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978-1-107-00383-5 - Living Death in Medieval French and English Literature

Jane Gilbert

Excerpt

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This book is about the ways in which certain medieval literary texts use death, dying and the dead to think about problems relating to life – problems political, social, ethical, philosophical or existential. More specifically, it is about the dynamic interface between life and death and about figures caught at that interface, hence ‘living death’. There are ghosts and revenants who, although dead, actively speak and will, disturbing the properly living. And there are those who while alive exist under a deathly shadow that forecloses their engagement with life and isolates them from their fellows. Vampires, ghosts and zombies are currently fashionable in popular culture; in literary criticism, tropes of the interstitial, the intermediary or the ‘third’ are in vogue. What I have attempted to do in this book is to use some of the latter – in particular, Lacan’s notion of *l’entre-deux-morts* – to think through some medieval examples of phenomena related to the former: dead who return to place demands on the living; living who foresee, organize or desire their own deaths.

## LIFE AND DEATH

Death, dying and the dead, as Lévi-Strauss might have said, are good to think with. But surely this assertion is paradoxical? The modern philosophical tradition with which I engage in this book is shaped by Epicurus’ affirmation that death ‘is nothing to us; since, when we exist, death is not yet present, and when death is present, then we do not exist’.<sup>1</sup> Epicurus’ rhetorical opposition between life and death is reflected in modern rejections of personal immortality in an afterlife; however, his insistence on death’s nothingness for the living is transformed. In a tradition borne most influentially by Hegel and Heidegger, death has become the negative which constitutes humanity as such, distinguishing it from animals on one side and from immortals on the other.<sup>2</sup> Awareness of mortality, of finitude, makes possible that freedom from compulsion which is the highest human

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capacity. Modern life, in Heidegger's phrase, is 'being towards death' where the simple fact that death is nothing to us frees me 'for possibilities before death, my own possibilities, not everyday trivia or the menu offered to me by the They'; this freedom compels me to make my own meaning.<sup>3</sup>

In the Middle Ages, things were different. As regards the dead, first of all. Patrick Geary asks us to imagine a 'movement in support of the dead's rights' parallel to those which today demand 'women's rights, children's rights, minorities' rights, and even animal rights'.<sup>4</sup> Dying is seen as ceasing to be one kind of person and becoming another, significantly altering but by no means destroying social roles and relations. The medieval dead and living had reciprocal obligations and complementary spheres of activity as members of a greater community.<sup>5</sup> Geary relates how the deceased Stephen of Grammont was approached when he failed in his duty to protect the tranquility of his monastery: 'Miracles worked at [Stephen's] tomb resulted in a pilgrimage that threatened the peace and isolation of the community. The prior approached his tomb and solemnly commanded him to cease his miracles, or else, he was told, his body would be disinterred and cast into the nearby river.'<sup>6</sup> Saints formed a special case in several ways, but the ordinary dead also retained a social role safeguarding the communities and places in which they found themselves and shielding those who were special to them. These might be the communities, places and people they knew when alive, or equally those among whom they found themselves when dead. In return, the living owed them reverence, commemoration and the prayers which might advance their souls through purgatorial pains.

Most dead persons remained quietly in their place. Those who rose from the grave in dreams, visions, apparitions or even vivid memories did so to intervene in the existence of the living and in this sense were troubled and troublesome even where their intervention was appreciated, and much more so when not. Schmitt relates the case of the knight's son who inherits his dead father's profits from usury. One night the deceased comes calling to reclaim his goods. Since the son refuses to open the door, the spirit eventually goes away, leaving behind him a gift of fish. Come the dawn, the young man finds instead toads and snakes, 'hellish food cooked in the sulphurous fire' according to Caesarius of Heisterbach, who recounts this *exemplum*. Schmitt comments:

The intense ambivalence of these gifts and of this revenant who offers, in the guise of fish, hell's deadly fare – symbol of the ill-gotten inheritance – equals the son's ambivalence towards his father. Only too happy to accept the inheritance, he does

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not want to know its origin, just as he refuses to recognize his father and open the door to him. The repressed returns in the figure of the father, whose hammering on the door expresses metaphorically – even the *exemplum*'s vocabulary recalls it (*fortiter pulsans*) – Freud's 'repetition compulsion', so characteristic of ghost stories.<sup>7</sup>

The obvious enforcing of social and ethical order in this tale does not prevent the dead man from appearing unusual and disturbing; even when playing their proper role by warning or advising, revenants depart from the norm for death. Others are deliberately obstreperous and obstructive. Welcome or unwelcome, the dead possess authority, agency and urgency; they threaten the living, making explicit or implicit demands or heralding imminent demise. Death in this perspective, then, is very much something to medieval people.

Relations between life and death were also different in the Middle Ages, and most intimate in Christianity. 'You have filled the whole world with tombs and sepulchres', Julian the Apostate complained, protesting against such Christian practices as the cult of bodily relics and the location of burial spaces within inhabited areas.<sup>8</sup> From the earliest period onwards, Christian writings play on the opposition between 'life' and 'death' in such a way as to make the two share quarters. Innocent III's influential *De miseria condicionis humane* [*De contemptu mundi*] illustrates the characteristic ideas and the biblically grounded rhetoric that mingles while it divides:

We are therefore always dying while we live, and we only stop dying at such time as we stop living. It is better to die for life than to live for death, because mortal life is nothing but a living death. Solomon: 'I praised the dead rather than the living, and I judged him happier in both ways that is not yet born.'<sup>9</sup>

Life in the body is a long process of dying that begins with conception and ends only with death's consummation. Metaphorical uses of the terms as well as massive emphasis on the afterlife add to the complexity.<sup>10</sup> Earthly life is not only a shadow of the life to come, it is very much more deathly than the post-mortem condition enjoyed by the blessed. In an extremist but recurrent Christian tradition championed by St Paul, corporeal and spiritual life are placed in inverse relation: 'God's ecstasy-in-Incarnation, his leaping down from heaven, demonstrates once and for all that self-preservation leads to death, while self-oblation leads to eternal life.'<sup>11</sup> In this way of thinking, life in the material body is an ethical concept:

The gospel message of life through self-oblation and sacrificial death cuts clean through the assumptions of the present age. The world lives by the law of the flesh and strives wherever possible to consolidate self. The world believes that power and

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glory come through calculating self-preservation. The world can make no sense of the word of the cross, of Christ-wisdom-crucified, and so regards it as 'insanity' (*mōría*, 1 Cor. 1: 18ff.).<sup>12</sup>

By aiming to minimize as far as possible the impulses of the flesh and the importance of its various conditions, including its demise, the ascetic attempts to die to sin and to the flesh and thus to actualize the life of the spirit on earth.

Conversely, pursuing the life of the flesh leads to, and indeed constitutes, the death of the soul. The damned are condemned to what is sometimes referred to as a 'second death' (the phrase derives from St John's Apocalypse) whose magnitude dwarfs that undergone on earth (and note that the first death is envisaged for most Christians as a physically painful and spiritually trying experience).<sup>13</sup> Although in early Christianity the second death which was the fate of non-Christians may arguably have been envisaged as simple ceasing to be, by the period with which I am concerned damnation, for Christians and others, had become an eternity of torment actively suffered by a conscious, sentient being whose awareness formed an essential element of his torture. From this perspective there is no final cessation of or for the spirit, hence in one important sense no death. Spiritual 'death' is rather a kind of negative life, characterized by duration, existence, consciousness and intensity.<sup>14</sup> Death is thus everything to us.

If damnation may be taken to be an important notion in the minds of medieval people, it by no means dominates medieval literature in French and English. Issues of salvation, and the extremist ideology according to which worldly life equates to spiritual death, govern only one of the texts I foreground, the Middle English *Pearl*, and even there it is put into question. Among the other texts I discuss, secular concerns predominate in relation to mortality and immortality, questions of fame, influence and potency in this world. This is a function not only of my own literary preferences but in part also of ideas of what constitutes 'literature'; modern literary studies often pays scant attention to the vast body of medieval theological, devotional or simply pious writing. (I am not the critic to redress this imbalance, which is more marked in French than in English studies, in part due to the nature of the extant material.) On the other hand, while the latter massively outnumber those works that qualify today as literary, it cannot claim to define medieval culture as a whole. The writers whose works are discussed in this book inevitably belong to educated cultural elites (which may coincide with a socially marginal position, as famously in Villon's case, or to a much lesser degree in the self-presentations of Chaucer or the *Pearl*-poet; marginality is a feature of late medieval poetics). Their

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audiences, insofar as we can recover information about them, are more diverse, and usually not identical socially or culturally to the writers, even where there is substantial crossover. But it is evident that both writers and audiences availed themselves of a variety of discourses. The names by which medievalists refer to these discourses depend on the contexts within which they have come to critical attention: genres such as romance, epic or fabliau; social milieux such as courtly, chivalric, clerical or vulgar; intellectual distinctions such as learned or popular; moral attitudes such as pious, secular or irreverent. Most medieval poets for whom we can identify an oeuvre show (display, even) a range of formal, rhetorical and ideological modes. Those who are sometimes pious are not always, only or uniformly pious. A single writer may use themes relating to death in ways which imply quite divergent views on the philosophical, social or literary issues involved. While numerous aspects of medieval thinking in relation to death, dying and the dead are foreign to modern Western subjects, many others are familiar, including the ability to hold or at least express contradictory opinions on those subjects. In this book I have not attempted a cultural history of the medieval 'way of death';<sup>15</sup> my field is literary criticism, my subject the ways in which certain *topoi* are exploited in particular literary texts.

Fine recent work has been done on the themes of death, suicide and sacrifice in medieval literature; however, my subject is different.<sup>16</sup> I have selected my texts to fulfil a number of criteria. Each foregrounds the shifting frontier between life and death, and shows human subjects and cultural systems confronting that problematic division. All are particularly embedded in medieval networks of reading and writing. All are notably high quality; almost all enjoy canonical status today. Widely studied and researched, they influence modern academic perceptions of medieval literary norms and therefore provide excellent places from which to re-examine such perceptions. One of my aims has been to investigate whether and how these important French and English literary works can be said to be normative.<sup>17</sup> I argue that the works analysed in this book deploy the ideas of death's presence in life and life's in death in such a way as to place in suspension or abeyance certain expectations, rules and ideals of what they represent as everyday life. These norms are thereby extracted from the ideological or customary contexts which give them meaning, force and vigour, to be examined from new and disorienting perspectives. It is therefore important to appreciate that the figures and situations through which this examination takes place are not themselves in conflict with normal expectations; the literary texts work to make cultures strange to themselves

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by highlighting problematic aspects of normal practice, whether 'normal' is taken to mean banal or ideal. The living dead present an ethical challenge to the ordinarily living.

I have sought meaningful representation rather than exhaustive coverage. The first three chapters, which focus on masculinity, encompass works from different genres and periods in the long development of medieval literature in French, from early *chanson de geste* (the *Chanson de Roland*) through mid-period Arthurian prose romance (the non-cyclic prose *Lancelot do Lac*) to late ballades by Deschamps and Villon, in the latter's case set into a satirical mock-will. In English I have concentrated on the flowering of high literary discourse under Richard II. The final two chapters develop the analysis of idealized femininity begun in relation to Villon's ladies, in Middle English poems mourning dead females: *Pearl*, read in relation to Middle French marguerite poetry in Chapter 4; Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess* and Prologue to the *Legend of Good Women* in Chapter 5. In discussing these English-language texts in the context of French-language ones I place them in one proper context. Such Ricardian works belong to a period and milieu in which English literature enjoyed an especially close and well-documented association with French, exemplified here by the use of French models and the adaptation of continental poetic practices and projects to insular media.<sup>18</sup> These poems therefore form a privileged site for comparative study.

## ENTRE-DEUX-MORTS

Central to my project is the distinction between corporeal death and what may be called 'symbolic' death, by which I mean the community's formal recognition of a person as dead. Symbolic death may follow bodily death, as in the funeral or the memorial ceremony. Symbolic may also precede corporeal death, as when such phenomena as religious commitment or mental illness make a person 'dead to the world'.<sup>19</sup> A different understanding of non-corporeal death might be termed 'subjective', referring to subjects' sense of being set on an inevitable course towards death, and attending to the ways in which that awareness affects their engagement with life. Symbolic and subjective deaths refer respectively to collective and individual aspects of human experience; although I would not wish to lose sight of the distinction completely, these two aspects interpenetrate. All death is importantly subjective until formally ratified by the collective (though it may be objective enough in the criteria it relies on to determine the extinction of life). Similarly, a particular subject's sense of

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being effectively already dead ('effectively' invites exploration) necessarily refers to the wider social order with its norms of life and death – what characterizes life and death, how they are to be recognized, accessed and organized.

The condition of those whose subjective or symbolic deaths seem to have come adrift from bodily death, I shall term *entre-deux-morts* or 'between-two-deaths': 'mort empiétant sur le domaine de la vie, vie empiétant sur la mort' ('death encroaching on the domain of life, life encroaching on death', my translation).<sup>20</sup> These much-discussed expressions, drawn from psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan's Seminar VII of 1959–60 on the ethics of psychoanalysis, have been widely used in modern literary studies where they are understood in varied ways, therefore any use requires explication and particularization. Before embarking on a preliminary overview, I emphasize that my use of Lacan does not entail rigorously Lacanian analyses of the medieval texts, for two reasons. In the first place, I treat Seminar VII here not as the exposition of a system but as a complex text: fragmentary, teasing, elusive, its constituent parts suggesting divergent, sometimes contradictory directions of inquiry. My chapters take this heterogeneous text as a starting point in order to develop different directions in relation to the medieval material. If my theoretical expositions are sometimes pedagogical in tone, it is not because I wish to restrict my readers' responses but rather, by clarifying the ideas, assumptions and logical steps that guide my arguments, to invite critical engagement with those arguments. In the second place, I explore alternative explanations of similar phenomena, with a view to contextualizing and thus reconceptualizing Lacan's account (the distinction between 'symbolic' and 'subjective' death is not Lacanian, for instance). Different chapters highlight different aspects of and approaches to these phenomena, dialoguing around their common theme of death's overlap with life and its ethical and political effects. I have drawn in my analyses on Freudian psychoanalysis for its accounts of the death drive, mourning and repetition; on (post)structuralist phenomenology and rhetorical theory for their challenges to human subjectivity; on gender studies and queer theory for their critiques of the famously contentious psychoanalytical accounts of gender and sexuality; and on anthropological discussions of burial and memorialization practices in different cultures. Each chapter can be read independently, but the approaches and questions treated in any one chapter will enrich those discussed in others, material from Lacan's Seminar VII providing both continuity and variety.

Unlike many theoretical medievalists, I do not justify my practice by appealing to continuities between medieval and modern culture; though



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it never fails to surprise me how many points of contact there are. It not infrequently seems, to adapt Slavoj Žižek's *jeu d'esprit*, that medieval writers have read Lacan; conversely Lacan, like some other thinkers, at times appears to be more in sympathy with medieval writers than with modern readers. This enjoyable illusion is not the basis of my method, however. I subscribe to the principle of ethnographic study according to which the explanatory model employed in the analysis should not be internal to the culture being analysed. Deploying modern critical theory in juxtaposition with medieval texts avoids the circularity risked by, for instance, reading in the light of Lacan's writings modern writers themselves influenced by having read those writings. The model of the medievalist as anthropologist has been influentially disputed, embraced by R. Howard Bloch and rejected by Sarah Kay, who points out that the past is not, in fact, a foreign country and cannot be visited by participant-observers.<sup>21</sup> I defend the model on three counts. In the first place, the impossibility of inhabiting the medieval world fully is a positive condition of medievalist study insofar as it aids the critical distance essential to insightful analysis. In the second, although many ethnographers participate in the living cultures they study in a way strictly impossible to modern literary medievalists, we can, by our practices of reading and research, aim to enter sympathetically and imaginatively into the ethos of the literary works we read. The imaginary is a valid heuristic tool and dimension of knowledge, though naturally scholarly observation and analysis also require drawing on documented external sources. Finally, an equally vital element in the ethnographic investigative model is the principle that investigators should not only refer to explanatory terms familiar from their own cultures, but should adapt those and formulate new ones as the material requires; thus the encounter between cultures, *entre-deux*, ideally generates both the analysis and its terms, and provides a new perspective on the analyst's original as well as target culture.<sup>22</sup> This goal of conceptual innovation, its purpose to discover more about medieval cultures than can be supplied by the terms within which modern cultures predominantly think about themselves or about more familiar others, is shared by many medievalists of both 'theoretical' and 'non-theoretical' persuasions. In pursuit of this innovation, critical theory (which may more helpfully be considered philosophy employed in the practical context of the study of literary and other cultural artefacts) stimulates by its bold questioning of modern mindsets and by the creative tensions which arise from placing its determined modernity and avant-gardism into dynamic interaction with a serious effort to imagine and to inquire into the past. My use of theory, therefore, aims to open up new questions, to find new



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angles on old ones, and to test contemporary ideas against other kinds of evidence.

## DEATH AND THE WORK OF ART

For Lacan, as for many thinkers influential in recent times, death is the negation of existence. It is one manifestation of what he calls the Real: those aspects of human life that cannot be mastered because they defy symbolization (which may be glossed as the process of translation into one of the many artificial patterned and structured communicative forms which make up human reality).<sup>23</sup> Lacan, again like others, does not consider death's nothingness as one among a number of historical and philosophical responses to a perennial existential crisis facing human beings but as an ontological reality – the crisis itself.

Although death in its Real dimension can never be tamed (*pace* Ariès, whose influential cultural history *The Hour of Our Death* entitles its opening, medieval chapter, 'The Tame Death'), this does not mean that it has no impact on human life. On the contrary, the unassimilable trauma of the Real stimulates endless responses, which show the futility of efforts to tame it. Thus the Real lies at the heart of human culture, even though that culture by definition excludes it. Lacan distinguishes two other registers within cultural and psychic experience: the imaginary and the symbolic. However distinct in theory, these registers nevertheless intertwine in complex ways. Any attempt to represent death figuratively involves the imaginary, 'the realm of image and imagination, deception and lure', whose 'principal illusions . . . are those of wholeness, synthesis autonomy, duality and, above all, similarity'.<sup>24</sup> Visual examples can include the *transi* or decaying corpse of late medieval tomb-sculpture; the skeleton representing death or the dead person; the soul going to heaven or hell, and indeed the characteristic rewards and punishments of the afterlife. Dying may be conceived, under its imaginary aspect, as reunion and return, as the recovery of loss and the end of lack, as ultimate fulfilment and peace. Hence the blessed expect repose in Abraham's bosom and everlasting bliss in the presence of the Lord. For the wicked, death brings a painful and humiliating dismantling: dismemberment, impalement, suffocating, burning, violation, explosion, turbulent and uncontrolled movement – a permanent process of dying which never achieves its final denouement (this providing its principal distinction from purgatorial regimes).<sup>25</sup> Since the symbolic aspect relates to social, political, cultural and linguistic order as systems abstracted from content or actual realization (which belong to the imaginary), symbolic

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death concerns whether or not someone is considered to exist as a person. There is a potential confusion here. On the one hand, 'symbolic death' can refer to the rites by which a person moves from the society of the living to that of the dead, a process which keeps that person within society's remit. Thus medieval anchorites, officially dead to secular society, were empowered by their unworldly position to exercise in some cases considerable political influence.<sup>26</sup> Even marginal categories such as the mad or the leprous – made up of subjects incapable of fulfilling their proper social roles – have a place: as to receive charity or to remind the more fortunate to be humble; or to criticize and thus improve the social order, like the unquiet dead. On the other hand, there is a more radical sense, in which death under its symbolic aspect appears as non-personhood, manifested either by social placelessness (the Wandering Jew, the Flying Dutchman) or conversely by too-perfect assimilation of, or into, the symbolic order. Fantasy figures corresponding to this latter condition include the living doll, the zombie, and figures of possession or hollowness, the apparently human shell animated by a non-human, automatic force. Metaphors rather than figurations of death, these figures refer to the symbolic, structural aspects of death (though clearly they also have imaginary aspects).

If death in its Real aspect resists symbolization absolutely, nevertheless Lacan argues that imaginary and symbolic responses to death can conjure up a sense of the Real. He considers this to be the special vocation of art, explaining via an elaboration of that classic metaphor of creation and paternity, the pot.<sup>27</sup> Considered from one point of view, a pot is a container for some substance, such as water, and is therefore logically secondary to the thing it contains. Viewed in another perspective, however, a pot gives shape to the emptiness within it prior to any filling. Thanks to the pot – and beyond it, to the potter – this emptiness acquires a kind of presence, coming into conceptual being as a void; which then cries out to be filled. We may choose to fill it with God the Potter or with some other transcendent stabilizer of meaning; however, for Lacan (as for many other thinkers) the mystery is final. The void thus produced is not the Real, but is a response to and place-holder for it, and genuinely if inadequately communicates a sense of its alterity. Thus the void dwarfs the artefact that projects it. Lacan insists on the heroism of human making: when the potter creates the pot he introduces into the world a no-thing (the void) which is man-made yet beyond making, indicative of the threatening, creative emptiness of the cosmos, and dwarfs into insignificance any human effort within that vast context. Our response to this *au-delà* ('beyond') will be one of awe and horror, in various measures. Lacan emphasizes that such images as the pot