with death that lay beyond the bounds of their earthly lives, as death ultimately lies beyond the bounds of all our lives.

Complicating any effort to understand death is the fact that we die only once. We therefore confront our own impending death vicariously: our lived experience of death is mediated through the deaths of others and through images of death. This aspect of the visual culture of medieval death has been explored by Paul Binski, Ashby Kinch, and Michael Camille, among others, who all explicitly engage with the mediating role of death imagery in various contexts.[9] This book builds on the work of these scholars, focusing on how this mediating function works in concert with the liturgical context of the Office of the Dead and within a prayerbook that bridges the physical and mental spaces between private and public devotion.

Much of the scholarship on the visual culture of death has focused on the image of the dead body. Paul Binski's *Medieval Death* considers death primarily through attitudes toward the corpse,[10] and Kenneth Rooney does the same for the literary material in his examination of 'physical dereliction and human transience' via the language of the macabre – that is, of the decaying body.[11] For Kinch, too, the 'image of death' is the image of the dead body.[12] There is an abundance of literature on various manifestations of the macabre such as cadaver tombs, chantry chapels, tomb brasses, the *Legend of the Three Living and the Three Dead*, the *Danse Macabre*, the *Ars moriendi*, and others.[13] The death of the body dominates because of the

9   Paul Binski, *Medieval Death: Ritual and Representation* (London: British Museum Press, 1996); Michael Camille, *Master of Death: The Lifeless Art of Pierre Remiet, Illuminator* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996); Ashby Kinch, *Imago Mortis: Mediating Images of Death in Late Medieval Culture* (Leiden: Brill, 2013).

10   Binski also discusses the representation of the afterlife in the final chapter of the book. Binski, *Medieval Death*, 164–214.

11   Rooney broadly defines the macabre as literature that 'didactically dissolves the body' and includes material that pre- and post-dates the first appearance of the term in the fourteenth century. Kenneth Rooney, *Mortality and Imagination: The Life of the Dead in Medieval English Literature*, Disputatio (Turnhout: Brepols, 2011), 7.

12   Kinch, *Imago Mortis*, 4

13   This literature is extensive. See for example: Sally Badham and Malcolm Norris, *Early Incised Slabs and Brasses from the London Marblers*, Reports of the Research Committee of the Society of Antiquaries of London (London: Society of Antiquaries of London, 1999); Kathleen Cohen, *Metamorphosis of a Death Symbol: The Transi Tomb in the Late Middle Ages and Renaissance* (London: University of California Press, 1973); Howard Colvin, *Architecture and the After-Life* (London: Yale University Press, 1991); Mary Catherine O'Connor, *The Art of Dying Well: The Development of the Ars Moriendi* (New York: AMS Press, 1966); Elina Gertsman, 'The Gap of Death: Passive Violence in the Encounter Between the Three Dead and the Three Living', in *Beholding Violence in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, ed. Erin Felicia Labbie and Allie Terry-Fritsch (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), 85–104; Elina Gertsman, 'Visualising Death: Medieval Plagues

wealth of material that represents, and makes physically present, that event within the visual environment, and because of the striking qualities of these images and the compelling body of literature describing and interrogating the corpse.[14] The body is also present in images at the Office of the Dead, and indeed many of the best known and most often reproduced images from the Office are images of the corpse.[15] The concentration on the body, undoubtedly an important aspect of death imagery, has privileged this way of thinking about death over others. The approach taken here addresses the powerful imagery of bodily decay as one aspect of death's meaning, situating it in relationship to other ways of thinking about death, the social and the redemptive.

The images of the Office of the Dead in Books of Hours will be familiar to those interested in medieval history. They often appear on book covers or are selected for the rare colour illustration in scholarly texts. They have been treated in passing in many historical studies of medieval death,[16] and their rich contemporary detail has seen them used as illustrations or confirmations of historical practice in scholarly and non-scholarly works on social history. Thomas Boase, for example, uses them as illustrations, while Gilchrist and Sloane use the images to support the archeological findings of *Requiem*, but there is little discussion of the extent to which such images themselves can be considered 'archeological'.[17] In the epilogue

and the Macabre', in *Piety and Plague : From Byzantium to the Baroque*, ed. Franco Mormando and Thomas Worcester (Kirksville, MO: Truman State University Press, 2007), 64–89; Dominique DeLuca, 'Bonum est mortis meditari: Meaning and Functions of the Medieval Double Macabre Portrait', in *Death in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Times: The Material and Spiritual Conditions of the Culture of Death*, ed. Albrecht Classen (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016), 239–61; Jill Bradley, 'The Changing Face of Death: The Iconography of the Personification of Death in the Early Middle Ages', in *On Old Age: Approaching Death in Antiquity and the Middle Ages*, ed. Christian Krötzl and Katariina Mustakallio (Turnhout: Brepols, 2011), 57–87; Sophie Oosterwijk and Stefanie A. Knöll, *Mixed Metaphors : The Danse Macabre in Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2011).

14   See for example Wendy A. Matlock, 'The Feminine Flesh in the Disputacione Betwyx the Body and Wormes', in *The Ends of the Body: Identity and Community in Medieval Culture*, ed. Suzanna Conklin Akbari and Jill Ross (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013), 260–82; Rosemary Woolf, *The English Religious Lyric in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), chs. 3, 9, Appendix H.

15   See, for example, the full-page painting that precedes the Office of the Dead in The Rohan Hours. Reproduced in Millard Meiss and Marcel Thomas, *The Rohan Book of Hours: Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris (MS. Latin 9471)* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1973), fol. 159. Discussed in Leslie A. Blacksberg, 'Death and the Contract of Salvation: The Rohan Master's Illumination for the Office of the Dead', in *Flanders in a European Perspective: Manuscript Illumination Around 1400 in Flanders and Abroad. Proceedings of the International Colloquium, Leuven 7–10, Sept. 1993*, ed. Maurits Smeyers and Bert Cardon (Leuven: Uigeverij Peeters, 1995), 487–98.

16   Neither Huizinga nor Ariès spend any time on them.

17   Thomas S. Ross Boase, *Death in the Middle Ages: Mortality, Judgement and Remembrance* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1972); Gilchrist and Sloane, *Requiem: The Medieval Monastic Cemetery in Britain*. Others, such as Duffy, have acknowledged them as a rich source but have not examined the visual material

of her book on parochial identity *Imagining the Parish*, Ellen Rentz specifically identifies Office of the Dead images as she queries to what extent images of ritual might support community practices within the medieval parish.[18]

There are several articles that examine Office of the Dead images, notably those by Millard Meiss and by Gabriele Bartz and Eberhard König,[19] as well as articles focusing on individual examples of Office of the Dead imagery.[20] Much of this existing work has focused on late fifteenth-century French examples. Although often referenced and frequently identified as the most iconographically diverse set of images in the Book of Hours,[21] the Office of the Dead images as a corpus have not received a book-length study. This book addresses that gap. Building on the existing literature on individual manuscripts and introducing less well-known examples, it assesses the images as a body of work that reveal diverse conceptualizations of medieval death. It is a topic that necessarily crosses disciplinary boundaries, and recent scholarship has demonstrated the rich results that arise from this approach.[22] While this book is structured around the visual

as significant in its own right. Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, c.1400–c.1580* (London: Yale University Press, 2005); Eamon Duffy, *Marking the Hours: English People and Their Prayers, 1240–1570* (London: Yale University Press, 2006).

18   Ellen K. Rentz, *Imagining the Parish in Late Medieval England* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2015), 152.

19   Gloria Fiero, 'Death Ritual in Fifteenth-Century Manuscript Illumination', *Journal of Medieval History* 10 (1984): 271–94; Gabriele Bartz and Eberhard König, 'Die illustration des Totenoffiziums in Stundenbüchern', in *Im Angesicht des Todes. Ein interdisciplinäres Kompendium*, ed. H. Berkeret (St. Ottilien: Pietas Liturgica III, 1987), 487–528; Millard Meiss, 'La Mort et l'office des Morts à l'époque du Maitre de Boucicaut et des Limbourg', *Revue de l'Art* 1, no. 2 (n.d.): 17–25; Elizabeth Morrison, 'The Light at the End of the Tunnel: Manuscript Illumination and the Concept of Death', in *The Ivory Mirror: The Art of Mortality in Renaissance Europe*, ed. Stephen Perkinson (New Haven; London: Bowdoin College Museum of Art and Yale University Press, 2017), 83–106.

20   Christine Kralik, 'Death Is Not the End: The Encounter of the Three Living and the Three Dead in the Berlin Hours of Mary of Burgundy and Maximilian I', in *The Ends of the Body: Identity and Community in Medieval Culture*, ed. Suzanna Conklin Akbari and Jill Ross (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012), 61–85; Caroline Zohl, 'A Phenomenon of Parallel Reading in the Office of the Dead', in *Mixed Metaphors: The Danse Macabre in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, ed. Sophie Oosterwijk and Stephanie Knoll (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2011), 325–60.

21   Roger S. Wieck et al., *Time Sanctified: The Book of Hours in Medieval Art and Life* (New York: George Braziller, in association with the Walters Art Gallery, 1988), 124; Roger S. Wieck, *Painted Prayers: The Book of Hours in Medieval and Renaissance Art* (New York: George Braziller in association with the Pierpont Morgan Library, 1997), 119; Fiero, 'Death Ritual in Fifteenth-Century Manuscript Illumination', 276, 291; Nigel M. Morgan and Bronwyn Stocks, *The Medieval Imagination: Illuminated Manuscripts from Cambridge, Australia and New Zealand* (South Yarra: Macmillan, 2008), 130.

22   Elina Gertsman, Sophie Oosterwijk, and Ashby Kinch, among many others, have drawn on a wide array of material in their studies of medieval death culture, from visual art and literature to performance and politics. Elina Gertsman, *The Dance of Death in the Middle Ages: Image, Text, Performance*, Studies in the Visual Cultures of the Middle Ages 3 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2010). Sophie Oosterwijk, 'Of Dead Kings,

material found in the Office of the Dead, the images are examined in conjunction with their bookish setting. This study addresses how the images interact with the liturgical text they accompany, the participatory reading practices of the period, and the broader world of late medieval death culture as expressed in literature and art outside the Book of Hours.

Medieval Death: The Practical and Conceptual

On a practical level, death was very physically present in the medieval world. In much of Europe, there was war abroad, dynastic unrest at home, and raging plague, in addition to the more quotidian concerns of hearth and home. But it was not only a biological and social fact; it was also a soteriological one. Death was an essential part of the Christian salvation narrative: death was at the beginning as a punishment for sin, and it was a death that opened the way to redeem the sinner. It was necessary for the body to die so that the soul could live anew with Christ. It was the only path to eternal salvation but also, frighteningly, a possible path to damnation. There was a highly developed anxiety about the spiritual fate of the dead: an awareness that not all would readily 'pass through the eye of the needle'[23] but instead face untold years, perhaps centuries, in the purifying fires of purgatory. The close proximity to death that was a part of daily experience, and the spiritual worry over the fate of the dead gave rise to devotional practices that encouraged the devout to meditate on death and consider what it would mean for the dead as well as for the living.

The shared ritual structures of the church shaped medieval encounters with death through the Requiem Mass and Office of the Dead. Originally a monastic service, by the late medieval period the Office was recited at family funerals, gild commemorations, yearly minds, and chantry chapel services in memory of the dead. It was present in the background of all deaths in the period and was one of the most familiar liturgical rituals to people from all walks of life.[24] The *Placebo* and *Dirige*, or 'Dirge', were texts that people knew through constant exposure. It

Dukes and Constables: The Historical Context of the Danse Macabre in Late Medieval Paris', *Journal of the British Archaeological Association* 161, no. 1 (2008): 131–62; Sophie Oosterwijk, 'Death, Memory and Commemoration: John Lydgate and "Macabrees Daunce" at Old St Paul's Cathedral, London', in *Memory and Commemoration in Medieval England: Proceedings of the 2008 Harlaxton Symposium*, ed. Caroline M. Barron and Clive Burgess (Donington: Shaun Tyas, 2010), 185–201. Kinch, *Imago Mortis*.

23   'It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God.' Mark 10:25.

24   Eamon Duffy states that the prayers and texts of the Office of the Dead were the most commonly used of all prayers in the late medieval period. Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, c.1400–c.1580*, 220–22.

was also accessible in the most popular and widely produced devotional book of the late medieval period, the Book of Hours.[25]

The Book of Hours is based around the Hours of the Blessed Virgin Mary and regularly included the text of the Office of the Dead.[26] In addition, other texts were added and subtracted to express the devotional tastes and desires (and purse) of the owner. These might include other offices or formalized sets of prayers such as the Commendation of Souls, Litany, or Hours of the Holy Spirit, as well as a variety of other more informal prayers and tracts.[27] Images could also be used to personalize the book via the inclusion of particularized illuminations containing portraits, heraldic motifs, or saints of special personal significance.[28] They were adapted through time with new images sewn or pasted in to reflect the pilgrimages, new devotions, or increased wealth of new owners. The book was thus malleable in content and illustration, shaped by and for the devotional and familial requirements of the reader. For readers today, it is often this personal quality of the Book of Hours that makes them both revealing and engaging. It is also a quality that makes them a good gauge of the devotional concerns of their users.

25   By the end of the fifteenth century, many households were able to afford one, and it was often the only book a household might possess. John Higgitt, *The Murthly Hours: Devotion, Literacy and Luxury in Paris, England and the Gaelic West* (London: British Library, 2001), 165; Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, c.1400–c.1580*, 211; Amtower, *Engaging Words: The Culture of Reading in the Later Middle Ages*, 35.

26   There are, of course, other types of books that contain the Office of the Dead, such as psalters, hymnals, breviaries, and antiphoners. There are also occasional mentions of books containing only the Office of the Dead, and perhaps some additional related prayers. These 'Dirige Books' were short, functional texts designed to assist the clergy in carrying out their commemorative duties. They do not appear to be very common. In the 313 wills written by clergymen between 1370 and 1532 examined by Norman Tanner, only four such books are mentioned, three in the years between 1440 and 1489 and one from 1490 to 1517. Norman P. Tanner, *The Church in Late Medieval Norwich 1370–1532*, Studies and Texts (Toronto: Pontifical Institute Mediaeval Studies, 1984), 194. Another such book is mentioned in the 1514 will of Sir Thomas Abbot, a priest in London, who leaves a 'lytell with Placebo and diryge' to his church of St George. Ida Darlington, ed., *London Consistory Court Wills, 1492–1547*, London Record Society 3 (London: London Record Society, 1967), 2.

27   On the personalization of Books of Hours see Duffy, *Marking the Hours: English People and Their Prayers, 1240–1570*; Katherine M. Rudy, *Piety in Pieces: How Medieval Readers Customized Their Manuscript* (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2016); Virginia Reinburg, *French Books of Hours: Making an Archive of Prayer, c. 1400–1600* (Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 2012), 53–83.

28   Alexa Sand cites an example, the Psalter-Hours of Yolande of Soissons, in which even the details of the architecture in the images reflected the environment of the intended owner. Alexa Sand, *Vision, Devotion, Self-Representation in Medieval Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 160. See also Amelia Grounds, 'Evolution of a Manuscript: The Pavement Hours', in *Design and Distribution of Late Medieval Manuscripts in England*, ed. Margaret Connolly and Linne R. Mooney (York: York Medieval Press, 2008), 118–38.

Death is a socially and culturally constructed idea. What was known about death and deadness in the medieval period was formed and shaped by the Christian community over centuries into a complex series of beliefs regarding the action, state, and landscape of death. By the late medieval period, the focus of this book, the 'facts' of death, had been rigorously fleshed out, and there was a boom in visual material that conveyed and contributed to these particulars. Many parts of the complex of concepts that made up death in the fifteenth century were an assumed truth for the medieval parishioner. And although the geography of the afterlife had been mapped and there were instructions on how to get to your final destination, death remained a compelling, powerful, and often mysterious subject. The locational schema of the afterlife, after all, were maps of *terra incognita*, and the how-to guides were hypotheses with no possibility of verification.

The abundance of material, textual, and intangible culture that concerns death reflects its important place in eschatology as well as the unknown and unknowable nature of death – so vital for the continued life of the soul and yet so impossible to fully comprehend. The incomprehensibility of death opened the way for continual engagement with and reassessment of death within the structures of established Christian notions regarding it. The nature of death prohibits anyone from possessing anything more than a theoretical expertise in the matter. The artists, poets, and scholars involved in the production of a visual and literary culture of death, as well as their works, were therefore participants in and shapers of the ongoing (one might say 'live') conversation on the nature and meaning of medieval death.

Images of death were particularly significant contributors to this negotiation because they were accessible to a wide array of the population in a way that text was not, but also because images are interpretively flexible. People owned and used images outside of the confines of ritual or accepted church teaching. They shared and thought about them, sometimes developing practices or iconographies that reflected beliefs and anxieties about death that extended or contradicted ideas sanctioned by official theology. The lively corpses of the *Legend of the Three Living and the Three Dead*, for example, are a theological impossibility since the corpse was without soul, literally inanimate – yet there they are, capering across the walls and pages of medieval Europe. Each manifestation of death contributed a new form to an imagined mental representation of death in the world and the viewers' place in relation to it. Each engagement with a representation of death is a distinct effort to construct a meaningful explication of death within a particular moment rather than a summation of all the emotional and social complexities embraced by the word 'death'. This pluralistic characterization reflects an awareness that death was not one thing and certainly not easy to capture or define in images or otherwise. Rather, within the frame of the liturgical text, the images themselves offer insights and methods for considering the nature of death, operating as a creative gloss

accessed through the act of imaginative looking.[29] The contribution of images to this ongoing discourse on the nature and meaning of death for readers and viewers is a central theme of this book.

Three conceptualizations of death dominate the images of the Office of the Dead: the social death, the bodily death, and non-death. Despite the wide array of subject matter found in the Office images, the majority of them substantially engage with one or more of these ways of considering death. These death concepts are expressed through images that represent death as 'regular' (visualizing the social and religious structures that regulate a medieval death), 'repellent' (foregrounding that which is deemed unsightly, the rot of the body), or 'redemptive' (providing visual corroboration for the impermanence of a Christian death).

Death makes itself felt through the gaps in the social fabric that occur as a result. Social death is about the loss of the individual from the larger community – it is about absence. The roles the deceased played in family, work, and public life are vacated. It is a form of death that impacts survivors keenly and for extended periods of time. It is what we grieve over. In the highly communal world of medieval society, these absences could be especially stressful, as they might also mark periods of significant political, economic, or social transition for the survivors as well as of emotional transition. As such, religious and social mechanisms for guiding people through the period of adjustment were well developed, and it is these regularizing structures that are pictured in 'regular' death images.

The quintessential image of the 'regular' death is the vigil or funeral service. It is death as it was shaped daily: matter-of-fact, ordinary, prosaic, familiar. It is also the most common subject used to illustrate the Office of the Dead. It is tempting to see these images as snapshots – tiny, hand-made 'photographs' showing us 'the way things were' in the medieval past. It is clear that the images do reflect the statutes and guidelines of the church, as well as (to an extent) the wills, church records, and accounts of funerals in the period. However, they are not (generally) representations of any specific commemorative event or individual but instead present the collective community response to death. The second chapter examines the 'regular' death image that is defined by the emphasis on community rather than the individual corpse. In these images, the body itself (often what we think of as the essential signifier of death) is inferred by the actions around it but rarely seen. These images emphasize death and absence as a social phenomenon and eschew direct visual references to either bodily decay or resurrection. As this chapter will demonstrate, 'regular' death images present death through the eyes of the survivors as an experience shared by the living in community with one another. In these images, the reader-viewer could

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29   Sarah Stanbury, *The Visual Object of Desire in Late Medieval England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 177.

vicariously explore their aspirations for, social expectations of, and community involvement in death as a method of preparing themselves for their own and others' deaths. Via their imaginative investment in the 'regular' death images and Office texts, readers participated in the maintenance and continuation of a harmonious commemorative community of the living and the dead which included themselves.

Lying uneasily alongside the daily experience of 'regular' death was an anxiety about the physical nature of death, its suddenness and final corruption. This is bodily death, concerned with the unavoidably corporeal consequences of death. The third chapter, 'Repellent Death', examines images of bodily death and their rhetorical power in the devotional context. In some ways, this seems to be the most straightforward of the three deaths: we have bodies, and it is bodies that die. However, bodily death is bound up with our sense of ourselves in the world. The 'repellent' death images thus also engage with readers' fears concerning identity and the dissolution of an autonomous self. Genesis warned Christians that 'to dust thou shalt return', but this process was a sight usually hidden by ritual, by shroud, by earth, and by tomb. To put the corpse on view was often a sign that things had gone badly wrong. It was a punishment reserved for criminals and transgressors, whose openly rotting bodies functioned as a sign of exile from their community in this life and the next. However, the image of 'repellent' death was not merely ghoulish – the corpse also served to remind viewers of the finitude of life. Animated corpses regularly exhorted the reader to virtue and salvation, and the corpse provided a visceral echo of the spiritual rot of the sinful soul and a preview of things to come. The contemplation of the *image* of the corpse, one of the few ways a reader could access this didactically powerful sight, was both a method of working toward salvation and an avenue for confronting the reality of one's own corporeal death. There is an immense and abundantly diverse corpus of images depicting bodily death, and it would be impossible to address them all. I have not attempted to do so. Rather, this chapter will address several recurring themes in 'repellent' death images: time, identity, agency, and disruption.

It is difficult to contemplate one's own physical non-existence. This was particularly so in light of the Christian belief in the resurrection of the body and the continued life of the soul. The concept of non-death encapsulates the contradictory sense in the medieval period that death was, and was not, an end. For the reader of the Office of the Dead, preparing for death included coming to terms with loss of community and loss of (physical) self, but it also meant preparing for the life of the soul which would continue beyond the bounds of death. The death-event was a pivotal moment, not between life and death but between life and more (different) life. The 'redemptive' death images evade both the existential horror of physical dissolution and the comfort of ritual and community; they focus instead on the Christian promise of death undone, a non-death. The images engage with the promise

of life after death through exemplars such as Job and Lazarus, whose miraculous lives demonstrated the possibility of resurrection and provided a template for Christian responses in the face of death. The 'redemptive' death images draw together all three of the deaths addressed in this book, as part of the promise pictured in this imagery includes the restoration of the deceased to both social and bodily life.

This book considers the various ways we think about death through and with images. When Elina Gertman wrote that the violence of death in a medieval image 'is meant to take place in the mind of the beholder, and to be constituted, therefore, through her own gaze',[30] what ideas was that hypothetical viewer drawing on to constitute that death? The 'regular', 'repellent', and 'redemptive' deaths encompass much of the visual discourse about death in the medieval period and both reflect and contribute to the construction of a polysemous death concept. The first two are concerned with a particular aspect of death (social, bodily) and its consequence (absence, decay), while the third concerns the Christian truth that denies death's power to end us. Social death, bodily death, and non-death constitute one articulation of the fundamentally multifaceted nature of death in the medieval period, and they are not fixed (or the only) categories one might use. These conceptualizations reveal different responses to the cultural and theological facts of death within the devotional worldview of late medieval Europe. Momentarily separating these different ways of understanding death allows us to better explore aspects of medieval death in relation to the real and conceptual experiences of the period.

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Death is many things beyond the cessation of breath; the concept of death in the imagined mortality of the reader is the concern of this book. It is about what it means to be a person-who-dies in a world in which death is viscerally real and simultaneously denied. It is not about dying, the moment of death, or the state of being dead. It is about trying to *imagine* these things in the absence of subjective experience and where imagination is the most effective (and only) method of preparation for one's own inevitable death and for the life of the soul beyond.

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30   Gertsman, 'The Gap of Death', 93.

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