Shifting Responsibilities: The Effect of the Black Death on Remembrance and Memorial
Sheri L. Kennedy

To understand a society, look to see what happens to the body.
-Robert Hertz

The response of civilization to questions of the afterlife and the dispensation of the soul is prominently displayed in the archaeological records from the pyramids of Giza to Arlington Cemetery. Monumental and testimonial practices illuminate how the dead and the living affect one another. In the Greco-Roman world, the relationship between the soul and the physical remains was reinforced through ritual practices such as feeding the dead to guarantee they had a peaceful afterlife, and tomb imprecations, that not only assured that the physical remains would remain undisturbed, but also protected from the machinations of magical practitioners who could compel the dead to their bidding. The preservation of the corpse assured the comfort of the soul, and the act of providing that comfort, in turn, bequeathed to the living an active relationship with their dead. However, starting in the fourth century with the rise of Christianity there is a notable shift in memorial practices and afterlife beliefs. The relationship between the body and the soul was given further dimensionality, while at the same time becoming more conceptual in its relationship to the physical remains. In the Christian paradigm, the body and soul were not considered co-substantial, they would only be reunited at the time of the Last

2 Richard S. Ascough, "Forms of Commensality in Greco-Roman Associations," 33-45, Patrick Fass *Around the Roman Table: Food and Feasting in Ancient Rome*, and Jocelyn Toynbee and John Ward Perkins *The Shrine of St. Peter*. 128-9 and 154-8 provide excellent archaeological analysis of the practice of feeding the dead. Georg Luck’s *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe: Ancient Greece and Rome* and Daniel Ogden’s *Greek and Roman Necromancy* are both compelling pieces on the necromantic literary corpus of the Greco-Roman world, although Ogden overreaches in his assumption that literature is indicative of regular practice, rather than, at best, liminal, but highly emblematic of cultural fear. Hans Dieter Betz, *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation Including the Demotic Spells*, and John G. Gagner, *Curse Tablets and Binding Spells of the Ancient World*, both work with magical texts that illustrate the use of corpses in rituals, and the practice of funerary imprecations and amulets for the protection of the dead from the living and of magical practice that required the cooperation or compelling of the dead in order to fulfill the caster’s desire.
Judgment. Therefore, the relationship between the living and the dead became less reliant on physical proximity and interaction. The community still attended to the needs of the dead, but through the nurturing of the soul, independent of the body. No longer would the care and succor of the soul be managed through a sustained relationship with the physical remains. Replacing the ritualistic act of feeding the soul through offerings to the body was prayer: pleas for God’s grace, which the living could not directly confer to the dead themselves without divine mediation.

Greco-Roman society had an active and ongoing relationship with their dead, which they negotiated in terms of the physical remains, a discourse housed in the fear of the capabilities of the dead over the living. This fear not only exhibits itself in ritual practice, but also in the layout of cities. Cemeteries were never within the city limits, and even the poor were given proper, although spartan, burials. The dead were to be venerated with marker and memorial, but because of their potential to become dangerous, they were to also be kept separated from the living. This core belief changed fairly quickly between the fourth and fifth centuries. First, churches began to house the remains of the martyrs and saints: the first welcomed dead within city limits. Then the churchyard began to receive the remains of the faithful who wanted to be in proximity of the venerated dead. Gradually, cemeteries became part of urban life; they were no longer in a space set aside for the dead, away from the living, but became incorporated into city life, itself. Cemeteries became not only places of the dead, but spaces that held dances, fairs, and markets, putting the living and the dead in regular proximity. This familiarity turned the dead into another age group, lying beyond old age, but still active members of society; the living still had obligations to the dead in gratitude for their inheritance and lineage.

The move from veneration, care, and fear of the remains to remembrance and prayer for the soul exhibits a change in mentality. The Greco-Roman dead required an unbroken continuum in their relationship with the living in order to

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3 It was considered not just bad luck, but a shirking of one’s civic duty to leave a body unburied for fear that it would manifest a restless and hungry spirit that would haunt or otherwise wreak havoc on any who had left the body in such an undignified state. This was a risk that was only worth taking when Roman society was looking to enact a protracted condemnation of the individual, as in the case of those executed in the arena. In specific cases the corpse would be left unburied, and dumped unceremoniously beyond the city limits, for the express purpose of psychologically torturing the individual in the afterlife by denying them proper burial. Donald G. Kyle’s *Spectacles of Death in Ancient Rome* provides an excellent case study.


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be at peace, a construct that required an endurance of family and community. An eternal Rome, with civically enforced ritualistic feeding holidays for the filial and the forgotten, could keep the dead sated. That bond with the living was severed as Christianity displaced traditional Roman practice starting in the fourth century. According to the Christian afterlife paradigm, the dead went into God’s care: they no longer required assurances from the living in order to be at peace. Broad stroke analysis indicates that the negotiation of the relationship between the living and the dead was analogous to the state of Roman society, or the members therein, responding to changes in socio-political climes, between one of security to one of uncertainty. These shifts in burial practice are suggestive of more than just a changing religious ideology.

Working from this premise, this essay will explore changes in the relationship between the living and the dead brought about by the experience of the Black Death. I will be looking at changes in memorial, testament, and iconography as indicators of an increasing concern over intercession and a deepening contemplation in the process of death, from preparation for the afterlife to the reuniting of body and soul at the Last Judgment. Placing the dead in physical, social, and spiritual terms required the negotiation of numerous factors. Through these discourses of the dead we are able to see how societies understood themselves and how when that understanding was challenged through conflict or calamity, they cleaved to the institutions that could give them access to God’s grace.⁶

One of the tropes that is reiterated throughout Black Death literature was that there were not enough living and caring left to properly bury to dead. Plague survivor Marchionne di Coppo Stefani reported that:

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⁶ For the purposes of this essay I will be focusing on death and ritual in terms of the ideal. Revenants and wraiths, while providing interesting commentary on the interpretation of possession in terms of elite and popular culture, does not reveal any significant change attributable to the Black Death lacuna. Not to be reductionary, but these folkloric beliefs have roots in the restless dead motif of antiquity, and while the continuance of belief makes for fascinating study, their impact on afterlife beliefs in the Middle Ages exist primarily in the peripheral. I am, admittedly, focused upon high culture death ritual from the fourteenth to fifteenth centuries, which interpreted animate dead as possessed, not as a possible outcome for the soul. Nancy Caciola has written two excellent essays on the subject, "Wraiths, Revenants and Ritual in the Middle Ages" and “Spirits Seeking Bodies: Death Possession and Communal Memory in the Middle Ages.” Jacques Le Goff, in The Birth of Purgatory and Phillippe Aries in The Hour of Our Death both point to official changes in the concept of Purgatory in the thirteenth century as having a hand in this evolution. Ghosts stories are increasingly exempla; ghosts were used to convey message to the living to remind them of their obligations to the dead.
All the citizens did little else except to carry dead bodies to be buried [...] At every church they dug deep pits down to the water-table; and thus those who were poor who died during the night were bundled up quickly and thrown into the pit. In the morning when a large number of bodies were found in the pit, they took some earth and shoveled it down on top of them; and later others were placed on top of them and then another layer of earth, just as one makes lasagna with layers of pasta and cheese.  

Images of the dead being carted out into mass graves and buried without marker sits uneasy with modern sensibilities, but in the Middle Ages, it was not the anonymity of the grave that caused distress, but the unceremonious attendance to the process of death. By the fourteenth century, it was not uncommon, especially in metropolitan areas, to dig up the hopefully more than less dried bones in older graves to make room for fresh residents. The bones were then piled up around the church, placed in archways and porticoes, as well as in ossuaries. The grave, for all except the most elite members of society, was a temporary lodging. The need for plaque or marker was unnecessary. The gravediggers would do their best to remember where specific individuals were buried if special requests had been made for the placement of their bones, but for most, there was no issue in having their remains, or those of their loved ones, intermingled with the dead of their community. Consider poor Yorick and the general lack of unease exhibited by Horatio and Hamlet as he is being unearthed and readied for move. The important thing was to have your remains placed inside the churchyard to share in any grace bestowed through the prayers of the living for the dead, with churches that held relics holding a place of prestige. Pilgrims were always a good source of additional benefaction, and an endowment for the reading of Masses compensated for the anonymity of the grave. Faith in the resurrection of the body and God’s ability to restore it at the Last Judgment made veneration of the tomb and its contents unnecessary. The tradition of gravesite anonymity that started in the fifth century was interrupted starting in 1348 as the threat of plague loomed large. Samuel K. Cohn’s The Cult of Remembrance and the Black Death: Six Renaissance Cities in

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9 With the exception of those who were executed or had committed suicide. These individuals were denied access to community sites, and sometimes to consecrated ground all together.
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*Central Italy* is an expansive study of testimonial practices between 1348 and 1450. In spite of a variety of significant differences in social and political influences, patterns emerge which Cohn analyzes, with the caveat that some were attributable to the influence of the notaries guiding the process, in terms of shifting mentality in reaction to the Black Death. Initial plague waves resulted in a marked increase in new chapel and tomb construction with clear instructions about where the individual wished to be buried. The grave was no longer anonymous. Even those with “fewer resources significantly increased their demand for concrete remembrance by sponsoring paintings to be placed above their tombs or in sacral niches of other churches, hospitals and monasteries.” The majority of testators began to specify what figures they wanted painted, something that, prior to 1348, was quite rare.\(^\text{10}\) The most requested image was the Virgin Mary, with the testator shown in supplication at the feet of the saint.\(^\text{11}\) The Black Death seems to have inspired people to take a more strategic interest in their remains to help shorten their path through Purgatory and into Heaven.

For those with the means, there was also a marked increase in the erecting of family chapels and tombs after the second wave of plague hit in 1363.\(^\text{12}\) Lineage became an afterlife strategy. Provisions were written into wills to assure that building dates were met, alongside threats to surviving family members of alienation from the family tomb should things not proceed on plan.\(^\text{13}\) Given that the second wave hit children more heavily than others, it is conceivable that monuments of this type address concerns over the continuation of the immediate family, with added reliance upon the extended family for remembrance. By the last quarter of the Trecento, nearly half of the wills generated specified a place of burial with over eighty percent of those being in monuments built by a family member. Generational graves, which had been rare prior to the summer of 1348, metamorphosed into choice burial sites in the early Quattrocento.\(^\text{14}\) Whether out of fear of being buried in a plague pit, or fear of abandonment in both this life and the next, people began to feel a need for personalized gravesites with proximity to the remains of their extended family.

Cohn’s study has also been used by art historians to discover how the Black Death affected Trecento art. Stylistic changes and patronage patterns before and after the Black Death are examined in detail in Millard Meiss’s


\(^{11}\) Ibid., 272.

\(^{12}\) Ibid., 37, 142.

\(^{13}\) Ibid., 145.

\(^{14}\) Ibid., 160.
Painting in Florence and Siena After the Black Death, Judith B. Steinhoff’s Sienese Painting After the Black Death: Artistic Pluralism, Politics, and the New Art Market and Henk van Os’ two volume set Sienese Altarpieces 1215-1460. Most art historians studying the impact of the Black Death upon art focus on Siena and Florence. Trecento art is not part of the accepted continuum of style leading to the Renaissance; it is “ugly”, an aesthetic move backwards in terms of linear perspective and representation, creating a variety of avenues of study to discover what led to this divergence. 

Millard Meiss penned the predominant theory by which paintings in Florence and Siena after the Black Death are assessed in terms of mentality and style. Meiss theorized that the Black Death, and the devastating impact that it had on Europe, was writ large in artistic expression, and there was a marked difference in Tuscan art starting in the middle of the fourteenth century. Prior to the onset of the plague, patrons were generally from the ruling oligarchies: individuals replete with cash who were both self-reliant and self-assured. Artistic representations from the first four decades of the fourteenth century were warm, family and civic oriented, and religiously optimistic; Mary is depicted in the iconography of “mother” with an infant or toddler Jesus receiving succor. However, in the 1340s, the area was struck with hailstorms that destroyed crops, a series of bankruptcies hit nearly every banker in Florence and Siena, and both cities were on the losing end of war. The cities saw profound changes to their political and economic structures, and, while still reeling from the effects of these disasters, were hit in the summer 1348 with the Black Death. Meiss maintains that rather than representing a simple break from the Giottoesque style that dominated earlier in the century, the art of the Trecento was highly influenced by this series of disasters that started with a grain shortage in the 1340s and culminated with the Black Death. It is reflective of the gloomy mentality of a society ravaged by adversity.

The change in artistic style, technique, and iconography took a bleak turn. Guilt, penance, and religious rapture became the preferred thematic and “though religious thought throughout the Middle Ages had dwelt on the brevity of life and the certainty of death, no age was more acutely aware of it than this.”16 The Black Death inspired an intensification of public penance and procession, which was already being practiced in an effort to assuage God’s wrath and find relief from famine and violence. The strains of societal change and worldwide disaster converged, resultant in artistic expression that put greater emphasis on orthodoxy and accentuated the divine over the human. From chaos

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16 Ibid., 74.
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came a great urgency to cleave to the institution that created order. The Church, as both intercessor and instructor was relied upon to help lead the way through the terrors of the Last Judgment and assure the future of the soul when the future of the body was very much in question. Matteo Villani, a Florentine chronicler, lamented that after the 1348 plague abated:

Those few sensible people who remained alive expected many things, all of which, by reason of the corruption of sin, failed to occur among mankind and actually followed marvelously in the contrary direction. They believed that those whom God’s grace has reserved for life…would become better men, humble virtuous and Catholic…for since men were few, and since by hereditary succession they abounded in earthly goods, they forgot the past as though it had never been and gave themselves up to a more shameful and disordered life.  

This era of plenty, however, was short lived, and when the plague returned in the 1360s, this indulgent lifestyle was quickly displaced by intense piety. Those that had survived were suddenly reminded that God’s grace was not to be squandered. The celebration of life was quickly supplanted by imagery of death, decay, and suffering. Meiss even goes so far as to call this a renunciation of life. Christ became the angry judge, depicted addressing his wrath toward guilty and damned souls, and Mary became their protector, with emphasis upon her role as intercessor at the Last Judgment. No longer was the halcyon Holy or urban family the favored subject of representation. Dark religious tableaus that emphasized the supernatural aspects of the divine came into fashion. Increasingly, Christ was represented in resurrection motifs defying the laws of nature; he is shown floating on the outside of the closed tomb, when previously he would have been depicted standing with one foot inside and one foot outside. Visually, his humanity was eclipsed by his divinity.

Meiss centers his thesis on the altarpiece by Orcagna at the Strozi Santa Maria, which was commissioned by a Dominican order. Christ is presented as supernatural, removed from the apostles, staring straight ahead as he floats in the forefront. Christ was not usually represented as an adult on altarpieces, and the new style taken up by painters post-Black Death:

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17 Ibid., 67
18 Ibid., 74.
A certain kind of adverse criticism of the work of Giotto and his followers was certainly common at this time in the paintings themselves. Every one of the younger masters after 1345-1350 rejected, at least in part, Giotto's most easily imitable accomplishment, linear perspective. None attempted to rival the equilibrium in his art between form and space, or his supple figures moving freely in a measured, easily traversable, receptive world.  

Meiss attributes this change in style to larger social concerns and a conscientious break with contemplation of the natural world and a renewed vigor toward hierarchy represented in somber and detached motifs. The dominant iconography was indicative of a newly fearful and penitent mentality directly attributable to the plague, as if in atonement for the more humanistic images of the first half of the fourteenth century.

Judith B. Steinhoff studies the same Sienese works as Millard Meiss, but rather than focusing on how changes in style reflect plague mentality, she explores the "extremely sophisticated and self-conscious sponsorship of art," intended to promote both religious and civic agendas. She begins with an assessment of Meiss's thesis, disagreeing with his assertion that conservatism in art reigned during the Trecento. Steinhoff sees the era as one in which stylistic pluralism prevailed: a blend of both traditional and contemporary influences. She dismisses Meiss’s interpretation of hierarchical and abstract imagery as emblematic of a change in mentality, seeing these representations as demonstrative of the relationship between patron and artist. For Steinhoff, the *nouveau gentes*, which were now in an economic position to become patrons, did so in a way that projected power. The old regime had been responsible for the visual aesthetic of the city, and patronage in the arts was a significant and lasting way to make monument of your new status. In addition to the changes in work patterns for the surviving artists, Steinhoff also claims that the *nouveau gentes* were willing to pay less for art. Therefore, stylistic changes could also be considered as a reduction in quality to meet demand and cut production costs in response to the environment that the new art patrons created.

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19 Ibid., 6.
20 Ibid., 82.
22 As a result of the dissolution of the Nine, the ruling elites in Sienna, the replacement governmental structure, the Twelve, included members from the merchant and artisan classes. Projection of power was predicated on the attainment of position within the structure of rule in addition to that obtained from new wealth.
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It may seem that Meiss and Steinhoff are talking about the same phenomena. How can Steinhoff point to “demographic upheaval” after the Black Death as an independent impetus for the stylistic changes that Meiss attributes to the plague? It is a fine distinction. Meiss is looking for iconography and stylistic changes that are in response to the experience of the Black Death, whereas Steinhoff sees the logistics of art production being the driving force for a return to Byzantinism. Steinhoff finds continuity where Meiss identifies a true caesura.

Further complicating the discussion is the work of Henk van Os, and his study of the Sienese altarpieces. His thesis contends that an altarpiece can only be fully understood if seen in its original setting related to liturgical demand and discussed in relationship to both patronage and the public. When factoring in the Black Death he asserts “the idea that the Black Death marked the end of one era and the start of another is rooted in the notion that the experience of a disaster is punishment for culture.” In other words, the culture preceding the event and its tactile values are converted into the scapegoat and a call to embrace religion and the values of the era prior to the one that ushered in disaster resounds. The stylistic and spatial changes outlined by Meiss, whose thesis looms so large in the study of art in the Trecento that nearly all later studies must address it, are, according to van Os, not a step backwards so much as a choice to focus on devotion rather than idolatry.

Van Os also looks at patronage patterns, and like Steinhoff attributes much of the stylistic differences to their influence. However, rather than charging the *nouveau gentes* with being cheap, he deems them less discriminating than their predecessors; they were happy with plasticism in lower quality materials because they were focused on the emotive religious message which superseded a need for gilt, gemstones, and costly accoutrements that prior had been the hallmarks of “great art.”

Meiss, Steinhoff and van Os all agree that changes in the patronage system are a significant component to assessing Trecento art in Florence and Siena, but there is no consensus as to how those changes are categorically attributable to the lived ordeal of the Black Death. The plague is part of a

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23 Byzantism is the use of singular iconic imagery, generally with a canonical quotation. The figures are depicted in a flat aspect, stiff and formal in appearance, in rich color, generally with a gold background. Meiss called this stylistic change “plastic,” which is more emotive than Byzantism, intended to illicit specific emotion for contemplation.


25 Ibid., 32.
continuum of calamitous changes to the cultural climate, all of which contributed to a massive change in population and social structure. However, issues of dating undermine Meiss’s thesis, and much of what he attributes to the post-Black Death era have been assigned earlier dates, some as early as the 1320s, and as such, “we can no longer believe, as Millard Meiss did, that Florentine and Sienese painting can be divided into a period before and after the ‘Black Death.’”

Regardless of which tribulation provided the impetus for change in Trecento art, Meiss, Steinhoff and van Os all agree that demand was up during the Black Death era, which is corroborated by Cohn’s analysis of wills, and speaks to the increased desire for individualized remembrance.

Increasingly, as the plague trudged on, individuals came to rely less and less on their social networks to make preparations for their remains. Chroniclers repeat tales of fathers abandoning sons, children deserting mothers, and of a lack of priests and honest men to deliver the body to the grave in proper fashion; the system in place prior to the Black Death to assure a good death and a proper burial collapsed under the strain of not only the number of bodies in need of attention, but from the additional stress of contagion. Franco Sachetti, a renowned Florentine chronicler and story teller, describes a testator who demanded that a plate of sliced pears be left yearly at a designated location for the flies: the only living entities not to abandon him during his last days of illness.

A similar strategy of personally procuring remembrance was employed by the English. In addition to a change in synod legislation requiring that the parishioners be responsible for the vestments and vessels required for worship, the increased focus on death and the uncertainty about who would be left alive to pray for your soul, coalesced into a marked increase in the number and type of donations. Parish communities recorded these transactions in their All Saints Books. The list of endowments and donations would be read to the congregation on the Sunday before Ash Wednesday and to assure that the subtext was not lost on the attending, the ritual would be ended with the following:

That they shall not be forgotten but had in remembrance and be prayed for of all the parish and all of them that be to come, and also for an example to you that be now living that you may

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likewise do for yourself and for your friends while they be in this world.  

The message of responsibility for and necessity of ensuring an abiding remembrance through physical objects so that the community could continue to help expedite your salvation was quite clear. The bede-roll recorded the benefactions of all parish members, large and small, along with a short biography that included a list of good works, and became a celebration of achievements while at the same time reinforcing the obligations between the living and the dead through the creation of communal memory.  

Joel T. Rosenthal’s *The Purchase of Paradise: Gift Giving in the Aristocracy, 1307-1485* provides compelling analysis of the wills of the English nobility. He argues that the process of disposing of one’s property at death speaks to their sense of priority: “a man of great wealth and large family is never as free of external obligations as when he makes his last will and testament.”  

By analyzing the institutions to which they bequeathed their property, we not only get a clear indication of familial structure, but of which services provided by the church were of particular importance to parishioners:

The giving of the gift activated a complicated mechanism of social exchange, with the church diverting its personnel and shaping its structures, duties, and teaching so as to offer the laymen a fair reciprocity for their money, obedience, and acceptance of the prescribed ecclesiastical values.  

And as such, the gift-giving patterns of the English nobility were, according to Rosenthal, socially conservative.

Recipients of prayers named on licenses to alienate provide a fascinating look at the family structure. Prior to the Black Death, beneficiaries were not

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29 Ibid., 63. The names of the churchwardens were also entered into the bede-rods, along with a list of their deeds so that their service rather than a donation of goods might be repaid in prayer for their souls as well.


31 Ibid., 11.
horizontal; they were vertical, consolidating possessions within the core family. The extended family was assumed to have descendants of their own who would arrange for prayers on their behalf. The childless, unmarried, and the sole survivor were socially liminal with no filiopietistic network of their own. Contingencies would not be made for them. Placing this understanding of familial obligation within the context of the Black Death could account for increasing chantry grants during plague years, which were two to three times that of non-plague years. While those of lesser rank could join guilds or confraternities to assure the continuance of prayer, the nobility could purchase it outright. As the plague waves continued, however, the family structure adapted, and endowments to the extended branch members became a strategy for securing a continuance of memorial, and threats of omission from the family mausoleum a mechanism of control.

The nobility within the first two generations of the Black Death were also interested in establishing new foundations, both of the regular and secular variety. These were much larger commitments that other philanthropic ventures and one that the donor felt obliged to leverage a modicum of social control over. As these foundations would be expected to provide prayer for the souls of the benefactor, his friends, and his family, the spiritual welfare of its residents was a prime concern. The nobles wanted, “thanks while they were alive, prayers for their souls after death, and the right to control and regulate their beneficiaries at both times.”

In both Italy and England around the time of the Black Death we see a growing concern with assuring personalized memorial, in forging familial ties for remembrance, and in obtaining prayers and masses to lessen time in Purgatory, coalesce. Additionally we can observe an increased need to handle these arrangements personally, where possible, and to tap into larger social and familial networks to safeguard one’s efforts. But is this attestation of a new, morbid age as Huizinga described in The Waning of the Middle Ages, or a continuum of practice intensified by the realities of demographic upheaval, housed in the tropes of hope and salvation?

II.
Purgatory surpasses heaven and hell in poetry, because it represents a future and the others do not.

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32 By the fifteenth century this type of endowment was quite rare, which Rosenthal attributes to a diversion of interest from the regular to the secular branches of the church.

33 Joel T. Rosenthal, The Purchase of Paradise, 73.
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-Chateaubriand

The bestselling book during the fifteenth century was the *Ars Moriendi*. Building on the theological construct of Purgatory established by the Second Council of Lyon in 1274 and fed by the calamitous events of the fourteenth century, the process of and preparedness for death, as we have seen, had become increasingly significant. The *Ars Moriendi* grew out of a ninth century addition to the Book of Hours – The Office of the Dead. This particular chapter not only provides us with some of the most intimate images of fear related to death, but is also unique in that the text is an exact duplicate of the breviary; the layperson could recite the same text as the ordained of the choir. Praying the Office texts was considered, alongside the purchase of Mass recitations, to be one the most efficacious ways to reduce the departed’s time in Purgatory. The Office of the Dead also served to remind the living that they would one day too be counted among those numbers. Although it is difficult to trace changes in iconography as each Book of Hours was a unique item reflecting one’s personal taste, the Office of the Dead exhibits many of the same tropes of Purgatory and redemption that became increasingly important in the wake of the Black Death, as well as the steps towards assuring a “good death.” Additionally, images from *The Golden Hour*, the apocryphal account of the Virgin Mary’s death, are often found in both the Office of the Dead and the *Ars Moriendi*, as a reminder of the most idealized death. Visually, *The Office of the Dead* is a primer, where textually it satisfied private devotion to the dead.

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39 That the “good death” is represented in the Book of Hours in visually but not textually may account for the long held theory that the *Ars Moriendi* sprung up as a truly original work in the fifteenth century, with no known antecedent. While I happily concede that the *Ars Moriendi*, which was published in a variety of vernaculars and a less costly book to obtain than a Book of Hours, grew out of an increasing concern for preparing one’s soul,
In brief, the process of a good death involved firstly, repose, preferably in your own bed. If medieval literature is to be believed, the individual through natural or supernatural inklings, knew he was about to die.\(^{40}\) From a posture of repose, the dying was to contemplate and commend death, understanding that through this process he was escaping a physical prison, and, upon being freed, would advance towards the Beatific Vision. During this process he would be tempted by the diabolic, who, hoping to capitalize on his despair, would (1) tempt him from his faith; (2) bring to mind all sins left unshriven; (3) make him impatient to end his suffering and die more quickly, an insult to God who had given him the gift of life and was the only one who could choose the hour of death; (4) encourage his complacence, that is spiritual pride in one’s self; and (5) tempt him with temporal delights. Next, the dying should be comforted and his faith reaffirmed by a priest along with consolation and remembrance of Christ’s sacrifice. Then he should be reminded to mirror Christ’s life. The last two chapters are instructions to the friends and family gathered at the bedside. The first, is direction to the living concerning the appropriate decorum around the death bed. The book ends with a collection of prayers to be recited. Confession and communion are administered, and the dying, now properly prepared, awaits his appointed hour.

Visual portrayal of this process begins to appear in the thirteenth century; angels and devils fight for the soul of the dying at the deathbed and, increasingly, the soul would be depicted either being weighed, or the acts of the dying being accounted for in a ledger.\(^{41}\) Only the select few, generally Saints went directly to Heaven. The vast majority would go to Purgatory, making a “good death” all the more important, as it was the last chance of the living to confess and ready their soul to the best of their ability in hope of shortening their afterlife penance.

T.S.R. Boase’s *Death in the Middle Ages, Mortality, Judgment and Remembrance* uses the evolution and demise of a single iconic image used throughout Europe to better contemplate the effect of the concept of Purgatory on the Christian mentality. In the thirteenth century, one of the predominate images of the assent to heaven is that of Abraham’s Bosom. The righteous ascend, usually in a napkin, to Abraham’s lap, where they are often seen crowned to indicate their position among the elect.\(^{42}\) The damned go straight to hell.

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I also maintain that the Office of the Dead was intended to instruct, doing so in the same tropes as the *Ars*, and should be considered as an antecedent.

\(^{40}\) Phillipe Aries, *The Hour of Our Death*, 5-28.

\(^{41}\) The ledger motif grew in popularity as the merchant class increased. It is dualistic in that it is both representative of the tallying of the works and deeds of the individual at the time of death and as a reminder that to attain a good death one should neither owe nor own anything upon their demise.

\(^{42}\) This imagery is derived from the parable of Lazarus in Luke 16:19-31.
Augustine himself uses this imagery to describe a friend’s passing, confirming the message behind the visual, “Now he lives in Abraham’s bosom. Whate’er that state be, which is signified by that bosom, there lives Nebrisus, my sweet friend…for what other place is there for such a soul?”

In 1331 Pope John XXII had sent shock waves through the theological community by declaring that none could enjoy the Beatific Vision before the Last Judgment. The intercession of the living and the Saints could do nothing to help the damned who were consigned to hell until the end of days. His successor, Benedict XII in 1336, would declare this an error and put an end to the debate over the existence of Purgatory. The doctrine of the Treasury of Merits and the efforts of the mendicant orders in the thirteenth century would reaffirm the efficacy of the resources that the Church could provide in shortening purgation. By 1439, the image of Abraham would be melded with that of the figure of God welcoming the elect to his lap, no longer an iconic image indicative of the process of salvation.

Christine M. Boeckl’s *Images of Plague and Pestilence: Iconography and Iconology* offers a broad approach to studying Black Death iconography. She systematically investigates facets of new meaning in the visual arts by examining those that are far removed from traditional votive association that has been reposted in the older literature. She begins with a primer, explaining how to place the icons of pestilence temporally by understanding the classical antecedents and contemporary plague tracts as well as by artistic style. For example, many of the Black Death reports mention animals dying, but we do not see their inclusion in representations of the plague until the sixteenth century as “religious paintings were subject to the rules of decorum which discouraged such base subject matter as animal carcass.” So even though the literary record from the fourteenth century describes these events, they do not make it to the visual record until much later.

From the onset, Boeckl removes the *Danse Macabre, Madonna de Miscordia* and the *Triumph of Death* motifs from the Black Death repertoire. There are extant representations of all of these tropes that predate the pestilence. While their popularity certainly expands in the latter half of the

46 Ibid., 49.
fourteenth century, for Boeckl, they are not emblematic of plague iconography so much as antecedents repurposed to highlight, “changing attitudes toward physical afflictions.”47 She attributes this rise of death imagery as part of the doctrinal revision of heaven and hell that was happening just prior to the onset of the plague. She also disassociates the Transi Tombs from the plague rhetoric as Black Death iconography is typically focused on sudden death, not the speculation of decay and the afterlife.48 Boeckl is concerned with representations that are drawn from the experience of plague, those that indicate a caesura in traditional mentality. The introduction of eschatological iconography, of the arma Christi, of dark clouds, sick people, and cadavers are all new additions to artistic representations which Boeckl categorizes as psychological weapons created by the visual arts. This exegesis is an extension of Anselm of Canterbury’s concept of the dual nature of Christ and the dependence of sacrifice and kinship to God’s mercy:

The Original Sin had offended God, and men owed him restitution. Men could not compensate for the offense because everything was already God’s property, therefore only God himself could satisfy the debt; but since the satisfaction was owed by man, a lawful offer of it could only be made by someone who was both God and man…the weight of the compensation Christ might claim for his death was more than the world might contain. Not needing it himself, he asked the Father that the debt be transferred to his fellow men, which the Father could not in justice refuse.49

This understanding resulted in the belief that only through the memory of human suffering could God’s mercy be influenced and the excess grace garnered by Christ’s sacrifice bestowed to mankind. That belief was reflected in artistic production during the Black Death and employed strategically to illicit pity from God.

Boeckl’s connections are, perhaps, a bit oversimplified, but they do represent an intellectual history that is not often factored into assessments of plague iconography. By moving beyond classical antecedents into more contemporaneous intellectual influences she encourages a reassessment of existing concerns about Purgatory and the Last Judgment and how those influences contribute to mentalities post-Black Death.

47 Ibid., 2.
48 Ibid., 64
49 As quoted in Christine Boeckl, Images of Plague. 75.
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From the pulpit, Purgatory was linked with the earthly calendar. The Eucharistic prayers and the devotions of the faithful on Sundays commemorated the dead and lauded Christ’s sacrifice, lessening the suffering of those in Purgatory and prolonging the presence of the dead within the community of the living. But perhaps nothing cemented the image of Purgatory in the popular imagination more than Dante Alighieri’s *Divina Commedia* where in Purgatory, Hope reigned supreme. At the moment of release from Purgatory, those newly free of sin and about to join the chosen, are not only exemplars of the cleansing mercy that Purgatory provides, but also reminders of the symbiotic relationship between the living and the dead along that journey:

This last petition, Lord, with grateful mind,
We pray not for ourselves, who have no need,
But for the souls of those we left behind (11.22-24)

The saved and the living both pray for the souls of those in Purgatory.

But was there a need for Purgatory if people believed that the Black Death was a sign of the impending Apocalypse? The latter half of the fourteenth century is awash with eschatological language, and historians have, for the most part, reinforced this view. Assuming that the plague was among the effects of the opening of the sixth seal, where natural disasters become described as the wrath of God, then as John Aberth put it, this was a world living on the brink of the apocalypse. Why then would the entirety of Christendom appear to be more concerned with assuring a continuance of memorial that was explicitly constructed to assure the *living* would aid them on their path through Purgatory?

III.
The Supernatural becomes the depository of the objectified values of the group.

-Peter Brown

Fourteenth century writings are a mosaic of empirical observation and prophetic interpretation. Earthquakes, famine, and war were repositioned into eschatological considerations when the first wave of the Black Death hit. Plague,

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through its association with the apocalypse through Revelations and portions of the gospels of Matthew (24:7) and Luke (21:11), imbued natural phenomena with the hyperbole of the end of days:

Serpents and toads fell in a thick rain, entered dwelling and devoured numberless people, injecting them with poison and gnawing them with their teeth. In the South, in the Indies, earthquakes cast down whole towns and cities were consumed by fire from heaven. The hot fumes of the fire burnt up infinite numbers of people, and in some places it rained blood, and stones fell from the sky.\(^{53}\)

With the tribes of Gog and Magog often accompanied by references to snakes, worms, and reptiles, the portents of the fourteenth century encouraged contemporary authors to identify the movement of the plague as an additional portent. The plague, as was anticipated in Revelations, was moving east to west to trumpet in Judgment Day.

The *Dies Irae*, taken out of its greater context, certainly resounds in terrific tonality, but the Day of Judgment was a day of “salvation, of entry into the bliss of eternity, a day of looking not backward in despair and penitence, but forward and confident.”\(^{54}\) It is from the vantage of modernity that we see only the horror; it is part of our own macabre sensibilities about the “dark ages.” Robert E. Lerner’s *Western European Eschatological Mentalities* and Laura A. Smoller’s *Plague and the Investigation of the Apocalypse* both look at plague treatises and their apocalyptic imagery not as portents of doom, but as messages of hope.

Lerner uses prophetic tracts that foretold the coming of the Antichrist during or even slightly before the initial plague bout diffused throughout Christendom. According to twelfth century lore, the Antichrist was to herald in a time of great joy for Christians. The Jews and heathens would be initiated into Christianity, the saints refreshed and the Church would be reformed and purified.\(^{55}\) This interpretation became codified in 1200 and remained


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unquestioned throughout the Middle Ages. That the time of the Antichrist would be harbingered by natural disaster placed the Black Death and the reports of wondrous and terrifying phenomena in the East, in a context that was altogether different from that of Divine punishment:

The Black Death, medieval Europe's greatest disaster, prompted many to think about how the present related to the future and called forth expressions of chiliasm that circulated from Italy to England and from Austria to Catalonia. In their main outlines, these expressions were not new but were manifestations of a basically unchanging medieval prophetic structure. They were meant to inspire perseverance in faith, hope, and penance, but they were not otherwise meant as calls to action. They intended to give comfort by providing certainties in the face of uncertainty and must have helped frightened Europeans get about their work.56

These tracts were not being introduced by the fringe; they were well grounded in traditional biblical exegesis and offered as formal treatises by identifiable writers.57

Smoller looks at these tracts that recorded the progression of the plague and situates them within a scientific frame. The phenomena were observable fact, and understanding their progression, mapping them, brought them under the control of human understanding. This rationalization allowed the reports of the apocalypse moving from the periphery inwards towards Christian Europe to progress in an explainable pattern with the expectation that those who survived in the East would acknowledge the power of God and become part of the Christian fold. This conversion motif, one that had been circulating in the Cedar of Lebanon since the early thirteenth century, found new popularity in the fourteenth. It expressed the hope of universal Christianity and salvation for all souls, the a continuation of the goals of the Prestor John mythos, as well as those of the Franciscan missionaries, and would issue in the era of peace.58

56 Ibid., 551-52.
57 Robert E. Lerner, Western European Eschatological Mentalities, 81-83.
Once placed inside the conventionally accepted trope of the Apocalypse, these portents were viewed not with morbidity and dread, but in anticipatory hope of the days to come. A world in which the Holy Land was no longer in the hands of the Muslims, where the Jews had recognized their error in rejecting Jesus as the Messiah, and where all of humanity recognized Christianity as the one true faith, were among the positive attributes of the End of Days. The bellwethers of Christ’s triumphant return to earth also included the defeat of all evil at the hands of the elect and the collective salvation of the Last Judgement. Moreover, the chiliastic aspects of these tracts also explain why people continued to prepare for Purgatory. There would be a thousand years between the birth of the Antichrist and the Last Judgment, a terrifyingly long time to be subjected to the unpleasantries of purgation.

The Black Death did not initiate a progression into morbidity. The shift in mentality is the natural result of famine, war, and pestilence culminating in an obsession with the afterlife. The Black Death bridged two intellectual streams. On one side, the dogmatic construct with the pastoral campaigns of the mendicants dispersing the dictates of the Second Council of Lyon from 1274 concerning the concept of Purgatory now coupled with the 1336 clarification by Pope Benedict XII on when the soul was to be judged. On the other side we have the eschatological construct, which until the event of the Black Death, was conceptual and expected, but not of primary concern when making preparations for the dead. At the onset of the plague years, the increased concern with personal salvation, be it in context of the Last Judgment or looking to access respite from God’s wrath, caused these two intellectual influences to converge, resulting in a change in testamentary practice, memorial, and iconography. People began to take more control over their salvation. The mechanisms of intercession were diversified and purchased in bulk to assure the continuance of prayer. The memorial was personified in name and visage to assure remembrance by the community. The family tomb was used to tap into the resources of the extended family, should one find themselves cut off from the immediate branch. It was a pragmatic continuation of hope in response to the uncertainty of the ability of the church to attend to memory, and by extension the path through Purgatory, should there be no voices left to illicit grace through prayer. Spreading endowments across entities was the medieval equivalent of hedging your bet.

The patterns we see emerge in the relationships between the living and the dead change only in that there was no longer an assumption of the living being willing and able to adhere to the rituals surrounding the process of death. Arrangements take on an increasingly personalized air: art was not only commissioned, but imagery with the purpose of inspiring contemplation of death, and thus inspiring prayers for the dead was specified. If you could commission your likeness into the tableau, you had a better chance of receiving personalized,
and therefore more efficacious pleas for intercession. The place of burial was no longer left to the assumption of inclusion inside the churchyard as the fear of the plague pit and its socially liminal position became an increasing reality. The Office of the Dead and the *Ars Moriendi* both instructed to the ideal, but neither had a contingency in place. Both however, reinforced the importance of aiding the dead on their way through Purgatory. The prophetic tracts elucidating the progression of and process towards the Last Judgment were hopeful, but not of immediate concern even for those who seemed to be living through the End of Days. Primacy remained with penance and the minimizing of the time between death and the Beatific Vision. The Black Death did not cause a disruption in the discourse of death, it simply shifted the burden of preparation from one party to the next, and should remind us all of the importance of the last will and testament.

*Sheri L. Kennedy is a medievalist specializing in cultural and intellectual history. She is fascinated by the rhetoric of death rituals, iconography, and literature.*
Bibliography


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