

Guyot Marchant's *Danse Macabre*

The Relationship Between Image and Text

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The earliest known representation of the *danse macabre* dates from 1424, when a mural representing the Dance of Death was painted on the external walls of the Cemetery of the Holy Innocents in Paris. Although the walls and the paintings have long since been destroyed, the images are preserved in the woodcuts of Guyot Marchant's edition of the *Danse Macabre*, published in 1485.¹ The authorship of the poem accompanying the illustrations has never been conclusively established, although from an early date it was ascribed to Jean Gerson, chancellor of the Sorbonne, and indeed its didactic tone is strongly reminiscent of the sermons for which Gerson was so famous. If not Gerson himself, it is probable that the author was a member of the theologian's circle. Marchant's book quickly attained great popularity, inspiring imitations by printers in Paris, Lyon, and Troyes. The original edition sold out almost immediately, and was followed in 1486 by an expanded edition. In the same year Marchant published a *Danse Macabre des Femmes*.

The literary quality of the poem is at best mediocre. The tone is heavily didactic, and it is evident that the writer is more interested in the moral and religious implications of his subject than in poetic subtleties. The text is composed of octosyllabic verses grouped in eight-verse stanzas, invariably ending with a one-verse aphoristic commentary, often only loosely connected to the preceding verses. This is not the work of a gifted poet. The interest of the work then does not lie in any intrinsic literary merit, but rather in the internal tensions that it contains. Three of these oppositions will provide the focus for the present study: the conflict between the figures of the living and the dead in the woodcuts illustrating Marchant's *Danse Macabre*, the opposition between two distinct perspectives on death (grounded in differing cultural values), and finally the tension between the image and the text.

The opposition between the living and dead, as depicted in the woodcuts of the *Danse Macabre*, operates on several levels. Perhaps the most obvious contrast relates to the clothing of the living and the virtual nakedness of the dead. While the former are always fully clothed, the latter, if clothed at all, wear nothing but a loose-fitting shroud. While the living identify their specific position in the social hierarchy by their manner of dress (and sometimes by the symbolic objects they carry), the figures of the dead, stripped to the flesh and sometimes even to the bone, remind their living counterparts of the superficiality and meaninglessness of the material and social distinctions that separate one group from another. The second level of opposition is based not on the contrasting appearance between the two groups of figures, but rather on

their contrasting attitudes, the opposition between their actual bodily postures. Early in the work, for example, we see the cardinal and the king (Figure 1) enjoined by two corpses to participate in the dance of death. While both the living figures remain relatively immobile — the cardinal staring with alarm at the hand of the corpse on his sleeve, the king standing rigidly as he holds his scepter — the corpse between them assumes a more flexible pose, raising one leg as he prepares to lead the two unwilling subjects into the dance.



Figure 1.



Figure 2.

We see the same contrast in the illustration depicting the bishop and the squire (Figure 2). Again, the posture of the two corpses, especially the one in the middle, suggests a certain naturalness and fluidity of movement, while that of the bishop and squire indicates immobility and even (in the case of the squire) a marked attitude of resistance. By raising one hand in a gesture of refusal, pointing his feet in the opposite direction from those of the corpse, and leaning slightly away from his "partner", the squire's body language expresses a futile attempt at escape.

The scene depicting the astrologer and the bourgeois offers another variation on the theme (Figure 3). Like the squire, the astrologer (the figure on the left) takes a stance that clearly indicates resistance. The corpse in the middle again raises one leg and hunches his shoulders as he prepares to pull both of his unwilling partners into the dance. The contrast between the living and the dead includes not only bodily attitude but also facial expression. While the countenance of the living expresses various degrees of dismay, alarm, fear, and denial, the face of the dead indicates mirth, mockery, and amusement. In a few cases the living are so preoccupied with their worldly values that they fail to recognize (or pretend not to recognize) the presence of death. The usurer, for example, is so engrossed in his financial transaction that he appears unaware that he has been touched by the hand of Death (Figure 4). The corpse is forced to lean backwards, forcefully and comically pulling the usurer's arm in order to attract his attention.



Figure 3.



Figure 4.

Any attempt on the part of the living to maintain a semblance of dignity in the face of their impending death is forcefully undercut by the mocking attitude of the corpses. The physician and the lover (a strange juxtaposition!) both become the subject of humiliation (Figure 5). While the physician attempts to study a vial of urine, a corpse holding a spade grabs the doctor's robe at the crotch. Meanwhile the other corpse, looking back at the effeminate figure of the lover, takes a lilting step as if to mock the lover's somewhat affected manner.

The most striking contrast between the living and the dead relates to the paradoxical nature of their relationship. While the living in their rigid poses of resistance and immobility take on the attributes of corpses, their partners, depicted in postures of movement--raising a leg for a lively dance step, leaning backwards or forwards, shifting their weight to force their unwilling partners into motion--convey a sense of rhythm, joy, and vitality. In a sense, one might argue, the dead are more alive than the living.



Figure 5.

The *Danse Macabre* of Guyot Marchant actually embraces two very different perspectives on death, and this gives rise to the second major opposition in the work. The images in the woodcuts basically derive from theatrical conventions, particularly those connected with the *farce*. The deflation of pretension and ambition, swift reversals of fortune, the undercutting of social conventions meant to protect and maintain the status of certain privileged members of

society — all of these hallmarks of the *farce* are to be found in the illustrations of Marchant's *Danse Macabre*. Indeed most of the scenes of the *Danse* fit quite comfortably into framework of the *farce*. The figures of the living in their stiff poses, often ornately costumed according to their social station, bewildered and perplexed by their sudden confrontation with death, and limited in their intelligence and their ability to comprehend their precarious situation, offer perfect targets of mockery. The *farce*, of course, generally empowers a socially inferior figure (a peasant, a woman, a fool) with the ability to conquer a more powerful character. In this reversal of the social norm, it is the "weaker" figures who end up controlling the action, manipulating their victims, choreographing the dance. The parallels with the *Danse Macabre* are obvious. Those depicted in the *Danse*, representing the most powerful figures in medieval society — emperors, kings, popes, cardinals, men of exceptional wealth, prestige, or erudition (astrologers, physicians, lawyers, professors) — are all undone by nothing more than a naked, grinning corpse.

The frame of the woodcut is itself suggestive of a stage, defining and enclosing the space in which the scene is enacted, clearly isolating it from the rest of the page. The grouping of the figures and the somewhat exaggerated nature of their poses also suggest a theatrical tableau. Like the characters in a farce, the latter often give the impression of caricatures. This aspect of the illustrations is especially visible in Figure 4, depicting the monk, the usurer, and the poor man. There is a definite farcical quality in the exaggerated gesture of the corpse tugging at the arm of the usurer, who is so preoccupied with his transaction that he does not even feel the fatal touch upon his arm. Towards the end of the *Danse Macabre* we find an especially revealing woodcut, depicting this time two living figures (the *clerc* and the hermit) and three corpses (Figure 6). The corpses at either end of the line are preparing to escort their victims to their fate. The corpse between the clerk and the hermit, who has positioned himself in the exact center of the frame, is pausing, however, to take a bow (or so it would appear). The posture of this particular figure is unlike that of any other of the dozens of figures to be found in the book, and the distinguishing aspect of this posture coupled with its position close to the end of the lengthy sequence strongly suggests the bow of an actor who has completed his performance. The final figure in the chain of characters who parade through the *Danse Macabre* is that of the *sot*. It can hardly be considered accidental that the series of images that draw so heavily on theatrical tradition should end with a stock character from comic theater, from the *sottie* in particular. The *sottie*, under the guise of literary devices, makes possible the satire of powerful political and religious figures of authority, the very figures who are targeted in the *Danse Macabre*. Both the *sottie* and the *Danse Macabre* systematically undercut the authority of such figures. In the latter, it is the grinning, dancing corpse who effectively takes on the role of the fool, but the appearance of the *sot* at the end of the chain of dancers can be taken as an indirect intertextual reference to the genre of the *sottie*.



Figure 6.

The internal evidence suggesting a connection between the *Danse Macabre* and medieval theater is supported by certain external evidence. Emile Mâle, in his classic work, *L'Art religieux de la fin du Moyen Age en France*, locates the origin of the artistic motif of the *danse macabre* in theatrical representations dating at least from the end of the fourteenth century. As examples, he cites recorded performances in Caudebec, Normandy (1393) and Bruges (1449).² If Mâle is correct in assuming a theatrical origin for the artistic motif (and indeed there is no evidence to contradict his theory), the resemblances between the illustrations in Marchant's edition and theatrical conventions of the late medieval period can hardly be taken as accidental.

While the images of the *Danse Macabre* appear to be at least loosely connected with comic theater of the period, the text carries a very different resonance. Whether or not Jean Gerson (1363—1429), the famous Parisian theologian, is the author of the poem, as an early tradition claims, the work is clearly marked by strong didactic, and even homiletic overtones. The bourgeois, for example, receives a typically stern admonishment from his skeletal interlocutor:

*Bourgeois, hastes vous sans tarder.
 Vous n'avez avoir ne richesse
 Qui vous puisse de mort garder.
 Se des biens dont eustes largesse
 Aves bien usé, c'est sagesse.
 D'autrui vient tout, à autrui passe,
 Fol est qui d'amasser se blesse:
 On ne scet pour qui on amasse.*³

The uselessness of money to protect its owner from death, the implicit contrast between material and spiritual wealth, represents, of course, a familiar refrain in late medieval sermons and didactic poetry. What is striking, however, is not the tone of the admonishment but rather the disjuncture between the image and

the text. The corpse delivering the speech (Figure 3), has assumed a most undignified posture, resting one hand familiarly on the arm of the bourgeois, tugging at the sleeve of the astrologer with the other, lifting one leg high off the ground, hunching his shoulders and leaning forward, preparing to shift his weight from one foot to the other. His head, and presumably his attention, is turned toward the astrologer. The scene, and other similar illustrations, raise a perplexing question about the *Danse Macabre*. On one hand, there is at least a superficial correspondence between the illustrations and the accompanying text. The figures depicted in the images, readily identifiable by their dress and occasionally by objects they carry to signify their rank or function in the social or ecclesiastical hierarchy, correspond to the rubric identifying the voice of each stanza: *le roy, l'archevesque, l'escuier*, etc. It is clear, therefore, that either the poem is inspired by the series of images, or vice versa. The circumstances of the actual composition of each component of the *Danse Macabre*, and the sequence of their creation remain unexplained. It is apparent, however, that the author of the poem and the artist who created the illustrations are working in two separate and distinct traditions. The poem, with its somber didactic tone, clearly represents an ecclesiastical point of view. The illustrations, on the other hand, bear an affinity to certain conventions associated with the *théâtre profane*. Daniel Poirion reminds us of the various social groups from which actors of the period were drawn: "Etudiants, clerics, rimeurs, acteurs, joueurs, saltimbanques, voleurs: il y a là une société instable mais dont le rôle est décisif dans le domaine littéraire." ⁴ The Church, of course, regarded the theatrical companies comprised of these particular social groups with an attitude ranging from distrust to contempt and condemnation. Perhaps the greatest perceived threat was the virtual autonomy of the actors' guilds, which effectively placed them beyond (or at least on the fringe of) ecclesiastical authority. The disjuncture between the illustrations and the accompanying text, then, can be taken on one level as emblematic of this cultural opposition.

There are, nonetheless, moments in the *Danse Macabre* when the image does correlate closely with the text. One such moment occurs in the prologue of the work. In the first illustration of the book (Figure 7) we see the figure of the *Acteur* seated in a professorial chair, reading from a book which is resting on a lectern. The term *Acteur* actually derives from a confusion of the Latin *actorem* and *auctorem*, (authority). ⁵ Ann T. Harrison, commenting on a parallel figure in the *Danse Macabre des Femmes*, states: "The figure of Authority is quintessentially Parisian. Perhaps descended from preaching street friars, he wears full academic regalia, and behind him stands figuratively the power, both temporal and spiritual, of the University of Paris. Speaking *ex cathedra*, Authority is backed implicitly by two of the most influential institutions of medieval Paris: the university and the church." ⁶



Figure 7.

The figure of the *Acteur* appears only at the beginning and at the very end of the *Danse Macabre*. The voice of the *Acteur*, however, the voice of authority, becomes subsumed within the text, and specifically within the homiletic tone of the portions spoken by the dead. The admonitions of the corpses become then in effect the verbal extension of the visual image of the *Acteur*. This transfer is partially effected by a series of mirror images. A prefatory note, presumably written by the editor, Guyot Marchant, immediately preceding the poem, offers the following description of the book: "*Ce présent livre est appelé Miroer Salutaire pour toutes gens et tous estaz . . .*"

The metaphor of the mirror reappears in the second stanza of the prologue to the poem:

***En ce miroer chascun peut lire
Qu'il lui convient ainsi danser.***⁷

The pairing of the living and the dead extends the mirror motif into the images accompanying the poem, for when the *vif* faces the *mort*, he is not confronting death in the abstract, but rather his own death, contemplating a barely recognizable image of his body distorted by the degradation following death. The passage quoted above conflates visual imagery (*miroer*) with textual interpretation (*lire*). Another conflation of the two may be found in the illustration itself. The *Acteur* is pictured in the act of reading (aloud, one may presume) from an open book resting on the lectern before him. A gesture of his pointing hand directs our attention downward to the columns of text that lie beneath the illustration. If we assume that the poem represents the text that the *Acteur* is reading from the open book, then it is significant that the pictured book, the visual representation of the text, is located virtually in the exact center of the illustration. Rather than clarify the relationship between the image and

the text, this observation only serves to complicate the relationship. Before continuing to explore the problematic interaction of the picture and the written word, one should consider the next illustration in the sequence.

Here (Figure 8) the reader is introduced to the *morts* who will lead the dance. Whether they represent the actual figures who will reappear in the course of the work, leading the reluctant *vifs* to their end, or whether they are simply the first of a long series of skeletal figures, the leaders of the parade, is not clear, nor is the distinction important for the purposes of the present study. Each of the figures holds a musical instrument — a bagpipe, a portative organ, a harp, and a pipe and tabor. ⁸ Just as the figure of the *Acteur* generates one of the prominent voices of the *Danse Macabre* — the stern, admonishing voice of the theologian--the four dead musicians become identified with the other "voice", expressing itself through a combination of mime, gesture, and theatrical pose.

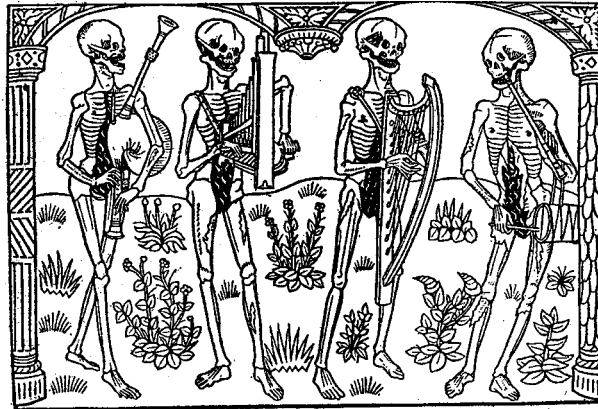


Figure 8.

Once the two discourses on death have been established, the didactic voice of the preacher and the farcical body language of the corpses, the rest of the work reflects a continuing conflict, as the two vie for primacy. Superficially, of course, each page maintains the illusion of a synthetic relationship between image and text, each somehow expanding, illustrating, commenting on the other. The reality, as the evidence demonstrates, points to opposition rather than synthesis. One could argue, on one hand, that the image is literally framed by the text, enclosed within the Latin inscription at the top of the page and the longer French stanzas beneath the woodcut. At a purely visual level, therefore, the pictorial content of the page may be seen as partially dominated, or at least enclosed, by the textual content. In support of this viewpoint, one might also cite the *Acteur's* book, the authoritative and generative text for the didactic discourse, situated in the perfect center of the first illustration, emblematic of the centrality of the text. On the other hand, the eye is naturally drawn to the graphic representation of the scene before settling on the verbal version of the confrontation. There is little doubt that the moment of death is rendered far more powerfully and dramatically in the former than in the latter. The text,

then, can be seen as relegated to a purely secondary role, a mere corollary of the iconography, reduced in effect to the role of a gloss, an exegetical elaboration on the primary representation of the drama. The opposition between the graphic and the textual renditions of the *danse macabre*, at another level, represents a conflict between the two modes of discourse present in the book — one associated with the Church, incarnated in the figure of the *Acteur*, the other associated with the theater, incarnated in the figure of the corpse, presented in various ludic postures.



Figure 9.

Sustained throughout the work, the conflict is not resolved until the closure of the *Danse Macabre*. In the final illustration (Figure 9), we are brought back to the opening scene of the book. The figure of the *Acteur* is again present, and although the design of his chair, the form of his apparel, even his facial features differ from those of the first illustration, he is clearly intended to represent a continuation of the figure who appears in the prologue. The angel of the opening scene also reappears, but now the scroll he unfurls, with its Latin inscription, occupies a much larger and more central portion of the entire frame. Both the angel and the *Acteur* direct the reader's attention to the inscription by pointing to it from different angles. Perhaps the most striking feature of the scene, however, and the aspect in which it differs most from the opening illustration, is the presence of the prostrate corpse. The mocking, teasing, playful figure, always animated by an unmistakable sense of vitality, is now totally inert, returned to its natural state. The crown lying by his head indicates the rung, now meaningless, he once occupied on the social ladder. His rigid hand points downward, indicating perhaps the earth which has become his new abode, but also directing the reader's attention to the columns of text that underlie the illustration.

The didactic voice, variously associated with the French text, the Latin inscriptions, the open book pictured in the opening and closing scenes, and personified in the figure of the *Acteur*, finally dominates the dancing corpse. The expansion of the Latin inscription and its centrality in the illustration, the

pointing hands of the *Acteur*, the angel, and the corpse, each of which directs the reader to a given text, and the immobility of the formerly energetic figure of the corpse, all suggest the triumph of the didactic/textual discourse over the visual/ludic element.

The implications of the conflicting modes of discourse in the *Danse Macabre*, and the means by which the conflict is eventually resolved raise questions that extend beyond the book itself. Is it possible that the conflict is purely accidental, or does it reflect the intent of the artist or the author (whichever of the two contributed his portion of the work after the first), reacting to the original rendition of the *danse*, creating a contrapuntal version that he wishes to set in relief? What is the role of the editor, Guyot Marchant, in combining the two disparate elements of the book? To what extent, if any, did he alter the original material? Are the key illustrations that open and close the work, for example, faithful reproductions of the mural painted on the wall of the Cemetery of the Holy Innocents, or do they represent later additions for editorial purposes? Finally, given that this is one of the earliest printed books to appear in France, could the tension between the image and the text represent, on one level, an opposition between the established manuscript tradition and the new medium of the printing press? Does the apparent validation of the text in the closing scene represent an effort to privilege written discourse over graphic imagery, or should it be taken as an effort to reconcile and integrate the two? Do similar tensions exist in other printed books of the same period? Fifteenth-century readers doubtlessly found Marchant's *Danse Macabre* a troubling and thought-provoking book. Twentieth-century scholars may find it troubling and thought-provoking for very different reasons.

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Notes

1. There is only one extant copy of this book, housed in the Bibliothèque Municipale of Grenoble. A facsimile edition was published by Pierre Vaillant in 1969 (Grenoble: Editions des 4 Seigneurs, 1969).
2. Mâle, Emile. *L'Art religieux à la fin du Moyen Age en France* (Paris: A. Colin, 1908): 391—92, 406—407.
3. Vaillant, p. 152.
4. Poirion, Daniel. *Le Moyen Age*, vol. II. (Paris: Arthaud, 1971), p. 168.

5. Harrison, Ann Tukey. *The Danse Macabre of Women*. (Kent, Ohio: Kentu State University Press, 1994), p. 50.
6. Harrison, pp. 9—10.
7. Vaillant, p. 143, verses 9—10.
8. Meyer-Baer, Kathi. *Music of the Spheres and the Dance of Death*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), p. 300. I am grateful to my colleague in the UNCG School of Music, Professor Carol Marsh, for her comments on the woodcuts of the *Danse Macabre*. The harp and portative organ are actually inappropriate for dance music. Thus the ensemble of musical instruments pictured in the illustration form a somewhat curious and unlikely combination. The dance itself, although it cannot be conclusively identified from the illustrations, seems consistent with various popular dances of the period based on lines of dancers — the *branle*, the *carole*, and the *farendole*, for example.