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CULTURES OF DEATH AND DYING IN MEDIEVAL EUROPE. ATTITUDES AND INTERPRETATIONS

Abstract

This article discusses some aspects of the most complex and variable problem in culture of Medieval Europe – death and dying.

The key to medieval religion is the fate of the individual's soul after death. Death was defined as the moment when the immortal soul left the mortal body and joined with an incorruptible, sexless, immortal body, often depicted in art as a small naked person. The soul itself could never die and its "life" was "independent of the body". During the soul's time on earth it was bonded to the mortal body. The soul was unaffected by any bodily illness or abnormality, and even if the disease led to death the "soul suffers no harm". The body, however, could be at the mercy of the soul. Corruption of the soul could result in physical disease: leprosy was thought to be an indication of sexual sin and the fifteenth-century priest John Mirk quoted St Augustine-"corruption of sin makes mankind to turn into corruption of carrion". If the soul deviated into sin there was also a real danger that it would suffer the torments of Hell for eternity. The Church therefore had to correct sins by confession, repentance and penance-the latter achieved by using the three most effective ways: devout praying, alms-giving and mass-singing. In the worst cases of heresy or witchcraft burning was used to help save the individual (fire was a cleansing agent for souls) and stop the infection spreading to other souls. Medieval people could help their souls in a large number of ways: from spiritual prayers to the physical actions of pilgrimage or alms-giving.

However, it was only a theory.

In medieval European society Death, the Grim Reaper, was a recurrent and omnipresent guest. The Biblical metaphor from Jeremiah likens the falling of human corpses to dung on the ground or hay behind the back of the reaper.

The image of mowing hay or grain was familiar to medieval and early modern people, as was the visualization of Death as a reaper with a scythe.

Epidemics, malnutrition and warfare took their toll of the human population and, in the mid-fourteenth century, the Black Death spread terror that reinforced the images of death in art and folklore. Even in times of peace, death was a regular visitor in families, and especially ruthless when wrenching infants from their parents' arms.

As the research of several sorts of sources and attitudes has shown, although people may have been more used to the omnipresence of death, they were far from being unmoved in the face of it. Both the death of individuals and mass death affected people. Then, just as now, death

stirred many feelings: grief, a sense of bereavement, relief, and so forth. Both men and women spontaneously expressed their inconsolable loss.

Attitudes towards male demonstrations of grief may have changed in the course of the later Middle Ages. Society came to view violent passions caused by strong emotions like grief with wariness as potentially disruptive powers that had to be channeled and restrained by the more decorous rituals of mourning. We see also a difference between private moments of unrestrained distress and public displays of more sedate grief.

In the course of the high Middle Ages, the uncontrollable demonstrations and outbursts of grief that had been associated with the epic masculine laments of knightly culture were increasingly perceived as unmanly expressions of feminine passion and thus unsuitable for men. Consequently, many thirteenth – and fourteenth century communities in Italy went so far as to legislate on expressions of grief and forbid the unseemly emotional outbursts of mourners on pain of punishment. The orderly town depended on self-possessed citizens who maintained decorumin the face of calamity. Consequently, appearing bareheaded, clapping, tearing one's own hair or clothing and ripping at one's own face as a sign of grief, became punishable by a fine by law. While crying was tolerated, public wailing and loud crying was penalized even if lamentations were permitted indoors. Noisy public mourning – this seems largely to have been an elite male custom – was targeted, and some communes even enforced these criminalization – "Stability required male emotional restraint and decorum."

Even in places in which expressions of grief were not restricted by law, it was more socially acceptable that women, considered more emotional and unrestrained, should display spontaneous emotion and ritual wailing both at the deathbed as well as after death. In some Italian regions, professional female mourners were hired.

Even if adults were supposed to master their emotions and display moderate grief, this probably did not apply children, who could feel the loss deeply when bereft of one or both of their parents. And even if the first shock of bereavement was over, it was often followed by lifelong sorrow and feelings of loss.

Indeed, research has indicated that bereavement and the death of one's children, spouses and close relatives led to melancholy and depression for medieval and early modern people just as now. However, the hope of a reunion in Paradise and the religious doctrines provided consolation. Resignation in the face of death was a strategy of coping with inevitability.

Loss felt by parents is also discussed by Viktor Aldrin in his analysis of parental grief in light of Swedish miracle stories. In "Parental Grief and Prayer in the Middle Ages: Religious Coping in Swedish Miracle Stories," Aldrin discusses stories that record accidents that happened to children, the parents' immediate reactions and attempts to cope with the situation in which their beloved child was supposedly dead. Aldrin considers the phases of parental grief from the first shock and disbelief to starting to let go of the deceased child, organizing the funeral. Aldrin observes that

there was less gendered difference in the expressions of grief in the parents of the dead children in Sweden than on the Continent and Britain, as both Swedish fathers and mothers cried.

The study by Carol Lansing suggests that earlier Italian miracle stories depicted even men wailing and crying loudly at the loss of close relatives before the expressions of grief permitted for Italian men were transformed in the later Middle Ages.

Thus, emotions were universal, but their manifestations were culturally determined and changed over time.

Demonstrating the intensity of love and grief, the narratives describe fervent prayers for a miracle, divine intervention that would restore the loved one to life. These stories reveal the sorrow and reactions of grieving parents in general, although they have an unusually happy ending through the miraculous deliverance of the children from death.

Such extraordinary resurrections from death to life could also occasionally be witnessed in other instances as well.

Leaving emotional aspects aside, the imminence of death required people to prepare for the possibility of dying. A person could be here one moment, gone the next, suddenly as by a thunderbolt!

The unpredictability of fate and the fickleness of Fortune was also a well-known late medieval topos in art and literature. Life was aleatory and its duration could neither be known nor influenced.

The transience of life had also an effect on art. The wheel of fortune (Rota Fortunae) was a popular topic in late-medieval art.

The Ubi Sunt ("where are") genre in literature called to mind the whereabouts of those who were already dead.

Late medieval mentalities were attuned to the cultures of death by the vicissitudes of the time: the Black Death, recurrent epidemics and warfare. In the Middle Ages, a whole form of literature, the Ars Moriendi, instructing people about the way of dying properly, developed for the use of the clergy and laity alike. Some Ars Moriendi versions recalled of the mortality of all, high and low alike, who all were "under the hand and will of Almighty God."

The memento mori, remembering one's mortality, became a popular motif in art. The Dance Macabre, with Death leading all sorts of people, rich and poor, young and old, men and women, to the dance, gained in popularity after the Black Death. The Dance Macabre reflected the powerlessness of people in the face of death, the great equalizer. Temporal wealth, power, beauty and youth were fleeting and useless in the face of death. Worldly pursuits were futile and empty in one's last hour as everyone was destined to be a rotting corpse, food for maggots, in the end.

The suddenness of death was further highlighted by its most common symbols, arrows, darts or javelins that came suddenly from nowhere and hit the unsuspecting victim. While the Dance of Death was a general motif, such images of the universal mortal lot of mankind could also be customized.

The topos of three living young men meeting three dead men on a hunting trip was adapted. Georges Duby has argued that the late medieval culture of the macabre is to be interpreted rather as a sign of an "excessive love of life" than the "real misfortunes of the times". The bigger the passion to live, he argues, the more painful was the bitterness of being torn from it. Yet, it is hard to

imagine that the cruel ravages of war and plagues of various kinds would not have its effects on the collective mindset of people. Chiffoleau talks about a Great Melancholy and a deep traumatization.

It can be asked whether the frequency of the representations of the Day of Judgment, the purgatory and the pains of hell in wall paintings in fourteenth – and fifteenth-century churches is coincidental or related to changes in mentality.

Indeed, because of the uncertainties of life and the capriciousness of fortune, people had to devise strategies to cope with death. One of these, described by Georges Duby, was to "domesticate" or "tame" death so that it was very rarely perceived as coming as a surprise. According to Duby, one of "its essential characteristics was to give advance warning of its arrival." Something anticipated became easier to handle and accept.

Some people attempted to domesticate death by a sense of manipulating the future through their intricate post-plague testamentary practices.

However, although people were generally aware of the fickleness of Fortune and attempted to domesticate death, some groups of people were involved in more dangerous activities than others. They needed to form special strategies to control the uncertainty present in their everyday life.

We have chosen to talk about cultures in the plural to emphasize that there were parallel cultures and customs aside from the prevalent Catholic one in the Middle Ages. There was divergence and variation depending on status, social group, ethnicity, age, religion and so on, in addition to inevitable regional variations. This variability makes perfect sense as it will help to make insightful comparisons across time and space.

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