

THE DANCE OF DEATH:  
A PRELIMINARY ENQUIRY

The Dance of Death is a subject which has fascinated scholars for centuries, but the literature about it is so involved and complicated that anything short of a detailed dissertation could only be called an introduction. References cover the whole of the Middle Ages, reaching their peak in the sixteenth century, but extending in influence through the latter half of the twentieth century. The themes extend not only through dancing and music, but the fields of art, poetry and literature. Part of the complexity surrounding the subject involves some confusion over the Dance of Death (Todes-Tanz) and the Dance of the Dead (Toten-Tanz) explained as an overlay of text and pictorial images. In the Todes-Tanz death is often represented by a simple skeleton, the messenger of god, who tries to entice the living to dance with him. He often carries a garment or implement corresponding with one worn by his living partner, or plays a musical instrument.

The Dance of the Dead (Toten-Tanz) is generally older than the Dance of Death. In this form the dead all have partners, and they too reflect their living counterparts' personalities. This is a folk tradition in which the dead dance in the graveyard at midnight, drawing the living into the dance if they can. This idea, according to Stegemeier, still exists today.<sup>1</sup> The confusion between the two dances apparently arose due to the "common practice of adapting new texts to old pictures" (Stegemeier, 1939:9). When a text describing the Todes-Tanz was applied to pictures of the Toten-Tanz (or vice versa), the distinction was lost, often forever.

Many European paintings and murals have aroused scholarly debate concerning whether they represent the Toten-Tanz or the Todes-Tanz -- for instance, the Chaise-Dieu, Karmaria and Innocents of Paris. These examples depict each dancer as having a skeleton partner, while the texts describe only a single figure of death. In Fehse's opinion,<sup>2</sup> the painted skeletons represent "the dead" -- relevant to the Medieval tradition of the dead rising from their graves at night and enticing the living to dance with them. Naturally, whoever joins in will die. Hammond, however, rejects Fehse's theory. She points out that the source of this painting is a series of wall paintings. On each one, it would have been typical Medieval practice to repeat the figure of Death.

Originally, the figures of the dead appeared as mummies or as rotting, decaying bodies. According to Stegemeier, skeletal

representations of death were certainly not invented in the Middle Ages; they have a long history traceable to ancient times. They were a standard image by the sixteenth century. He also claims that the skeletons always look vaguely human and can show emotion and feeling.

The origins of the Dance of Death are somewhat cloudy, and extend over much of Europe. One of the major contributing factors to the existence of the folklore was the Black Plague of the fourteenth century, which began in Asia and raged in Europe from 1347-1350. Stegemeier claims that "the Plague undoubtedly popularised the macabre" (Stegemeier, 1939:23). He suggests that the appearance of syphilis at the end of the fifteenth century also increased people's fear of death.

Whatever the putative biological origins of such dances may be, the literary origins of the Dance of Death can be traced to a legend entitled 'The Three Living and the Three Dead', which arrived in the west circa the eleventh century, although it was "known as early as the third century in the Orient" (Stegemeier, 1939:26). In it, three decomposing corpses warn their sons, who are three noblemen, of the transience of life and earthly pleasures. They warn the noblemen to live a good life in order to escape the punishments of the next world. Stegemeier points out that this element of clemency is not present in the Dances of Death -- victims receive no warning, but are simply pulled into the dance.<sup>3</sup> Yet the whole folklore of the dance<sup>4</sup> is, in itself, a warning to the living, similar to the one that the dead corpses give to their sons.

The Vado Mori, a thirteenth-century Latin poem, is also an important link to the history of the Dance of Death. "The six introductory verses ... remind one that nothing is surer than death, nothing more uncertain than the hour of death, and nothing less definite than one's destination after death" (Stegemeier, 1939:28). As several manuscripts of this poem still remain, one might assume that it was quite popular among the literate members of the population in its day. Many other medieval literary sources contain references to Death, or personify Death in some way -- for instance, in the morality plays.

Another authority, Whyte (1931:vii) claims that dances of death contain three principle elements -- dancing; "the arrangement of characters by estate" and "the imminence of death". The idea of estate (rank or class) stems from Medieval life in that rank, career, or even religious life might all effect the sort of estate in mortal life that an individual inhabited. Persons from each estate must, of course, be summoned to Death, and many of the literary forms of the dance describe Death inviting different people to dance with him.<sup>5</sup>

Many of the problems related to study of this kind revolve around the personification of Death itself. "A theory is involved which regards the origin of the paintings as representing a tradition distinct from that of the texts" (Whyte, 1931:38).

We are told that at Montserrat, many pilgrims would sing as they walked up the mountain. Arriving at a basilica, they would spend many hours in prayer and meditation. One such scene has been immortalised by a painting of the sixteenth century. However, Chaucer relates a contrasting picture of the entertainment that also occurred on these pilgrimages. Thus it is conceivable that religious dances were both entertaining and devotional and were held for the Virgin, various saints, feastdays and as ritual (Whyte, 1931:43).

The Clergy tolerated such dancing (if not exactly approving of it), and scholars such as Douce believe that the clergy itself may have introduced the Dance of Death to substitute for more profane types of dancing. Whyte states quite clearly that at Montserrat, "... the monks, forbidding wanton dances and disorder by the pilgrims at vigils or in the open squares adjoining the shrine, provided as substitutes the songs and dances contained in the Llibre Vermell, one of which is Ad Mortem Festinamus" (1931:45).<sup>6</sup> She suggests that the Ad Mortem Festinamus was probably danced according to local custom. Stegemeier claims that "it is very likely that the first Dances of Death were written by ecclesiastics" (1939:43), claiming that the moralistic sermons of the time are the possible explanation for the initial interest. He also points out that the Dance of Death became more religious and more "admonishing" in tone as the years progressed. The author was apparently interested in the psychological aspects of the Dances of Death and thought that the subject of death was an obsession of the Middle Ages -- especially sudden death, possibly as a result of the Plague -- when the salvation of the soul was of prime importance (1939:47).

The French Danse Macabre is, in fact, regarded as the oldest form of any Dance of Death.<sup>7</sup> The history of the Danse Macabre shows continuity to the late nineteenth century. Its main feature is skeletons, with Death appearing as a dancer. In all the danced representations of Death, music is important because it is often the means used to entice the victims to join the dance. Stegemeier points out that if assembled together, all the instruments portrayed in pictures of Death "would make up an entire Medieval orchestra" (1939:10). However, France seems to be the only country where Death did not carry an instrument.

The idea of Death carrying a musical instrument might

present an interesting paradox to a modern reader. Music for dancing is usually associated with a friendly, alluring atmosphere, whilst personified Death exists as an evil, unwanted force. Many other paradoxes surround the folklore -- some people (the blind, crippled, poor) might welcome Death, yet he takes many years to appear, while others fear and loathe him, and he makes his appearance all too soon. Is death a punishment or a salvation? The answer surely depends on the lifestyle of the victim. It is easy to see why preachers throughout the centuries have found the figure of Death a powerful tool in their sermons.

It has been suggested that the word 'macabre' originates from the Hebrew and Yiddish word for gravedigger, indicating that "the dance's origins may lie in the customs of the Medieval gravediggers guilds (Sadie, v5, 1980:218). Pictures of skeletons dancing have been found on an ancient Etruscan tomb, and in the fifteenth century the cloisters of St. Paul's cathedral were decorated with the poet Lydgate's verses. During the fifteenth century the Danse Macabre was performed throughout continental Europe, and a dance called 'The Black Man' performed by children in Germany is said to continue the tradition today.

Spain was much more interested in the physical aspect of dance, rather than pictorial representations of it. The word 'dance' is mentioned thirty-six times in the seventy-nine stanzas of Dança General de la Muerte, the Spanish version of the Dance of Death. Whyte quotes words such as "andad aca luego" (lines 503, 529, 610) and "en vn salto" (line 151), which denotes some speed, and "correr la athaona" (1931:47) evokes dizziness, causing the dancer to fall. Suggestions of action are cloudier in the Danse Macabre, with the word 'dance' appearing only eighteen times in sixty-seven stanzas. While it is surmised that the Spanish Dance of Death contains circlings, leaps and whirls, the Danse Macabre suggests a procession with the words "suiuons les autres".

The Dança General de la Muerte has no known connections to any picture and is the most similar to the old French text. There is debate amongst scholars as to whether it began as a drama. Stegemeier suggests that "perhaps characters recited the dramatic text on the stage as if it were a morality of Death" (1939:65). He also claims that clerical authorship is likely because of the emphasis on spiritual powers.

In it, Death "addresses each mortal twice and is replied to; some intercommunication exists also between the victims" (Whyte, 1931:vii). It opens with a prose prologue, which is followed by seventy-nine stanzas. After about ten stanzas Death begins to organise a dance to the accompaniment of the "sad piping of the flute" (Whyte, 1931:5). The maidens who dance first are seen to

be unwilling brides of Death. Alternately, religious and lay classes meet death. Religious characters include the "Pope, cardinal, patriarch, bishop, abbet, dean, ..." and so on, while laymen include "emperor, king, duke, condestable, knight, squire, ..." (Whyte, 1931:7) and others.

The text is remarkable in the fact that it is perfectly consistent -- the victims file past from highest in rank (Pope and emperor) to lowest (non-Christian, rabbi and tax collector), and each has a weakness which is pointed out by Death. At all stages Death woos and seduces his victims, all of who are naturally unwilling, and protest their innocence. "Embrace me," cries Death, "be my spouse; you have desired pleasure and delight -- I am at your service. Take me for your very own!" (Whyte, 1931:8).

At the end of the text "an inclusive summons is made to those not already named" (Whyte, 1931:12) in case any rank or person might consider themselves exempt from the dance. Naturally, those who have the most to lose in life, the emperors, kings and rich men, are those who protest the loudest, while the poor, crippled and blind "welcome him as a deliverer" (Stegemeier, 1939:7). Death can be either male or female (and, indeed, usually takes on the sex opposite to that of its victim) and is occasionally less stern to the characters of the hermit and the Benedictine monk, who have lived blameless lives.

The author of the Dança is unknown, although it was attributed to Rabbi Sem Tob by Sánchez in 1779. By 1790, however, he had revised his opinion. In 1520 a continuation of the Dança General de la Muerte was printed in Seville; however, the alternation between clerical and layman was discontinued, which no doubt destroyed some of the rhythm of the text.

In Catalonia, the Dance of Death is somewhat different. Pedro Miguel de Carbonell continued the Catalonian translation of the Danse Macabre. Yet he was not the actual Catalan translator, although the only remaining manuscript is in his handwriting. In this translation, the word "macabre" (central to the French text) does not occur -- it possibly was not known in Spain until fairly recent times.<sup>9</sup>

According to various beliefs, Death is depicted as the twin brother of sleep, or the messenger or servant of God. 2 Peter 3:10 says that, "The day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night". Death leads his victims to God, the final judge. This is an interesting symbol, as often one would equate death with Satan rather than God. Perhaps, however, it is our own sins that link death with the Devil -- God sends Death as punishment to man. The Angel of Death is, of course, mentioned in the Bible.

Interestingly, it is the Bible which first portrays Death as a reaper. Job 5:26 states that, "Thou shalt come to thy grave in a full age, like as a shock of corn cometh in his season". Thus in many pictorial representations of Death he carries a scythe.

Most of the dances are so ancient that the actual steps and movements have been lost. This is also partly due to the fact that no real form of notation existed. Although by this time a quite successful version of musical notation (neumes) was in common use, dance relied basically on paintings and verbal description, neither of which has a strong survival record. Thus historians must laboriously piece together fragments of information to form a general idea of the dance.

The Dance of Death seems to have existed mainly as a literary phenomenon, enhanced by various works of art. However, there is no doubt that originally there must have been dancing which led to the literary genre. As discussed earlier, various works in the literary forms of the Dança General de la Muerte and Danse Macabre can suggest movements and action. This is not, however, a very accurate way to piece together information about dance steps. According to dance historian Fiona Garlick, most known dance manuals from the period are of Court dances, the dances of the upper classes. The Dance of Death in general flourished in the folk idiom, although the whole point of the Dance is to show that everyone, from every class must succumb to Death. Also important is the fact that Court dances were danced for entertainment and pleasure, while the Dance of Death was designed to create in people a fear of God, and change their lifestyle for the better.

As mentioned in the introduction, two separate dances actually existed -- the Toten-Tanz or Dance of the Dead, in which the dead pull the living into the dance, and the Todes-Tanz or Dance of Death. The fourteenth-century mystics saw death as a transition or entrance to eternal life, and as such, welcomed it. In pictures dating back to this time, two separate styles are evident. The older one is "a measured, stately, ceremonious procession of the living and the dead, a chain dance, a 'Reigen'" (Stegemeier, 1939:21). Murals all over Europe, including la Chaise-Dieu, Clusone, Berlin and Pisonne, depict this dance. Other areas (especially in France and Germany) show dancers split into groups or pairs. The victims show barely any emotion, whilst the dead "indulge in gestures" (Stegemeier, 1939:21).

The second style is more active, with more gestures and movement. Death personally invites his victims to dance, and "the victim's whole body shakes with fear as he attempts to flee or as he struggles with Death" (Stegemeier, 1939:21).

One dance of Death which is known in some detail is the Danza de los Siete Pecados, a play by Diego Sánchez de Badajoz.<sup>10</sup> Whyte states that the Danza was performed in a Corpus Christi procession. There are several similarities between this dance and the "Dance of the Seven Sins". In the plays of Badajoz, Death is a grinning skull and is described as "long, dry and stiff" (Whyte, 1931:79). This is a remarkably mild moral for a medieval text -- they usually preached death and damnation and burning in Hell. This text looks forward to a tradition of Christians believing in salvation and victory through death.

These dances are but a few in a huge tradition throughout Spain and its neighbours. Many manuscripts exist either in part or whole, which attest to the fact that the idea of the Dance of Death existed in serious drama, comedy, as school plays, in poem, art, music and dance performances. At this point, some mention must be made of a few other death rituals or myths involving the dance. During the nineteenth century, the Dance of Death became a symbol of midnight revelry by skeletons, thanks to Goethe's poem, "Der Totentanz". Saint-Saens' Symphonic Poem, opus 40, "Danse Macabre" was inspired by the poem of Henri Cazali, who presented the Dance of Death as occurring on Halloween. Saint-Saens used discord and unusually tuned violins (G,D,A,E<sup>b</sup>, instead of G,D,A,E) to represent the dance. Death's skeleton is represented by the rattling xylophone, and strains of the Dies Irae can be heard through the melody. The piece greatly disturbed its first audience in 1875, but gradually gained such popularity that Saint-Saens rewrote it for two pianos, and Liszt later transcribed it for solo piano (1877), as well as writing his own "Dance of Death" for piano and orchestra in 1855. Mahler's "Das Klagende Lied" (1878-98) is loosely based on the Dance of Death, and also uses the Dies Irae. Glazunov's suite, "The Middle Ages", represents the dance in scherzo form.

A slightly different form of the Dance of Death occurs in the legend of the Tarantella. This is a dance which borrows its name from the seaside town in which it originated -- Taranto, in Apulia, Italy. The tarantula spider (also named after the town) was found in the surrounding countryside, and popular legend had it that its bite would cause a fatal disease unless the victim performed a lively dance, which in itself caused 'tarantism', or dancing mania.

Tarantism has now been repeatedly discredited, and the bite of the spider is only mildly toxic, and certainly not fatal. Most scholars agree that the disease, prevalent from the fifteenth to the seventeenth centuries, was probably due to hysteria. The music for the Tarantelle(a) is a virtuosic showpiece, usually marked 'presto' or 'vivace', normally in 6/8 with regular phrase structure. Composers such as Chopin, Liszt,

Weber, Thalberg and Balakirev have immortalized the dance as a kind of mimed courtship dance, usually performed by one couple surrounded by a circle of others. Castanets and tambourines are held by the dancers, and sometimes the onlookers sing, usually in 3/8 or 6/8, alternating between minor and major mode, usually increasing in speed. Stegemeier makes reference to a "dancing disease" much older than tarantism. He states that "an intense love of life, one aspect of the Middle Ages, degenerated until it became pathologic and finally gave rise to the phenomenon of the Dancing Sickness". He describes this as people being overcome by intense religious passion and dancing until distortion of their bodies occurred. St. Vitus and St. John were their patron saints. This phenomenon is first documented in 1027, and records of a 'dancing mania' date to 1374.11

The idea of the Dance of Death has also influenced many ballets. One of the most famous of these is Giselle. Here is the story of the beautiful peasant girl who is in love with a prince in disguise, who kills herself when she learns of his masquerade. She becomes a 'Wili', and is forced to try to entice him to join the Dance of Death with her -- she succeeds, but dawn breaks just as madness overcomes him. Albrecht, the prince, is saved. Beaumont talks of "a tradition of nocturnal dancing known in Slav countries under the name of will" (1937:161).

While the music of Giselle has little critical acclaim today, one score which is still extremely popular is Stravinsky's "Le Sacre du Printemps". In this ballet the Death theme is once more explored, as the most beautiful virgin is sacrificed to the goddess of Spring by dancing faster and faster in a mad delirium until she finally drops dead of exhaustion.

The story of the "Red Shoes" is another which has interested people for many generations, and once again links the two themes of dancing and death. Hans Christian Andersen's tale revolves around Karen, a poor girl who is given a pair of red shoes made out of scraps of leather by the shoemaker's wife. When her mother dies, Karen wears her only pair of shoes, the red ones, to the churchyard. Spied by a rich old lady, Karen is 'adopted', but her benefactor burns her red shoes and replaces them with a sensible black pair. When she is old enough to attend church with the adults, Karen is given a white dress and taken to the shoemaker's to have a new pair of shoes made. The old lady, nearly blind, does not realise that the pair Karen has chosen are bright red. At church Karen can think of nothing but the red shoes, but when the old lady is informed of their shocking colour, she forbids Karen to wear them any more. The next week Karen debates which shoes to wear and eventually slips the red ones on. Outside the church is an old soldier with a long red beard who is leaning on a crutch. He taps Karen's shoes and



says, "My, what lovely dancing shoes! Stay on tight when you dance". After church, Karen dances a few steps. However, she soon finds she can't stop and goes on dancing over the graves until someone catches her and pulls the shoes off. By and by her guardian falls ill, and soon has not long to live. She asks Karen to stay by her bedside, but Karen has been invited to a ball. She puts her red shoes on and leaves the old lady. She dances all night without a pause, and when the ball is over, she finds she cannot stop dancing. She dances through the town and into the woods, where she sees the old soldier laughing and saying, "My, what lovely dancing shoes! How beautifully you dance!" Karen can never kick off the shoes, and the legend ends with the statement that, "On a clear day, when the sun hangs high and there is not a cloud in the sky, you may yet see her dancing in her red shoes, on and on, forever and ever, over the hills and far away" (Andersen, 1984:270).

As with most fairy tales, this story has strong moral overtones. Both times Karen put her red shoes on in defiance -- and both times their powers overcame her.

This legend links shoes with dancing to death (or in this case, endless dancing -- Karen's death is never actually described) and leads one to a wealth of folklore and superstition concerning shoes. Whilst it would take many volumes to discuss them all, some particularly pertinent beliefs should be mentioned: the still popular tradition of tying shoes to a newly married couple's car has its origins many centuries ago. The Encyclopedia of Superstitions states that "this has variously been explained as a relic of ancient bride-capture and its attendant fight, or as a token of transfer of authority over the bride from her father to her husband" (Hole, 1948:306). It goes on to explain that shoes were often a token of authority, but were also connected to the soul, or 'life essence' of the person to whom they belonged. "Thus, if a man was found murdered, his shoes were sometimes removed to prevent him from walking after death". The encyclopedia cites an 1889 case in Arran, when a murdered man's clothes were produced in court, but no shoes. Upon investigation it emerged that the constable had buried them between high and low water marks on the foreshore of the place where the murder occurred. This was presumably to prevent the ghost haunting the area. In Scotland in the seventeenth century, people were accused of sorcery for acquiring shoes -- the ownership of another person's shoe indicated power over that person.

Another dictionary of folklore (Leach, 1972) describes "dead shoes" -- the shoes provided for the dead in their long journey to the underworld. A traditional Scottish ballad, "The Lyke-Wake Dirge", illustrates the belief that "to give new shoes to a poor

man in life guarantees that at death an old man will meet you with the shoes in his hand, so that you need not walk unshod over the stones and thorns in the path" (Leach, 1972:299). American Black tradition, however, contradicts this. They do not put shoes on their dead (possibly a similar response to the above belief of the dead being able to haunt if their shoes are worn). They also avoid wearing new shoes to the funeral, lest the dead become envious and try to steal them.

The legends surrounding the Dance of Death have changed a great deal over the five hundred or so years they have been circulating. Possibly the original legends generated some of the superstitions involving shoes (and indeed many of the other superstitions we encounter every day). Although there was a shift in interest away from things macabre in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it is obvious from some of the folktales, songs and ballets described above, that the genre pervades our consciousness even at such an obscure level.

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#### NOTES

1. The author does not tell us where this idea exists, but we could safely assume that it has entered general European and New World folklore.
2. The references to Fehse (1907), Hammond (1927), and Douce (1858 -- cited later in connection with the clergy) are given in Whyte (1931:44-47). I do not have access to the primary sources.
3. The warning is the clemency. "Forewarned is forearmed."
4. Hereafter, when 'the dance' is referred to, I mean the Dance of Death because by this time, the Dance of the Dead has been incorporated.
5. Although in this instance (and in others) I impose the masculine gender on Death, it is later pointed out that in the literary sources Death can be male or female. It is an interesting comment on sexual stereotyping that the initial response of most people is to imagine Death as male!
6. The Llibre Vermell is a manuscript collection of songs,

dances and ascetic treatises from the monastery of Montserrat, which includes ten songs. No source has thus far been proposed for the Ad Mortem Festinamus, but three of its nine stanzas also appear in the 1276 Contempus Mundi, and both works have phrases in common with the legend of the Three Living and the Three Dead.

7. "The oldest Dance of Death of which we have dated reproductions and whose date of origin we know is the wall painting on the ossuary of the Cemetery of the Innocents in Paris, executed in 1424-1425" (Stegemeier, 1939:61).
8. Whyte does not supply us with much information about T.A. Sánchez, other than documenting his work, "Colección de poesías, castellanas anteriores al siglo XV", Madrid, 1779-1790.
9. The title of the Catalan version was "Dança de la Mort e de aquelles persones qui mal llur grat ab aquella ballen e dancen".
10. Badajoz, a sixteenth-century Spanish dramatist, wrote several plays based on the theme of the Dance of Death.
11. Even today a disease of the nervous system known as 'St. Vitus Dance' exists. It is thought to occur as part of acute rheumatism and results in constant uncontrolled movements in the hands, arms, feet and face (Gomez, 1970:351).

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