Lessons in “Hopping”:
The Dance of Death
and the Chester Mystery Cycle

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The plays in the Chester mystery cycle may paint a vivid picture of
religious belief on the eve of the Reformation, but they also contain
many echoes of contemporary social customs as well as borrowings from
other sources, both textual and visual.¹ Over the years, research into
medieval drama has not just focused on the play texts themselves but
also has taken into account the art of the period for visual parallels to the
plays. W. L. Hildburgh and M. D. Anderson are but two in a long line of
authors to draw valuable comparisons between medieval art and drama.²
Similarly, Sally-Beth MacLean’s Chester Art is among the early contribu-
tions to the Early Drama, Art, and Music series to list extant and lost art
relevant to the study of early drama in the area.³ The problem facing
researchers is to identify such influences when the original sources have
failed to survive. While many medieval texts have undoubtedly been lost
to us over the centuries, the extent of the destruction of medieval art
through iconoclasm at the time of the Reformation and again under Oliver Cromwell may well be far greater. Inevitably, therefore, comparisons between the extant word and image are badly hampered in that they can only be based on what has actually survived or on other evidence of what once existed. Drama texts can be crucial in helping us obtain a better understanding of the imagery with which late-medieval viewers must once have been familiar but which has since been lost. One famous theme was the *danse macabre*, or Dance of Death, which was the subject of many examples in the visual arts across late-medieval Europe, although few appear to survive in Britain. In two of the Chester plays, however, it may be possible to detect references to this theme that would attest to its former popularity.

Play 10 of the Chester mystery cycle, in which the Goldsmiths (and possibly the Masons) enacted the Massacre of the Holy Innocents, presents viewers with a scene of brutal murder that is made even more horrific by an exceedingly cruel joke. The scene takes place after Herod has sent his soldiers to Bethlehem to slaughter “all knave-children within two yeere / and on daye ould” (179–80) in an attempt to kill the newborn Christ. The soldiers first demur slightly at the king’s command, which they deem unfit for “knightes of great degree” (160), but it is the very extent of the killing that reconciles them to the task. Although not explicitly mentioned here, the total number of Innocents slain was traditionally held to be 144,000. Primus Miles soon exults in the prospect of killing “[t]hese congeos in there clowtes” (209), as the infants are at one point described. At the start of the killing spree by Herod’s soldiers, Secundus Miles, whose name is tellingly given as Lancherdeepe (58, 85), addresses the first Bethlehem mother thus:

> Dame, thy sonne, in good faye,  
> hee must of me learne a playe:  
> hee must hopp, or I goe awaye,  
> upon my speare ende.

(10.321–24)

The threat of making this mother’s son “hop” on the end of his spear would seem to describe simply a favorite mode of slaughtering the infants in Massacre scenes, as confirmed by the subsequent stage direction: “Tunc Miles trasfodiet primum puerum et super lancea accipiet”
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(344 s.d.). However, the joke about teaching his infant victims to “hopp” clearly proves irresistible to the second soldier, for he repeats it to Secunda Mulier prior to despatching yet another Innocent:

Dame, shew thee thy child there;  
hee must hopp uppon my speare.  
And hit any pintell beare,  
I must teach him a playe.  

(10.361–64)

The women try to ward off the soldiers with all their might, yet the outcome is the same, as the stage direction bears out: “Tunc Secundus Miles transfodiet secundum puerum” (376 s.d.). Both infants thus die impaled upon the soldiers’ spears.  

In themselves, the lines appear simply to agree with the quite common iconography of the Massacre in medieval art. All too often one may see Herod’s soldiers holding aloft an Innocent transfixed on a sword or spear.  

Even the Chester soldier’s crude reference to the gender of his intended victim has at least one blatant visual counterpart in the early-fourteenth-century mural on the north wall of the chancel at St. Mary’s Church in Chalgrove, Oxfordshire (fig. 1). Still visible here is the outline of the lower part of a naked Innocent in red ochre, his genitals prominently displayed between his sprawling legs.  

This scene also includes a soldier presenting to Herod the dripping corpse of an Innocent impaled on a spear. The blood pouring from the body of this skewered Innocent now has acquired a blackish color due to red lead alteration; the deliberate and copious use of a more vivid red pigment to represent blood would have emphasized the goriness of the event for the viewer.  

Yet it is the repeated joke about “teaching an infant to hop” that is particularly striking in the Chester play. The very fact that it is made twice suggests that it had important resonances for the playwright—and presumably also for his audiences. The quip may actually be related to the way in which infants were perceived in medieval culture, for the Innocents were supposed to be mere babies who might not even have been weaned.  

It was, of course, a universally recognized truth in the Middle Ages that infants under the age of two would as yet be incapable of walking or talking properly, if at all. This characteristic nature of the Innocents is confirmed in yet another Massacre play, the Coventry Pageant of
Fig. 1. Massacre of the Innocents: detail of an early-fourteenth-century mural on the north wall of the chancel at St. Mary's Church in Chalgrove, Oxfordshire (Tracing: author).

the Shearmen and Taylors, where the first mother protests in vain at lines 797–800:

For a sympull sclaghtur yt were to sloo,
Or to wyrke soche a chyld woo
Pat can noder speyke nor goo
Nor neuer harme did.\textsuperscript{11}

In depictions of the Ages of Man, the first age of \textit{infantia} is often represented by an infant lying in a cradle, occasionally followed by the slightly later stage of the toddler who is still learning to walk.\textsuperscript{12} However, the Chester soldier takes this image one step further: he offers to teach the infants a “play,” \textit{viz.} to “hopp” on his spear. As we shall see, this repeated line seems to contain an echo of the words of Death to the infant in English and Continental versions of the Dance of Death.

The \textit{danse macabre} was a very popular theme throughout late-medieval Europe. It presents Death appearing unexpectedly to summon
both the mighty and the low to take part in his dance; each victim in turn is forced to acknowledge that death is grim but inevitable. The infant was a regular participant in the *danse macabre* from the earliest known examples onward. Perhaps this is not surprising if one considers the infant’s common appearance in depictions of the Ages of Man, the high rate of infant mortality, and the ubiquitous Massacre scenes in medieval art and drama that presented viewers with a horrifying spectacle of infant death. However, the infant is unusual among Death’s dancers not only because he holds no social status of his own (unlike the other participants from all ranks of society) but also because he is characterized as one who cannot yet walk, let alone dance. His helplessness is emphasized in the earliest known French printed edition of the *danse macabre*, published in 1485 by Guyot Marchant, which was based on the famous mural of 1424–25 on the cemetery walls of the Franciscan convent Aux SS. Innocents in Paris. The woodcut illustration in Marchant’s version shows the infant in a cradle, while the dialogue between Death and his victim runs as follows:

*Le mort*

Petit enfant na gueres ne:
Au monde auras peu de plaisance
A la danse seras mene
Comme autres, car mort a puissance
Seur tous: du jour de la naissance
Conuient chacun a mort offrir:
Fol est qui nen a congoissance.
Qui plus vit plus a a souffrir

*(Little infant barely born,
you will find little pleasure in this world.
You will be led to the dance,
like the others, for Death has power
over all: from the day of one’s birth)*

*Lenfant*

A. a. a. ie ne scay parler
Enfant suis: iay la langue mue.
Hier nasquis huy men fault aler
le ne fais que rentree et yssue
Rien nay meffait. mais de peur sue
Prendre en gre me fault cest le mieulx
Lordonnance dieu ne se mue.
Aussi tost meurt ieusne que vieuex

*(A, a, a, I know not how to talk.
I am an infant: my tongue is mute.
Born yesterday, today I have to go.
I only make my entrance and my exit.
I have done no wrong, and yet I
sweat for fear.)*

Everyone is subject to Death.
A fool is he who does not know this.
He who lives longest will suffer the more.

The original French poet, who may have been Jean Gerson and who concentrated on the newborn’s characteristic inability to talk, based the
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infant’s response on the biblical text in Jeremiah: “et dixi a a a Domine Deus ecce nescio loqui quia puer ego sum” (1:6). Marchant’s first offering of 1485 was clearly a success, so a year later he published a new edition that included an all female danse macabre, its text usually ascribed to the poet Martial d’Auvergne. Further versions by other printers soon followed. The theme also became a beloved decorative motif in both printed and manuscript versions of books of hours. The wider range of printed danse macabre editions helped to popularize the theme while also providing models for new murals.

It was the Parisian wall painting, which he must have seen during his stay in the city in 1426, that inspired the poet John Lydgate from Bury St. Edmunds to produce a Middle English “translation” in the early 1430s of which two distinct versions exist. Lydgate’s text was included in a famous series of Dance of Death paintings in the cloister at Old St. Paul’s Cathedral in London; before this scheme was destroyed in 1549, it was vividly described by Sir Thomas More in his work The Four Last Things. Because of this famous scheme at St. Paul’s, the danse macabre came generally to be known in England as the “dance of Paul’s,” and it inspired further (mostly lost) depictions of the same theme up and down the country. Lydgate’s poem was not a literal translation, but it largely followed the French model, even copying the infant’s tentative first utterings:

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**Deth to the Chyld**

Little Enfaunt / that were but late borne
Shape yn this worlds / to have no pleasure
Thow moste with other / that gon here to forne
Be lad ym hasty / be fatal ordynaunce
Lerne of newe / to go on my daunce
Ther mai non age / a-scape yn sothe ther fro
Late eueri wight / haue this yn remembrance

Who lengest leueth / most shal suffre wo.

**The Chyld answereth**

A a a / a worde I can not speke
I am no gauge / I was borne gestern en
Deth is so hasti / on me to be wreke
And liste no lenger / to make no delai
I cam but now / and now I go my wai
Of me no more / no tale shal be tolde
The wille of god / no man with-stonde mai
As sone dyeth / a sone man as an olde.

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Concerning Lydgate’s translation, Philippa Tristram has commented that “Death’s words to the Child, and the Child’s reply, are so touched with tenderness that they merit full quotation.... To those neither humble nor proud, Death adopts an appropriate aspect.” Yet is there any tender-
ness in summoning a newborn baby to a dance when he cannot even walk?

In fact, there is a new element in Death's words to the child in Lydgate's text that cannot be traced back to the Parisian version: "Lerne of newe to go on my daunce." Whereas the French version focuses on the newborn's inability to speak, Lydgate's words seem to echo a different German tradition that addresses the infant's other natural characteristic: the inability to walk. The result is a morbid joke by Death at the infant's expense which first appears in the oldest surviving Latin-German text (Heidelberg Universitätsbibliothek, Codex pal. germ. 314, fols. 79–80). This manuscript version, which does not contain illuminations, was copied in Augsburg between 1443 and 1447. It contains the following lines:

Puer in cunabulo
O cara mater, me vir a te trahit ater.
Debeo saltare, qui nunquam scivi meare.

Daz Kint
O wē, liebiu muoter min,
ein swarzer man zieht mich dahin.
Wie wiltu mich alsō verlān?
Muoz ich tanzen und kan nit gān?

(Child in the cradle:
O dear mother, a black man pulls me away from you.
I must now dance, who never learnt to walk.

The child:
Oh alas, my dear mother,
a black man pulls me away.
How will you abandon me thus?
Must I dance when I cannot walk?)

Both the Latin and German verses conjure up the plight of a helpless infant who has not learned to walk and yet is forced to dance. The theme was expanded in the earliest known printed version of the German Totentanz, published with illustrations in Basel around 1465 and now usually referred to as the Heidelberg blockbook because of the unique surviving copy in the Universitätsbibliothek at Heidelberg (Cod. pal. germ. 438). Although based on the Latin-German manuscript version, the added speech by Death results in an actual dialogue between the two figures:
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It is clear that the “black man” and the joke of the Latin-German text have been retained, but Death adds to the grim picture with his insistence that the child must dance, regardless of his condition; even if he must crawl his way to the dance. One curious anomaly is that whereas the Latin-German manuscript text specifically refers to a “puer in cunabulo” (child in the cradle), the blockbook illustration instead shows Death grasping a nude male infant by his chubby arm.25 Incidentally, the infant’s plea to his mother does not go unheard, yet she is equally helpless; the subsequent verses reveal her to be Death’s next victim.26 The image of a naked standing infant, rather than a baby in a cradle, can also be found in a later Totentanz version of c.1488, first printed probably in Heidelberg by Heinrich Knoblochter (fig. 2); the accompanying text with its description of the child being unable to speak is, however, clearly derived from Guyot Marchant’s printed edition of the French danse macabre.27 There were at least two later editions of this Totentanz version printed in Mainz (1492) and Munich (c.1520). A fittingly grim touch in the Knoblochter woodcut is that Death is shown wielding a whirligig, the archetypal toddler’s toy in medieval art; it is not unusual to find Death appropriating an attribute typical to his victim in mockery.28

The question is whether Lydgate knew an even earlier, now lost Latin or German Totentanz version with a similar emphasis on the infant’s inability to walk when he added his line “Lerne of newe to go on my daunce” (italics mine). Such a suggestion would not only contradict Lydgate’s explicit references to the Paris mural as his source but also raise serious questions about the origins and dating of the European danse macabre tradition, yet the shared “learning” motif remains intriguing.29 However,
for the purpose of the present study we must look at the situation around the time of the Chester cycle as we now know it—that is, the early sixteenth century. To understand the cultural context properly, we must study what evidence survives of the visual as well as the textual tradition. Although some might claim that the danse macabre was never as popular in England as it was on the Continent, at least twelve manuscripts of Lydgate’s English poem are known to have survived in addition to a

Fig. 2. Death and the infant, from an illustrated German Totentanz edition entitled Der dotten dantz mit figuren clage und antwort schon von allen staten der welt, first printed by Heinrich Knoeblochzter in Heidelberg, c.1488 (Photo: Europäische Totentanz-Vereinigung).
printed version published by Richard Tottel in 1554 as an appendix to a folio edition of Lydgate's *Fall of Princes*; one author has claimed that, at an even earlier date, in 1521, the Parisian printer Johan Bignon produced an English edition of the *Hore beate marie virginis ad vsum Sarum* for the London bookseller Richard Pakes that included at the end five leaves with ten Dance of Death woodcuts and accompanying verses by Lydgate.\(^{30}\) Furthermore, an illustrated broadsheet entitled "The Daunce and Song of Death" was published by John Awelely in 1569, and a Dance of Death woodcut with letterpress verses below was printed around 1580; in addition, woodcut illustrations featuring *danse macabre* scenes can be found in English editions of the popular *Kalender of Shepardes* and in other books of hours printed abroad from the early sixteenth century on, as well as in John Day's *Christian Prayers and Meditations* of 1569.\(^{31}\) These printed examples suggest that the *danse macabre* must have been a much more widespread visual theme in Britain by the middle of the sixteenth century than has previously been thought.

The scheme at Old St. Paul's must have been sufficiently famous across the country to have provided the generic name by which the Dance of Death became also known in this country.\(^{32}\) Nonetheless, so little visual evidence remains here that England tends to be almost completely ignored in Continental discussions of the *danse macabre* in spite of the early date of Lydgate's literary contribution.\(^{33}\) In England the only surviving medieval Dance of Death wall painting, which almost certainly included the infant, has been hidden behind wooden paneling in the Guild Chapel at Stratford upon Avon since the early 1950s.\(^{34}\) Still extant is part of a painted *danse macabre* scheme of c.1500 on the medieval paneled rood screen in the priory church at Hexham, Northumberland, that features a pope, an emperor, a king, and a cardinal, each paired with a figure of Death (fig. 3).\(^{35}\) Other surviving examples include two early-sixteenth-century painted figures of Death and a young gallant in the parish church at Newark-on-Trent in Nottinghamshire; three misericords in St. George's Chapel, Windsor, and three more misericords at Coventry Cathedral (lost in World War II); a stained glass panel of the late fifteenth or early sixteenth century that shows Death with a bishop in the north aisle of St. Andrew's church at Norwich; and a series of carvings of c.1460 decorating the vault ribs in the retrochoir of Rosslyn Chapel, Scotland.\(^{36}\)
Fig. 3. Two panels from the medieval paneled rood screen of c.1500 in the priory church at Hexham, Northumberland, showing Death and the emperor and Death and the pope (Photo: R.J.L. Smith of Much Wenlock).

However, there were once other schemes of the Dance of Death in different media, which may include a tapestry belonging to Henry VIII in the Tower of London. In a recent article, Fred Kloppenburg has discussed three more examples: a set of three “stained or painted” cloths once hanging before the rood loft in Holy Trinity church at Long Melford, as listed in an inventory of 1529; a painting of the late fifteenth century, possibly also on cloth, in St. Edmund’s Church, Salisbury; and another set of painted cloths with a “Dawnse of Powlys” hanging in the parish church of All Saints in Bristol, as mentioned regularly in the church book accounts from 1449 onward. The Bristol accounts show that the cloths there were displayed twice a year on the feasts of All Hallows (1 November) and St.
James the Greater (25 July), with money being paid out for hanging them, taking them down again, and rolling them up; it is important to note that St. James shared his feast day with St. Christopher, the patron saint of travelers and protector against sudden death. Kloppenborg is probably not unduly optimistic when suggesting that further study of parish records may well reveal more such “Dance of Paul’s” examples in England in addition to known but lost murals.

Unfortunately, there is currently no known evidence for a medieval danse macabre scheme in the Chester area, although it is not inconceivable that one of the city’s churches once housed a mural or cloth hanging with which locals would have been familiar. Whatever the case, the printing press would have helped to make the Dance of Death a far more familiar theme by the time the Chester Massacre play was written. We do know that there was a Corpus Christi procession at Chester by 1398 and a Corpus Christi play as early as 1422, but it is important to realize that the extant Chester mystery cycle is of a much later date. Research has shown the surviving texts to have been the result of extensive revision and addition in the first half of the sixteenth century, and, since the cycle continued to be performed until 1575, one author was prompted to describe the extant Chester plays as a Tudor cycle. As mentioned earlier, Lydgate’s Dance of Death was printed by Richard Tottel in 1554, and earlier readers could have encountered the theme among the decorated borders in books of hours or in printed editions of the Kalender of Shepardo. Of course, foreign printed editions of the danse macabre would also have made their way across the Channel, and these would have included copies of the famous woodcut series by Henry VIII’s court painter Hans Holbein the Younger which he had designed around 1526 and which was first printed as Les simulachres et histories faces de la mort at Lyon in 1538.

Moreover, by the sixteenth century the danse macabre had also made an impact on tomb iconography. The first known example of a tomb monument with a danse macabre motif occurs at Biggleswade, Bedfordshire, in the brass of John Rudyng, archdeacon of Bedford (d. 1481), which shows Death armed with an array of spears beside the lost figure of the deceased (fig. 4, 5). Significant also is the epitaph, which contains a dialogue in Latin verse between the reader and Mors, who is clearly labeled as such in the left margin, below the actual figure of Death. In this
Fig. 4. Brass commemorating John Rudyng (d. 1481) at St. Andrew's Church in Biggleswade, Bedfordshire; the figure of Rudyng himself has been lost. (Rubbing reproduced by kind permission of Martin H. Stuchfield.)
dialogue, the reader reproaches Mors for depriving humankind of the admirable John Rudyng, but Mors defends himself at some length:

Horrida tela fero morsu . necis vrgeo seclum
Nec vulgo nec hero . parcens traho singula mecum
Quid valet altus honos . rex . dux . princeps . que sacerdos
Hanc subeunt sortem . nequeunt precurrere mortem....

(I carry grim weapons, I harass the world hard with the bite of violent death. Sparing neither the masses nor the master, I carry them off one by one. What use is high honor then? King, duke, prince, and priest, they all suffer this fate, they cannot outrun Death,)\textsuperscript{44}
A rather different type of memorial survives in the church at Stanford-on-Avon in Northamptonshire, where the local vicar Henry Williams had indicated in his will of 5 April 1500 his desire to be commemorated in “smalle quarells” of glass showing “my ymage knelying in ytt and the ymage of deth shotync at me.” The little scene is reminiscent of Lazarus’s words in the N-Town play: “Whan deth on me hath shet his dart …” (25.63). Death also could once be observed stabbing Thomas Annott with his arrow on the lost 1577 brass at Lowestoft, Suffolk, as recorded in an 1817 engraving by John Sell Cotman. Park-keeper James Gray’s 1591 brass at Hunsdon, Hertfordshire, depicts a morbidly ironic scene of Death striking a double blow with his arrows at both deer and hunter. A late-sixteenth-century monument to a member of the Foljambe family at Chesterfield is interesting in featuring not only Death armed with a spade and a large arrow but also two figures representing infancy and old age on either side of him. The popularity of this danse macabre iconography in tomb sculpture continued well after the sixteenth century and culminated in Roubliac’s 1761 monument to Lady Elizabeth Nightingale at Westminster Abbey.

Whereas Williams and others adhered to the image of Death using arrows to shoot or stab his victims, Rudyng’s Death is unmistakably armed with an array of spears. Medieval iconography can be confusing, with artists seemingly uncertain as to whether Death should despatch his victims by shooting at them with arrows or transfixed them with a spear; it is not uncommon to find Death using an over-large arrow as a stabbing weapon. Admittedly, Continental artists tended to show Death with an often over-large dart or arrow, yet this could sometimes be mistaken for a spear; French medieval murals may show one or more of the Three Dead wielding an elongated dart or a spear against the Three Living. In English medieval wall paintings of the Seven Deadly Sins, Death sometimes uses a spear against the allegorical figure of Pride; for example, a fifteenth-century mural between the spandrels of the arches of the north wall of the nave at Raunds Church, Northamptonshire, shows the skeletal figure of Death immediately above the arch on the left where he is piercing the tall female figure of Pride with a very long spear. Death also wields a spear in the deathbed scene in the early-fifteenth-century
Pricke of Conscience window in All Saints North Street in York (fig. 6) and in an illuminated English manuscript (Oxford, Bodleian Library MS. Douce 322, fol. 19v) of the mid-fifteenth century that contains a collection of religious verse and prose, including two texts by Lydgate and a treatise on “the crathe of Dying” (fig. 7). Here Death in the accompanying dialogue text *Orlogium sapientie* exhorts the reader:

† But that ye now in thys world leuyng. † afore be redy or I my belle rynge.
† My drede full sper full sharpe y grounde.
† Doth yow now lo here thys manate.
† armour ys noon, that may withstande hys wounde.
† Ne whom I merke, ther ys non other grace.
† To fynde respite of dayoure ne space.

Chaucer chose the spear as Death’s weapon when describing him in the Pardoner’s Tale as a “privee theef”: “And with his sperre he smoot his
Fig. 7. "Dethe" armed with a bell and spear; illuminated in an English manuscript of the mid-fifteenth century containing a collection of religious verse and prose (University of Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS. Douce 322, fol. 19").
herte atwo." The spear is particularly prominent in the so-called Carthusian Miscellany (British Library MS. Add. 37,049), a religious miscellany produced in northern England in the first half of the fifteenth century that contains multiple illustrations of Death wielding a spear as opposed to just a few instances where he is armed with arrows (fig. 8). In the morality play *The Castle of Perseverance* of the same period, Mors uses a lance to strike his deadly blow at Humanum Genus, as the latter exclaims: "Deth hate thouacly me wyth hys launce!" In Holbein's 1538 woodcut series, Death relinquishes his musical approach to transfix the knight with his own lance, which leaves the victim twitching desperately in his final agony as if in a parody of Death's usual dance (fig. 9).

The spear is thus a weapon often given to Death as his attribute, especially in English culture, and also as used by Herod's soldiers in the Chester Massacre play. From a theatrical point of view, shaking a puppet impaled on a spear would have been a very effective way of enacting the Massacre of the Innocents onstage, and this device was used in mystery plays elsewhere. In the N-Town play, the first soldier presents an impaled innocent to Herod with the words "Upon my spere/A gerle I bere" (20.109–10), while there is also mention slightly later of "boys sprawlyd at my sperys hende" (220). As the latter words are spoken, however, another crucial event is about to occur in the N-Town play: the despatch of Herod and his soldiers by Mors himself. Although the death of Herod often served as the conclusion of Massacre plays in medieval drama, the N-Town play is unusual in presenting a personified figure of Death. Mors appears on the scene after Herod's vainglorious words "In joy I gynne to glyde" (167) in the foolish belief that Christ has indeed been killed. His sense of triumph is, of course, both false and short-lived, as Mors himself reminds the audience. Mors turns out to be a more effective killer even than Herod or his soldiery. His ominous line "Wher I smyte ber is no grace" (190) may suggest that he, too, uses a spear to dispatch the tyrant and his henchmen before handing them over to the devil, who promises to "teche [hem] pleys fyn" (235). One might even wonder whether Herod mistakes Mors for one of his minstrels when he issues his last command to "[b]lowe up a mery fytt!" (232)—prophetic words, considering the dance he is about to face. Yet Mors is in no way disguised; his description of himself as naked and worm-infested in his final speech conforms to the traditional image of Death as found in depictions of
Fig. 8. Death striking a dying man with his spear: deathbed scene in the Cætherusian Miscellany, produced in northern England in the first half of the fifteenth century (London, British Library MS. Add. 37049, fol. 38r).
Fig. 9. Death transfixed the knight with his lance, in Hans Holbein the Younger, Les simulacres & historiees faces de la mort, first published in Lyon in 1538 (Photo: Europäische Totentanz-Vereinigung).
the *danse macabre* and elsewhere in medieval art—and to the late-
medieval phenomenon of the cadaver effigy.

It was the appearance of Mors in the N-Town play that inspired Gail
McMurray Gibson's remarks on the Dance of Death in East-Anglian
drama and the connection with Lydgate, Long Melford, and Bury St.
Edmunds. A link between Death's concluding role in the N-Town Mas-
sacre play and the Dance of Death had already been made in 1903 by E.
K. Chambers, who also drew attention to the fact that the *danse macabre*
is known to have been enacted on the Continent on a number of docu-
mented occasions. Of course, the personification of Death occurs in a
number of morality plays across late-medieval Europe, and these include
the Middle English *Castle of Perseverance* and *Everyman.* The Chester
play also features the death of Herod, but here instead of a personified
Death it is a demon who comes to fetch the king directly to Hell. Herod's
moans about his rotting legs and arms strangely conjure up an image of
a semi-decomposing corpse—in fact, much like Death himself—although
this is actually in line with medieval tradition.

As Gibson has argued, a link between the appearance of Mors in the
N-Town play and the *danse macabre* is not hard to accept, but is it pos-
sible to detect the same influence in the Chester mystery cycle? Could
the repeated joke made by the second soldier in the Chester Massacre
play somehow have been inspired by the quip in the German *Totentanz*
versions about teaching an infant to dance when he cannot yet walk?
Moreover, could his spear have helped to reinforce his mocking impers-
onation of Death himself? Rosemary Woolf simply preferred to inter-
pret the soldier's words as a game metaphor that "very horribly conveys
enjoyment in the savagery," while Lumiansky and Mills offer little com-
ment on this repeated joke. To interpret this Chester Massacre scene as
carrying overtones of the Dance of Death—especially when one relates
the soldier's actual words to a German *Totentanz* version of the early to
mid-fifteenth century, around a century older than the extant versions
of the Chester play—may seem far-fetched, even though there also ap-
pear to be echoes of this German quip in Lydgate's text. A visual link
between the Massacre of the Holy Innocents and the Dance of Death
was certainly made by artists on the Continent at a later date. The skel-
etal figure of Death is shown hopping around gleefully in a violent
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Massacre scene amongst a set of thirty danse macabre engravings with accompanying verses in Het schou-toneel des doots, of Dooden Dans by the Dutch physician Salomon van Risting (1652–1709/13) which was first published in 1707 (fig. 10). 62 This sixth engraving with the caption “Geen wreder soort als Bethl’hem’s moort” (no fate more cruel than the Bethlehem murder) follows five earlier episodes from the Old Testament, from the Fall of Man to scenes of war and destruction upon the return of the Israelites to the promised land.

Although much later, Death’s wild antics in the Dutch 1707 engraving are a reminder of another vital aspect, for dancing and jumping were originally an intrinsic part of the iconography of the medieval Dance of Death, but especially in the German tradition. The Chester soldier twice uses the Middle-English word “hop,” which could have two distinct but related meanings: to dance, but also to hop, leap, bound, or bounce. It is found several times in Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales as well as in Lydgate’s work, albeit not in his Daunce of Death poem. 63 The Middle English verb “hoppen” is related to the Lower and Middle German verb hoppen, which is a variant of the modern German word hüpfen, meaning to leap or hop. It even occurs in the Totentanz version of the Heidelberg blockbook, although there it is not the child who is enjoined to “hop.” Instead it is the cook whom Death orders to “hoppe off” and prepare a pepper sauce to liven up the sluggards in his dance. 64 In visual presentations of the Dance, the grim specter of Death is usually the more energetic dancer who forces along his reluctant partners from all ranks of society. Although Lydgate’s elegant language makes it sound almost like a formal court dance, there are hints that it really is not quite so sophisticated, for example, when the king admits that “I haue not lerned / here-a-forne to daunce / No daunce in sothe /of fytynge so sawege.” 65 Just like the infant, the king too must learn, albeit in his case a new “savage” type of dance more in line with the energetic depictions of the danse macabre in medieval art than with court entertainment.

It is in the German Totentanz tradition that Death is typically presented playing one of a variety of usually rather lowly musical instruments, from bagpipes to drums, and even applying a still current proverb to one of his victims in the lost mural of c.1463 at Lübeck: “Went gy moten na myner pypen springen” (for you must dance to my pipes). 66
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Fig. 10. Death in the Massacre of the Innocents; engraving no. 6 in Het schou-toneel des doots by the Dutch physician Salomon van Ruysting, first published in 1707 (Photo: Europäische Totentanz-Vereinigung).
Again and again, “der doit” in the German Totentanz exhorts his victims to join him in his dance. Mordant humor is evident throughout when Death summons the various ranks of society with impunity, even those whose position would have made them unlikely dancers whilst alive. The pope, the empress, the patriarch, and the cardinal in the Heidelberg blockbook are all ordered to “springen” or leap, while the “stolzer herzog” (proud duke) is pointedly reminded of how he had previously “hoch gesprungen” (jumped high) with women. In the slightly later Knoblochter Totentanz, Death reminds the “jungeling” how he can “gar süßlichen syngen/höfieren dantz enh spryngen” (sing, behave, dance, and jump quite sweetly). Only on rare occasions does Death seem willing to adapt the pace slightly in accordance with his victim’s condition, as when he addresses the pregnant woman in the late-fifteenth-century French Danse Macabre des Femmes with the words “Allons pas a pas bellement,” suggesting that “easy does it.” Thus each participant in the Dance of Death “hops” according to his or her condition. Perhaps this is an additional indication that the soldier in the Chester play facetiously assumes the role of Death as a dancing master in the Massacre of the Innocents at Bethlehem. Similarly, the word “play” in the Chester soldier’s repeated joke is, of course, a commonly used Middle English word but with a wide range of meanings from merriment and children’s play to an actual performance or spectacle and even music or dancing; its meaning here could be deliberately ambiguous. One may compare it to the words of Diabolus after Mors has killed off Herod and his soldiers in the N-Town Massacre play: “I xal hem teche pleys fin, /And shewe such myrthe as is in helle!” (20.235–36).

Yet it is another Chester play that offers even more compelling evidence for further danse macabre influence in this mystery cycle. Unusually, the Chester mystery cycle has three plays (nos. 22–24) devoted to the end of the world, but it is the Last Judgment play, in which the two groups—the saved and the lost souls—are presented, that is relevant here. Woolf remarked in 1972 that the risen souls in play 24 “are not socially unidentifiable, but are part of the cast of the Dance of Death.” This appears to be peculiar to Chester, although more common in French plays. After the initial words of God and two angels, the first blessed souls to rise from their graves are the pope, emperor, king, and queen.
They are followed by the damned souls, who consist of another pope, emperor, king, and queen, with an additional “Justiciar” and merchant. Lumiansky and Mills comment upon the apparent descending order of authority, yet they make no explicit mention of the fact that both the blessed and the damned adhere very closely to the order of the first few characters in most danse macabre schemes. Marchant’s version, which does not feature the queen or any other female personages, starts with the pope, emperor, cardinal, and king and includes a merchant, as does group A of the manuscript versions of Lydgate’s poem; it is interesting to note that the English Kalender of Shepards, from the first 1506 edition by the London printer Richard Pynson onward, contains what has been described as a rudimentary danse macabre that includes a king and bishop, followed by knights, judges, and merchants. The main character missing among the Chester souls is the cardinal—incidentally, a rank that few English clergymen ever attained. Group B of the Lydgate manuscript versions does not include the queen either, but it has the empress preceding the king and thus follows nearly the same order of many German Totentanz versions. For example, the order in the Latin-German manuscript version is pope, emperor, empress, king, and cardinal; the Heidelberg blockbook features the pope, emperor, empress, and king, with the cardinal only appearing after the patriarch and archbishop; the famous Totentanz mural of c.1440 in the Dominican convent at Basel started with the pope, emperor, empress, king, queen, and cardinal; and, finally, Holbein’s woodcut series has first the pope, then the emperor, king, cardinal, empress, and queen, with a judge, advocate, and merchant among the remaining characters. The hierarchical choice of souls in the Chester play seems fixed in the danse macabre tradition.

Significant in the Chester cycle is the appearance of the two queens, although female characters are hardly unexpected in a Last Judgment play. More striking is the inclusion of the emperor (albeit here without an empress), which seems to point directly at some form of danse macabre influence. The emperor was obviously an important political figure on the Continent, although he is not to be found in late-medieval Doom paintings in England. However, as we have seen, he does feature with the pope, king, and cardinal in a typical if small danse macabre series on the painted rood screen at Hexham, and there is also a moralistic image
of a dead emperor lying in state in the Carthusian Miscellany.\textsuperscript{80} One finds the emperor with the pope and a king as a trinity of earthly power in Continental art—for example, in Hieronymus Bosch’s \textit{Haywain} triptych of the early sixteenth century which shows these three personages on horseback immediately behind the haywain.\textsuperscript{81} Another example is a miniature in a mid- to late-fifteenth-century book of hours produced in northern France (British Library MS. Harley 2917, fol. 119) which shows a pope, emperor, and king opposite their dead counterparts wearing exactly the same crowns appropriate to their status (fig. 11).\textsuperscript{82} The speeches given to each of the blessed and damned souls are also in many ways characteristic of the Dance of Death. All refer to their former lives, status, and deeds with great humility and regret. The Papa Salvatus describes his “fleshye will that wicked was” (\textit{Chester} 24.61) and his neglect to fulfill God’s commandment, but his time in purgatory has cleansed him of his sins. The Imperator Salvatus owes his salvation to his last-minute contrition and a thousand years in purgatory, much like the Rex Salvatus. In contrast, the Papa Damnatus faces the ultimate penalty for his covetousness and simony, while the damned emperor and king belatedly show remorse for their covetousness, manslaughter, gluttony, lechery, and lack of pity for the poor and the sick. However, it is the Regina Salvatus and the Regina Damnata who echo the very feminine regrets of many women in Martial d’Auvergne’s \textit{Danse Macabre des Femmes} who, even when faced with Death, still hanker after their pretty clothes and jewels.\textsuperscript{83} The saved queen realizes that her aims and her “great repentance at the laste” (24.155) have brought her salvation, despite the fact that she was not only guilty of lechery but also reveled in her “softe sandelles and silke alseoe,” her velvet, “and all such other weedes” (150–52). Her damned colleague bemoans the fact that she “was woman wrought” and curses the typically feminine enticements and sins that have brought her only perdition:

\begin{quote}
Fye on pearles! Fye on prydee!
Fye on gowne! Fye on guyde!
Fye on hewe! Fye on hyde!
These harrowe me to hell.
\end{quote}

(24.277–80)

The Justiciarius Damnatus and Mercator Damnatus, for whom there are no blessed counterparts, are figures that also occur in many \textit{danse
Fig. 11. A pope, an emperor, and a king facing their dead counterparts: illumination in a mid- to late-fifteenth-century book of hours produced in northern France (London, British Library MS. Harley 2917, fol. 119).
macabre versions. The former likens his flesh to a flower, which is quite a common image in this period but also is vaguely reminiscent of the words of Lydgate’s “Doctor virtusque Juris,” who compares human life to a flower that is killed off by frost.84 His self-confessed list of sins is spiked with legal references and includes dishonesty, covetousness, and injustice both toward the poor and the Church. Finally, the merchant, describing his dishonest and covetous dealings both in trade—in acquiring land and property—and in usury, thus paints what Lumiansky and Mills have termed “a composite picture of evil at local level.”85

In the past, many scholars have tried to find evidence for the danse macabre in other literary texts. One such example occurs in the B-text of Piers Plowman: “Deep cam dryuyne after and al to duste passhed /Kynges and knyghtes, kaysers and popes” (Passus 20.200–01).86 However, as James Clark pointed out, these alliterative sequences were very popular not just with Langland but also with other medieval authors; they are rather stereotypical and occur elsewhere in the poem. Nor are these sequences always alliterative, as illustrated by Death’s warning to Everyman that he “set not by golde, siluer, nor rychesse, /Ne by pope/emperour/kynge/duke, ne prynces,” and by Mors’s boast in Robert Henryson’s poem “The Ressoning betuix Deth and Man”:

Paip, emprion, king, barroun, and knyght,
Thocht thai be in thair ryell estait and hicht,
May nocht ganestand quhen I pleis schote this derte.87

Curiously, in both instances we find the same threesome of pope, emperor, and king. More significant might seem another example of alliteration in the first soldier’s reference to “kinge and [kesar]” (10.90)—the only occurrence, albeit misspelled in the manuscripts, of this Germanic term in the Chester cycle. However, there is not necessarily a direct German association here, as the word kesar had been known in England for centuries, and the alliterative formula “king and kesar” had been commonplace since at least the later thirteenth century.88 The word is also used twice in The Castle of Perseverance, where it appears with a clear alliterative purpose.89 Other listings of different personages can be found in the Chester mystery cycle—for example, when the Justiciarius in play 24 bemoans the money he sought “of baron, burges, or of bound” (306). Play 10 also contains several such examples, as in Herod’s opening lines
“Princes, prelates of price, / barronnes in blamner and byse” (1–2) and soon after in “barrones, burges, and barronett” (10). Similarly, it may just have been a liking for hierarchical lists that made the Chester monk and author Henry Bradshaw recommend his *Lyfe of the gloryous Virgyn saynt Werburge* (published with woodblock illustrations by the London printer Richard Pynson in 1521) to “[e]very great estate / quene/duches/and lady”; the fact that Pynson is known to have produced by this time at least three editions of the *Kalender of Shepardes* with its “rudimentary” *danse macabre*, and that Bignon’s edition of the *Hore beate marie virginis ad vsum Sarum* with Lydgate’s verses accompanying ten Dance of Death woodcuts, is said to have been published the same year, could well be significant.  

Although modern-day Chester still retains a medieval character, there is reason to believe that the loss of medieval art in the city and its surrounding area must have been great and deplorable. Medieval Chester was once a thriving city, rich in churches, monastic houses, and friaries.  

Fragments of high-quality wall paintings dating back to Henry III have been found at Chester Castle, and the colossal sandstone figure of St. Christopher of c.1375–1400 from Norton Priory is rare surviving evidence of the quality of art produced in the area. The Benedictine Abbey of St. Werburgh at Chester was home to such authors as the well-known historian Ranulph Higden in the fourteenth century and Henry Bradshaw in the early sixteenth. Two of the latter’s works were published in London, and there is no doubt that other printed works could have found their way to Chester; these could have included French and English books of hours and copies of the *Kalender of Shepardes* featuring marginal *danse macabre* illustrations. The fortunate survival of the Chester mystery cycle adds to the picture of Chester as a cultured and intellectual center in the early sixteenth century.

There can be no denying that the *danse macabre* influenced the choice of saved and lost souls in the Last Judgment play. Once we acknowledge this, it seems even more plausible that the *danse* also inspired the second soldier’s joke about teaching an innocent to “hop” on his spear and thus his apparent impersonation of Death in the Massacre play. Yet in a fitting ironical twist, king Herod, who ordered his soldiers to carry out the Massacre, ultimately discovers that he too cannot escape the devil, death,
bodily decomposition. Does the textual evidence then point to the existence of a now lost Dance of Death scheme in the Chester area? MacLean does not include this subject in her *Chester Art* in the EDAM Reference Series, nor is there any mention of the Dance in the *REED* volume on Chester. While this may indicate a complete absence of surviving evidence, it is possible that any references to such a scheme were simply overlooked, or even that the *danse macabre* was not thought to be relevant to the Chester cycle. There appear to be no known antiquarian sources mentioning a mural of this theme in the Chester area, but there remains the possibility of an unrecorded cloth hanging similar to the ones that previously existed at Long Melford, Salisbury, and Bristol, or even of a *danse macabre* sequence in a lost stained glass window.

However, even if no such *danse macabre* scheme did exist in the vicinity, we should not forget the late date of the Chester mystery cycle as we now know it. By the second quarter of the sixteenth century, Death had long been a familiar stage figure in morality plays, and he also appeared in pageants, masques, and other types of performances. We also need to be aware of early printed works containing references to the *danse macabre* and woodcut illustrations of it which would have helped to make the theme more widely known. It is likely not only that local people knew the famous "Dance of Paul's" by reputation, but also that the Chester playwrights were familiar enough with *danse macabre* texts, visual schemes, or even performances to insert references to the Dance in certain of the plays. After all, it has long been recognized that the Chester plays contain borrowings from other medieval texts and mystery plays elsewhere. Thus, the Chester mystery cycle may teach us not only about religious drama on the eve of the Reformation but also about the wider cultural context in this period and in particular about a once popular theme that is now so little known in Britain.

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NOTES

The original idea for the present article was first presented at the Midwest Modern Language Association conference in St. Louis, Missouri, in 1998, while I was a Ph.D. student at the University of Leicester. I am grateful to Cecil H. Clough, Miriam Gill, Fred Kloppenborg, Martine Meuwese, David Mills, Malcolm Jones, Clifford Davidson, and James Stokes for their valuable comments and suggestions on earlier drafts of this paper, and to Allan B. Barton, John Smith of R. J. B. Smith, H. Martin Stuchfield, and Uli Wunderlich for providing some of the illustrations.
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3 Sally-Beth MacLean, Chester Art: A Subject List of Extant and Lost Art Including Items Relevant to Early Drama, Early Drama, Art, and Music Reference Series 3 (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1982).


6 As indicated in the comments on ll. 325–26 by Lumiansky and Mills (Chester, 2:154), "the pattern of events in this section is not clear," and the two children may be killed by the first and second soldier, respectively, rather than both by the second soldier. There is even a suggestion that there could have been as many as four women and more than two knights enacting this massacre scene.


9 As pointed out to me by Miriam Gill, who is an expert on late-medieval wall painting in England, the use of red ochre for body outlines was more common, which means the use of red lead pigment was clearly intended to make the blood stand out more vividly.
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Compare the life of the Virgin, for example, in the Legenda Aurea, where she is said to have been offered to the temple at the age of three, once she had been weaned. Her age of three, which is in strong contrast with her precocious behavior, is repeatedly mentioned in the N-Town play of the Presentation of Mary (9.162–67), as when the Episcopus describes her as a "babe of three yeare age so yngye." Quotations from the N-Town collection in my article are from The N-Town Play: Cotton MS Vespasian D.8, ed. Stephen Spector, EETS, s.s. 11–12 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991). The perceived image of the infant in the Middle Ages is examined in my ""Titel enfant that were but late borne": The Image of the Infant in Medieval Culture in North-Western Europe"" (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, forthcoming), based on my Ph.D. thesis (University of Leicester, 1999). The Innocents at Bethlehem are traditionally shown naked in medieval depictions of the Massacre; this helps emphasize their infant helplessness and vulnerability, although one does find the occasional cradle or swaddled baby in such scenes.


I quote from the facsimile of the 1485 edition in Gert Kaiser, ed., Der tanzende Tod: Mittelalterliche Toteninszenierung (Frankfurt am Main: Insel Verlag, 1983), 102 (translation mine).


For example, the danse macabre mural of c.1500 on the north wall of the nave in the parish church at La Ferté-Loupière in Burgundy has clearly been modeled on the woodcut illustrations of Marchant’s 1486 edition. The antiquarian and collector Francis Douce compiled an early list of all then-known editions; see The Dance of Death in a series of Engravings on wood from designs attributed to Hans Holbein with a treatise on the subject by Franciscus Douce also Holbein’s Bible cuts consisting of ninety engravings on wood with an introduction by Thomas Peggall Dibdin (London, 1902), chap. 3.

For these two text versions, referred to as groups A and B, see Florence Warren, ed., The Dance of Death, edited from MSS. Ellesmere 26A.13 and B.M. Lansdowne 699. Collated with the Other extant MSS., EETS, o.s. 181 (London: Oxford University Press, 1931). Warren's discussion of the two manuscript groups appears in ibid., xxiv–xxx. According to Derek Pearsall, John Lydgate (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970), these two distinct groups "indicate an unusually extensive revision on Lydgate's part" (177).

See James M. Clark, The Dance of Death in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance (Glasgow: Jackson, 1950), 12–13.
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21 For this earliest German version, see Reinhold Hammerstein, *Tanz und Musik des Todes: Die mittelalterlichen Totentänze und ihr Nachleben* (Bern and München: Francke-Verlag, 1980), 29–39, 149; Hellmut Rosenfeld, *Der mittelalterliche Totentanz: Entstehung—Entwicklung—Bedeutung*, 2nd ed., Beilage zum Archiv für Kulturgeschichte 3 (Cologne and Graz: Böhla Verlag, 1968), 89–102, 308–23. Interestingly, a scribal note in this manuscript seems to suggest that this version was copied from an earlier illuminated manuscript.

22 Rosenfeld, *Der mittelalterliche Totentanz*, 317, 323 (translation mine); also Hammerstein, *Tanz und Musik des Todes*, 37–38.


26 The verses dedicated to “Diu Mueter” or “Mater” naturally follow those of the infant in the Latin-German manuscript version, although their order is reversed in the Heidelberg blockbook.


28 See the description of the woodblock print IC.55 in n. 12 above, and also Cornelia Löhrer, *Die Welt der Kinder im fünfhundert Jahrrundert* (Weinheim: Deutscher Studien Verlag, 1989), 156–59; Annemarieke Willemsen, *Kinder delitt: Middeleeuwse speelgoed in de Nederlanden, Nijmeegse Kunsthistorische Studies* 6 (Nijmegen: Nijmegen University Press, 1998), 127–30. For Death parodying his victims, see also Death displaying banners with the crossed keys of St. Peter and the Habsburg double-headed eagle to respectively the pope and the emperor in Knebelochter’s edition, or the small wall-painting of c.1520 of Death and the young gallant in the church of St. Mary Magdalene at Newark (Nottinghamshire), where Death extends a rose to his victim in a parody of courtship.

29 In fact, Lydgate’s version deviates from the French model in another crucial respect in that it includes several female characters among the dancers, just like the earliest known German versions; instead, if we can rely on the evidence of Marchant’s edition, the mural in Paris seems to have been an all-male scheme.
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32 Warren, ed., The Dance of Death, xxvii, mentions that two manuscripts in group B of Lydgate's poem are actually entitled "The Daunce of Poylws" (Oxford, Corpus Christi College MS. 237) and "Daunce of Poules" (MS. Bodley 686).

33 For example, a recent article by Hartmut Kokott, "Todeserleben und Totentänze im Mittelalter," Der Deutschunterricht 1 (2002): 11, lists Bohemia, Yugoslavia, Hungary, and Poland in addition to the more obvious countries, but fails to mention Great Britain. This common omission was recognized in Hubertus Schulte Herbrüggen, "Der Totentanz von Roslyn (Schottland): Ein Beitrag zu einem neuen Forschungsvorhaben," Jahrbücher der Universität Düsseldorf 1981–83 (Düsseldorf, 1986), 165: "Während der kontinentaleuropäischen Totentanz durch eine Rille hervorgegangen ist, haben wir ihn als erforscht gelten darf, herrscht gegenüber dem britischen Totentanz selbst in Fachkreisen verbreitete Unkenntnis."


35 See Clark, The Dance of Death, 7–8 and accompanying plate.

36 See Williams, "The Dance of Death in Painting and Sculpture," 237–39; Clark, The Dance of Death, chap. 2; Herbrüggen, "Der Totentanz von Roslyn," 165–75. Although the Norwich glass is illustrated and briefly discussed in Richard Marks, Stained Glass in England during the Middle Ages (London: Routledge, 1993), 84, pl. 67, it is not identified as a danse macabre scene. However, Clark (The Dance of Death, 17) claims that this panel of Death and a bishop was part of an original scheme of forty-four panels, which were distributed over eleven windows and once included Death with an emperor, a pope, a cardinal, and other figures. Clark based his claim on the antiquarian John Kipling who in his Church Notes for St. Andrew's Church dated September 1712 in the Norwich Record Office (NRO, MC 5000/14) described the window with the emperor, pope, cardinal and "all degrees of professions to carpenter and other mechanical trades" and added that "ye greater part of their figures are quite defaced."

37 Clark, The Dance of Death, 16.

38 Kloppenburg, "Totentänze in der religiösen Gebrauchskunst Englands," 56–66. References to the Salisbury painting are be found in the churchwardens' accounts for the 1490s. For Long Melford, see also Gail McMurray Gibson, "East Anglian Drama and the Dance of Death:
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Some Second Thoughts on the ‘Dance of Paul’s’; Early Drama, Art, and Music Newsletter 5 (Autumn 1982): 1–9. The lost painting in the Hungerford chapel at Salisbury Cathedral, described as a Dance of Death by Clark (The Dance of Death, 10), is instead identified by Kloppenburg as a scene of the Three Living and the Three Dead.


37 Danse macabre borders can be found in books of hours from the 1480s on, both in illuminated manuscripts and in editions printed by Simon Vostre, Antoine Vérard, Thielman Kerer, and John Day; see Hammerstein, Tanz und Musik des Todes, 177. For John Day, see Herbrüggen, "Ein anglikanischer Beitrag zur Geschichte des englischen Totentanzes"); and also Samuel Chew, The Pilgrimage of Life (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962), 228–32.

38 See Sophie Oosterwijk, "‘The sodeyne vyolence of cruel dethe’: Commemoration and the Dance of Death in Late-Medieval England," unpublished paper presented at a conference on the "Commemoration of the Dead in Ireland and Britain from 1400 to the Present: Monuments and Society," National University of Ireland, Maynooth, 24 November 2001. A number of examples, including the lost 1577 brass to Thomas Annot at Lowestoft in Suffolk mentioned below, can also be found in the author’s contribution to the Picture Library on the Monumental Brass Society Web site at www.mbs-brasses.co.uk.


41 I am grateful to Sally Badham for bringing this brass to my attention.

42 In John Awelay’s 1569 broadsheet, Dance is seen leading along "the old man" with his walking stick and "the child," with the latter shown as a naked toddler; the old man on the Chesterfield monument also holds a walking stick, while the naked infant has a whirliigig.

43 This is a later iconographical development from the earlier type of moralizing encounter between the Three Living and the Three Dead. Compare the various illustrations in Vifs nous sommes … morts nous serons: La Rencontre des trois morts et des trois vifs dans la peinture murale en France, ed. Groupe de Recherches sur les Peintures Murales (Vendôme: Editions du Cherche-Lune, 2001), e.g., 12, 26, 50, 60, 78, 81, 92, 180, 102–03, 106, 114, 137, 143, 147. In German Totentanz scenes, Death is more usually presented with musical instruments to accompany the dancers.

44 See J. G. Waller, "On the Wall Paintings Discovered in the Churches of Raunds and Slapton, Northamptonshire," Archaeological Journal 34 (1877): 219–41, esp. 221 and illustration opposite. I am very grateful to Miriam Gill for drawing my attention to this mural and its iconography.
50 For the York window, see Marks, Stained Glass in England, 82, 84, fig. 66. The Bodleian Library miniature is illustrated in Tristram, Figures of Life and Death, pl. 24. The figure of Death in the left column on fol. 19r is specifically referred to in the right column in the lines: "Syth that ye lyse to be my costes. And in your book to set myne image." According to the text on the frontispiece, the manuscript was a gift to Sister Perelle Wratisman in the nunnery of Detford from her uncle William Baron.


52 See An Illustrated Yorkshire Carthusian Religious Miscellany (Brit. Library London Additional MS. 37049), ed. James Hogg, Analecta Cartusiensia 95 (Salzburg: Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, Universität Salzburg, 1981), vol. 3. Death is shown with a spear in scenes on fol. 19r, 36v, 38v, 39v, 40v, 42v, 42v, 43r, and with arrows on fol. 69v and 84r. One could wonder whether the illustrator saw a link between the scenes of Death spearing dying figures—all, on fol. 38r—and the lance piercing Christ's side on fol. 67v.


55 See Woolf, English Mystery Plays, 210, 393 (n. 80).

56 As noted by Spector in her commentary (The N-Town Play, 2:479), in Holbein's woodcut Death approaches the king at his feast while acting the part of a servant pouring wine.


60 For Herod's grisly end, which was traditionally regarded as a fitting punishment for his role in the Massacre, see the commentary by Lumiansky and Mills on ll. 417–33 in The Chester Mystery Cycle, 2:156, and also by Spector in The N-Town Play, 2:479 (commentary on play 20.232).

61 Woolf, The English Mystery Plays, 206, 254–55, comparing this episode with other game metaphors such as the game resembling blind man's buff elaborated in the scourging of Christ in three out of four English cycles, although not in the Chester Play.
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I am grateful to Uli Wunderlich, president of the Europäische Totentanz-Vereinigung, for alerting me to this print and to yet another Massacre scene with a figure of Death painted in 1885 in the Friedhofskapelle at Bad Morigenthurm.

For Chaucer, see the Reeve’s Prologue, “We hoppen alwey whil the world wolde” (3876), and the Cook’s Tale, “At every bridale wolde he synge and hoppe” (4375). The MED (s.v. “hoppe”) quotes Lydgate as having used the word in his poem “O Fools”: “The teneth fole may hoppe vpon the ryng, Poore al afloren, and lede of riht the daunce” (25).

See Kaiser, ed., Der tanzende Tod, 320.


This motif of Death playing musical instruments also occurs in the Spanish Danza, but not in the French or British traditions; see Hammerstein, Tanz und Musik des Todes, 51–55.


Ibid., 156.


See MED, s.v. "ple(e)".

Woolf, The English Mystery Plays, 295; see also the commentary on l. 40 in The Chester Mystery Cycle, ed. Lumiansky and Mills, 2:355.

Woolf, The English Mystery Plays, 295, 413 n. 95, lists the damned souls in the French play Le Jour du jugement as a bishop, abbes, king, bailiff, provost, lawyer, queen, usurer, and the usurer’s wife, servant, and child.

Clark, The Dance of Death, 14, translates justiciarius as justiciary; Woolf, The English Mystery Plays, 295, interprets the term as judge; and Lumiansky and Mills in The Chester Mystery Cycle, 2:355, as lawyer.

For the different personages in the two manuscript groups, including the empress, see Warren, ed., The Dance of Death, xxiv–xxxi; although belonging to group A, MS. Selden Supra 53 shows the two stanzas relating to the empress added in a different hand. For the Kalender of Shepards, see Herbrüggen, “Der Schäfer-Kalender,” esp. 246–48 and fig. 1.

Hammerstein, Tanz und Musik des Todes, 32–33.

Kaiser, ed., Der tanzende Tod, 276–279. In contrast, the Knoblochtzer edition of c.1488 has first the pope and cardinal, with the emperor and king as the tenth and eleventh personages, but without the empress or queen; see ibid., 106–93.

Ibid., 194–275, esp. 198–209.


I am grateful to Miriam Gill for this information.
Chapter 4: Lessons in ‘hopping’

See An Illustrated Yorkshire Carthusian Religious Miscellany, fol. 87, where the dead emperor’s newly crowned son is shown his father’s corpse by a steward.

See Roger H. Marijnissen and Peter Ruyffelaere, Hieronymus Bosch: The Complete Works (Antwerp: Tabard Press, 1987), but esp. 74, for the version in the Prado, Madrid; another version of the Haywain triptych is in El Escorial. All three figures can easily be recognized by their characteristic crowns and tiara.

For this miniature, see Tristram, Figures of Life and Death, 162–63, pl. 25; Tristram describes the figures not just as the Three Living and the Three Dead but also as representing three Ages, without mention of their actual status or significance as figures of power. Referring to this illustration, Spinrad (The Summons of Death, 5) interprets the three figures as a pope, an emperor, and a prince.

Despite the assertion made by Suzanne F. Wemple and Denise A. Kaiser, “Death’s Dance of Women,” Journal of Medieval History 12 (1986): 341, that “the author can not be accused of misogyny,” many of the women are presented as preoccupied with clothes and jewelry, which is very much in line with the attitudes to women expressed in other medieval texts. Even the little girl, who was once quoted by Johan Huizinga as a touching example of medieval childhood, still worries about her “belle cotte” when captured by Death; see The Danse Macabre des Femmes, ed. Harrison, 107. In the Danse Macabre des Femmes, the queen, who is presented as its first personage, does not mention clothes or jewelry, although she does complain that Death’s dance is “bien nouvelle” to her—probably another reference to its “savage” or lowly character; see ibid., 55.

Warren, ed., The Dance of Death, 35, 37; this character is apparently unique to MS. Lansdowne 699.

Lumiansky and Mills, eds., The Chester Mystery Cycle, 2:364.


I am grateful to David Mills for pointing this out to me.

Beyald mentions the “kyngs, kayserys, and kemys and many a kene knyght” in The Castle of Perseverance (213) among his victims, while Malus Angelus refers to “caysere, kynge, and knytth” (343).

Henry Bradshaw, Life of the glorious Virgyns saynt Werburge, ed. Carl Horstmann, EETS, o.s. 88 (Oxford: Trübner, 1887), 198 (l. 1986); see Elizabeth Danbury, “The Intellectual Life of the Abbey of St Werburgh, Chester, in the Middle Ages,” in Medieval Archaeology, Art and Architecture at Chester, ed. Alan Thacker, British Archaeological Association Conference Transactions 22 (Leeds, 2000), 116. In subsequent verses, Bradshaw also commends his text to virgins, widows, and nuns. For Pyson’s and Bigon’s editions, see Herbrüggen, “Ein frühes liturgisches Beispiel für den englischen Totentanz” and “Ein anglikanischer Beitrag zur Geschichte des englischen Totentanzes.”

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80 Sharon Cather, David Park, and Robyn Pender, “Henry III’s Wall Paintings at Chester Castle,” in Medieval Archaeology, Art and Architecture at Chester, ed. Thacker, 170–89.

81 See Deacon and Lindley, Image and Idol, 46 and plates (exhibit 8).


83 Clopper, Records of Early English Drama: Chester, passim.

84 The likelihood of any relevant reference having been overlooked seems especially small in Clopper’s extensive REED study, yet evidence for danse macabre schemes can be hard to detect or interpret. For example, Gail McMurray Gibson herself originally misinterpreted the reference to the “three long cloths” of the “daunce of Paule” in the Long Melford inventories as banners for a maypole dance, nor was she the only one to make this mistake; see Gibson, “East Anglian Drama and the Dance of Death,” 1, 7 n. 2.

85 In addition to the remaining glass panel of Death and a bishop at St. Andrew’s Church in Norwich, Clark (The Dance of Death, 16) mentions two medieval panes of glass once in the possession of Francis Douce. One of these is described as Death and a pope, while the other showed “three Deaths” that could once have been placed at the beginning of a Dance of Death, with the accompanying text: “... ev’ry man to be contented w’ his chaunce./ And when it shall please God to folowe my daunce.”

86 Spinrad, Summons of Death, passim. Of course, scholars have long wondered whether the danse macabre could have developed out of a much older folk dance or ritual; see, for example, Warren, ed., The Dance of Death, xiii–xvi; Kaiser, ed., Der Tanzende Tod, 55–58; Christoph Mörgel and Uli Wunderlich, “Tanzende Tote in einer Aargauer Handschrift des 14. Jahrhunderts,” in L’art macabre 3: 144–61.

87 See David Mills in The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre, esp. 113–15, for the inclusion of material from the Middle-English poem A Stanzic Life of Christ in at least seven Chester plays, and also borrowings from the Coventry, Towneley, and York cycles and the Brome play.