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

Jane Gilbert

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## LIVING DEATH IN MEDIEVAL FRENCH AND ENGLISH LITERATURE

Medieval literature contains many figures caught at the interface between life and death – the dead return to place demands on the living, while the living foresee, organize or desire their own deaths. Jane Gilbert's original study examines the ways in which certain medieval literary texts, both English and French, use these 'living dead' to think about existential, ethical and political issues. In doing so, she shows powerful connections between works otherwise seen as quite disparate, including Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess* and *Legend of Good Women*, the *Chanson de Roland* and the poems of François Villon.

Written for researchers and advanced students of medieval French and English literature, this book provides original, provocative interpretations of canonical medieval texts in the light of influential modern theories, especially Lacanian psychoanalysis, presented in an accessible and lively way.

JANE GILBERT is Senior Lecturer in French at University College London.

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When the princess Melisande was born, her mother, the queen, wished to have a christening party, but the king put his foot down and said he would not have it.

‘I’ve seen too much trouble come of christening parties,’ said he. ‘However carefully you keep your visiting book, some fairy or other is sure to get left out, and you know what *that* leads to . . . I’ll be her godfather, and you shall be her godmother, and we won’t ask a single fairy; then none of them can be offended.’

‘Unless they all are,’ said the Queen. (Nesbit, ‘Melisande’, pp. 161–2)

Unlike Melisande’s parents, I have not been able to resist at least a small party. Mistrusting my memory, I can only beg the pardon of those I omit, for so many people have contributed to this book over a long period that I cannot possibly name all. Although I have distinguished between the kinds of support for which I am grateful – emotional, intellectual, professional – I have of course benefited from more than one of these in most cases.

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My family has been living with this book for as long as I have. It has impinged on some more than others. My husband Dan Elliott, my children Sam and Nanon, and my mother Norma, have borne much; but my father, Malcolm, has borne most, as reader, editor and interlocutor. His only fault has been that his commitment to understanding my prose exceeds what anyone not related to me is ever likely to share. It is to him that I dedicate this book.

Melisande, by the way, grew up bald; all the fairies were offended.

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An earlier version of Chapter 5 appeared in Nicola F. McDonald and W. M. Ormrod (eds.), *Rites of Passage: Cultures of Transition in the Fourteenth Century* (York Medieval Press; Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2004), pp. 109–29 (reproduced by kind permission of Boydell and Brewer).

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## *Note on translations*

Throughout this book I have provided translations of medieval works. For modern secondary material in French, I have given English translations alone where I judge that the original wording is not significant to my argument. Translations are reproduced or silently adapted from published translations where available, as referenced; other translations are my own.