

## the gender of death a cultural history in art and literature

Why is it that in some cultures and times, literature, folklore, and art commonly represent death as a man, in others as a woman?

Karl S. Guthke shows that these choices, which often contradict the grammatical gender of the word “death” in the language concerned, are neither arbitrary nor accidental. In earlier centuries, the gender of the figure of death contributed to the interpretation of biblical narrative – in particular, whether original sin was that of Adam or Eve; it related to concepts of the devil and also reflected the importance of the classical figure of Thanatos. More recently, the gender of death as angel, lover, or bride – whether terrifying or welcome – has carried powerful psychological and social connotations. Tracing the gender of representations of death in art and literature from medieval times to the present day, Guthke offers astonishing new insights into the nature and perception of the Western self in its cultural, intellectual, and literary context.

Karl S. Guthke is Kuno Francke Professor of German Art and Culture at Harvard University. He is the author of a wide range of books on German and West European and English literature and culture, among them *Modern Tragicomedy* (1966), *The Last Frontier* (1990), *B. Traven: The Life Behind the Legends* (1991), *Last Words* (1992), and *Trails in No-Man's Land* (1993).



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karl s. guthke



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To talk at all interestingly about death is inevitably to talk about life.

d.j.enright *The Oxford Book of Death*

It is our conception of death which decides our answers to all  
the questions that life puts to us.

dag hammarskjöld *Markings*



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*The Gender of Death* is my own version (with some additions, deletions, and corrections) of *Ist der Tod eine Frau?* (Munich: Beck, 1997; 2nd edn. 1998). I am deeply indebted to Robert Sprung for devoting many hours of his busy life to reviewing my text with his unfailing eye for stylistic infelicities.

The argument was fine-tuned here and there and accommodated to the interests of English-speaking readers by greater reliance on examples from the arts and literatures of the Anglo-Saxon world as well as by occasional modifications of my commentary. Unless indicated otherwise, English renderings of quotations are my own; I have no fear that my translations of poetry will be thought to imply any poetic ambitions. In many cases there is no standard English title of a work of literary or pictorial art originating outside the English-speaking world; this should be no problem, however, as the notes invariably (even when an illustration is provided) refer the reader to illustrations and further discussion, wherever possible in English-language publications, though the German catalogue of the Düsseldorf collection, Eva Schuster's

## acknowledgments

*Mensch und Tod* (Düsseldorf: Trittsch, 1989), remains the most indispensable handbook in this field. In providing foreign language titles and/or English equivalents, I have been guided by common sense, adding or omitting translations or original titles with a view to what most readers would find necessary or desirable. (So I refer simply to the *Aeneid* on the one hand, and to Malraux's *Antimémoires*, on the other; in the overwhelming number of cases, both original title and English translation are given.) The period labels of the individual chapters are flags of convenience; thus, for better or probably worse, "The Romantic Age" includes the later eighteenth-century Enlightenment as well as the Classical Revival around 1800.

Speakers of English will take it for granted that the Grim Reaper is male, but, then, they are apparently not expected to be taken aback when, in the *Times Literary Supplement* of August 14, 1998, they come across a poem by Edwin Morgan which quite matter-of-factly casts Death in the role of a ghastly "she." Or are they?

Interest in the subject of this essay seems esoteric until one discovers that it is universal – which might explain why it has never resulted in a book-length study, or why, perhaps, it shouldn't be taken to such an extreme. Be this as it may, I was not disconcerted to find out that even British TV culture has been infested by the "bug." One fine day on ITV (on July 9, 1997 at 8 p.m., to be scholarly about it), Inspector Morse got into a mildly philosophical discussion of death with the usual suspects; one of them, a young woman disappointed in matters of the heart, offered the opinion that Death is a "he" because all things "ugly" are male, while all things beautiful are female. She turned out to be innocent of murder, but not of oversimplification.

# 1

## imagining the unimaginable: death personified

IS DEATH A WOMAN?

Why is the Grim Reaper a man? True, the noun ending would theoretically allow us to visualize the reaper as a woman as well, but we don't. German word formation is more explicit: "There is a reaper, Death by name," the folksong has it – "ein Schnitter," not "eine Schnitterin." Yet the female reaper is not at all uncommon in the art and literature of the French-, Spanish-, and Italian-speaking countries, ranging all the way from the late medieval fresco in the Campo Santo in Pisa, via an anonymous seventeenth-century Italian etching of a woman wielding a scythe, through Félicien Rops's "Mors syphilitica" and a Spanish broadside from the early twentieth century.<sup>1</sup> Why is it "Mister Death" in E. E. Cummings's poem "Buffalo Bill's Defunct," but "Madame Lamort" in Rilke's fifth *Duino Elegy*, or, for that matter, in Rachilde's play *Madame La Mort* at the turn of the century? Why is Death "Freund Hein" (friend Henry) in the popular parlance of the German-speaking countries, but "La tía Sebastiana" (aunt Sebastiana) in the folklore of Mexico?

In some cultures – Spanish, French, and Polish, for example – art, literature, and conventional thought almost regularly personify death as a woman: beautiful or ugly, old or young, motherly, seductive, or dangerous. In others – English and German, for instance – Death more often than not appears as a man, and again in a large number of variations: violent or friendly, inexorable or weak, horrifying or alluring. But in both sets of cultures there are significant, substantive exceptions, real alterna-

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tives such as the “Schnitterin” in German, for example, that occurs at the end of Sacher-Masoch’s short novel *Raphael the Jew* (*Der Judenraphael*), and the (male) reaper (“segador”) in *Don Quixote* (pt. 2, ch. 20).

Or *are* they exceptions? The “exceptions” and the “rule” reflect rivaling conventions of the imagination which are arguably of anthropological interest. How do we account for this twofold discrepancy – between cultures and within a given culture? What does this twofold image-making, this visualizing of death as a man and as a woman, as this *kind* of man and that *kind* of woman, tell us, if not about “human nature,” then at least about creative individuals and their historical and cultural milieu? In what follows, a wealth of “cases” from the Middle Ages to the present will be examined with a view to discovering the meaning of such questions and, with luck, some insight into the multiform functioning of the literary and artistic imagination in its various cultural, intellectual, and historical contexts.

### I

Image-making is one of those urges that define humans. The fact that some religions try to curb it only shows that it is basic to our orientation in the world. This urge to make an image is activated most dramatically whenever we experience situations that baffle or overwhelm us because familiar patterns of thought cannot cope with them, cannot give them shape and order that make them familiar. Death is such an experience – our own death and that of others. Neither the sun nor death can be looked in the eye, says one of La Rochefoucauld’s *Maximes* (Nr. 26: “Le soleil ni la mort se peuvent regarder fixement”).

But that is only a half-truth. The theologian’s or the philosopher’s conclusion that death is imageless and therefore cannot be visualized as a person is not really tenable, as every historian knows.<sup>2</sup> It is refuted time and again by the imaginative and sometimes very concrete representations of the imageless that abound in art and in literature and indeed in language. Imagination, being the elementary urge to visualize, does not stop short of the “unimaginable.” It gives shape to the shapeless by approximating it to the familiar, thereby endowing it with meaning. At the border of intelligibility, the imagination, according to Goethe’s observation about the nature of the symbol,<sup>3</sup> transforms the unin-

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telligible into an image that clarifies, elucidates, and thereby renders accessible to understanding what seemed to elude it. The German dramatist Gerhart Hauptmann sketched this process in poetic language, and with a faint touch of Jungian psychology, in his play *The White Savior* (*Der weiße Heiland*):

All believe what I declare,  
If not all, at least, the many:  
Yet what we know is but little.  
We stand at all knowing's frontiers,  
And we gaze with pious eyes,  
As 'twere from a little islet,  
Deep into the first sea's night.  
That is more than knowledge, brothers.  
For now faces rise before us,  
Images fearful and sublime, –  
Rise out of our very self.  
And the ancient peak of knowledge  
Seems to open out in silence,  
And from its abyss of fire  
It spouts o'er us the sacred flames.

Manche glauben, was wir wissen,  
sei das meiste, wenn nicht alles,  
und doch ist's das ganz Geringe.  
Stehn wir an des Wissens Grenze,  
blicken wir mit Götteraugen  
wie von einer schmalen Insel  
in des Urmeers Nacht hinein.  
Das ist mehr als alles Wissen.  
Denn dann heben sich Gesichte,  
Bilder, furchtbar und erhaben,  
aus dem eignen Selbst empor.  
Und der alte Berg der Rede  
scheint sich lautlos aufzuschließen  
und aus seinem Feuerabgrund  
heiliges Leuchten auszuspein.<sup>4</sup>

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“Strange are these creatures, strange indeed, / Who what’s unfathomable, fathom,”<sup>5</sup> Hofmannsthal might have objected: isn’t this an all-too-human escape into myth and illusion? And yet it is more and something quite different. For, to return to La Rochefoucauld’s metaphor, an image produced in this manner can be looked in the eye; it can be given a name that creates distance, orientation, understanding. What seemed overwhelming in its namelessness and unimaginability has been “domesticated” through interpretation.

In this manner, death, too, rather than remaining shapeless and chaotically threatening, is made concrete and visible by our creative imagination. Such image-making, such interpretation through personification, occurs on all levels of consciousness, in all cultures, in all times that have left records. Many mythologies, including the fall of Adam and Eve that brought death into the world, all but define humans by their knowledge of death, their awareness that they are destined to die. Where there is life, there is its opposite, demarcating the border that circumscribes and, literally, defines it. Thus every reflection about human nature must begin with the end of life. “La mort c’est encore elle seule, qu’il faut consulter sur la vie” – this quotation from Marie Lenéru’s play *The Liberated* (*Les Affranchis*, 1911) opens Maeterlinck’s ruminations on *La Mort* (1913) – it is death alone that one should ask about life. To speak about life and its possible significance is to speak about death: about our image of death, since we define and understand and shape our life with a view to its ultimate “other.” “No doubt every civilization,” André Malraux remarked in his *Antimémoires* (1967), “is haunted, visibly or invisibly, by what it thinks about death.”<sup>6</sup> Quite apart from all philosophy in the narrower sense (which, to be sure, Montaigne understood to be a matter of teaching how to die and, therefore, to live),<sup>7</sup> what we “think” about death emerges in the image we form of death as the radical opposite of our being and hence the focal point of our search for ourselves.

No single image can capture death in all its allure and horror.<sup>8</sup> Not surprisingly, not one but *many* images come to mind spontaneously or with some reflexion. Mythologies, folklore, religions, turns of phrase, art and literature, and even our daily lives are full of such visually realized or realizable personifications of that which is largely taboo in industrialized societies today – unthinkable and therefore unimaginable. The most



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familiar is perhaps the Grim Reaper with his sickle; he makes his appearance early, in the Hebrew Bible (Job 5:26; Jer. 9:21), and again in the Revelation of St. John (14:15–16) but also in the German folksong and hymn mentioned above, “Es ist ein Schnitter, der heißt Tod.” Longfellow features him in a much-quoted line of his poem “The Reaper and the Flowers” (1839): “There is a Reaper whose name is Death.” The skeleton with the hourglass comes to mind just as easily. Equally commonplace in the eighteenth century was Thanatos, twin brother of Hypnos, god of sleep, familiar from the Sarpedon episode in the *Iliad* (xvi, 688 ff.) or the *Aeneid* (vi, 278); in visual art he appears as a youth with a torch turned to the ground, as in Jean Simon Berthélemy’s painting “Apollon et Sarpédon” (1781)<sup>9</sup> or any number of statues and reliefs in our cemeteries. The rider on the pale horse, from Revelation 6:8, has become a household image as well, not least through Dürer’s woodcut of the four apocalyptic horsemen. Akin to the rider is Death the hunter – with a lasso in Egyptian mythology,<sup>10</sup> with a sling and a rope in the Bible (2 Sam. 22:6; Ps. 116:3), with bow and arrow everywhere: in the folksong “The Old Archer, Death by Name” (Der alte Schütz, der Tod genannt), in a woodcut in an early edition of *The Plowman from Bohemia* (*Der Ackermann aus Böhmen*, Bamberg: Pfister, 1461), and in many paintings and graphics of the Renaissance, inspired to some extent, no doubt, by the apocalyptic horseman (Rev. 6:2).<sup>11</sup> As late as the seventeenth century William Drummond of Hawthornden chose Death the hunter as *the* allegory of human life: “This world a Hunting is, / The pray, poore Man, the Nimrod fierce is Death.”<sup>12</sup>

This series of death images can easily be continued. The biblical angel of death as the messenger of God may come to mind, as may “King Death” of the Middle Ages (with its faint echo in Dürer’s 1505 charcoal drawing of the crowned skeleton riding, scythe in hand, on an emaciated nag [see below, p. 88] and even in Shelley’s *Adonais* [vii: “kingly Death”]). Death has also made an appearance as dancer, judge, or bailiff (Hamlet’s “fell sergeant” [v, 2]), as grave-digger, gardener, and fisherman or fowler with his net (Eccl. 9:12 and still a powerful image in J. R. Schellenberg’s Dance of Death *Freund Heins Erscheinungen in Holbeins Manier* of 1785, where, in the copper engraving “Love Disturbed,” the skeleton sets up his net for the lovers). Other commonplace personifications include Death as fiddler in the Dances of Death of the early modern

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period, as treecutter or forester, as army commander or general (as in the German folksong “Der Tod reit’ oft als General”)<sup>13</sup> or simply as warrior or mercenary with spear or lance. Peculiar to the German-speaking countries is the proverbial “Freund Hein” or “Hain” who became widely known through Matthias Claudius’s dedication of this collected works (1775) to the “boneman” featured in the frontispiece (“a good sort”). The Dutch equivalent is “de magere Hein” (apparently undermining the widespread assumption that Claudius immortalized his physician, Dr. Anton Hein of Hamburg, in his “Freund Hain”).<sup>14</sup> A similar personification that may be remembered in this context is “Godfather Death” (Gevatter Tod) of the Grimms’ and Ludwig Bechstein’s fairy-tales, a death figure, incidentally, that re-emerged in Indian garb in B. Traven’s adaptation of a Mexican folktale, *Macario* (1950).

Death the lover is an even more common motif the world over. It gained unprecedented popularity with Gottfried August Bürger’s horror ballad “Lenore” (1773) and with Schubert’s setting of Matthias Claudius’s poem “Death and the Maiden” (Der Tod und das Mädchen, 1824) and it was still going strong in Hofmannsthal’s poem on the transience of beauty (“Vergänglichkeit der Schönheit”).<sup>15</sup> It had in fact been current as early as the sixteenth century in the crassly sexual variations introduced by Niklaus Manuel, Hans Sebald Beham, and Hans Baldung Grien. The motif lends itself to a whole range of emotions: Death may be the terrifying seducer as in Baldung Grien’s paintings, or a “friendly” savior as in Claudius’s verses; he may be the fervently desired bridegroom of the soul as in Schiller’s *Intrigue and Love* (*Kabale und Liebe*, act v, sc. 1); he may be the lover whose sexual advances are explicitly welcomed as in Edvard Munch’s etching “The Maiden and Death” (Pigen og døden, 1894), or he may be the elegant and gallant heart-throb of Ferdinand Barth’s lithograph “Death and Young Woman” in his Dance of Death sequence entitled, oddly, *Death at Work* (*Die Arbeit des Todes*, 1867). In the Age of Reason, Death the lover may even be trivialized in pure rococo manner, as in Gleim’s “To Death” (An den Tod) in his *Versuch in scherzhaften Liedern* (1744):

Death, can you fall in love, too?  
Why, then, are you fetching my girl? . . .  
Death, what are you going to do to my girl?

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With teeth and no lips  
You cannot kiss her, can you?  
Tod, kannst du dich auch verlieben?  
Warum holst du denn mein Mädchen? . . .  
Tod! was willst du mit dem Mädchen?  
Mit den Zähnen ohne Lippen  
Kannst du es ja doch nicht küssen.

In Herder's poem "Death: A Dialogue at Lessing's Grave" (*Der Tod: Ein Gespräch an Lessings Grabe*, 1785) the classical Thanatos figure actually becomes Love personified: "Heavenly youth, why are you standing here? Your smoldering torch, turned earthward . . . / Are you Amor? – / I am!"<sup>16</sup>

It would not be difficult to add to this list many more images of death from literature, the arts, and film, images which vary the conventional or traditional notions in an often highly original manner without, however, offering a new paradigm.

All of these personifications, in spite of their differences, visualize death not as an animal or half-animal being or a monstrous demon (death personifications not unknown in mythology) but as a human figure, more exactly: a male figure. "And come he slow, or come he fast, / It is but Death who comes at last" (Scott, *Marmion*, II, 30). Likewise, Longfellow's reaper "with his sickle keen, / He reaps the bearded grain." Death is the male, not the female reaper, the man, not the woman with the scythe, the male, not the female skeleton. Folksongs, both English and German, present Death as a man – powerful, terrifying, grim, and inexorable.<sup>17</sup> In German and in French "leaving for the grand army" is, or used to be, a euphemism for dying which would seem to require us to picture the commander of that army as male.<sup>18</sup> In the landmark dialogue of Death and the plowman, *Der Ackermann aus Böhmen* (ca. 1400), Death is repeatedly addressed as "herre tod" – just as (to compare the seemingly incomparable) "Mr. Death" is ubiquitous in the folklore of sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>19</sup> To return to more well-trodden ground: Schiller dedicated his starkly disillusioned lyrical *Anthologie auf das Jahr 1782* to his "master, Death", addressing him further in equally masculine terms as "tsar of all flesh," "devastator of the Empire," and an "insatiable glutton." From Ingmar

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Bergman's film *The Seventh Seal* one remembers Death as a male, not a female chess player (a motif dating back to the Middle Ages),<sup>20</sup> and no less male, finally, is the death figure in White Zombie's video "Thunderkiss."

Surely, this deliberately mixed bag of "cases" of male death personifications gives one pause. We tend to think of Death as male, it seems; and yet Death may be female, and indeed, gender is one criterion which allows us to perceive some order in the multitude of personifications of death prevalent in a variety of cultures – a criterion, of course, that would not seem to be far-fetched these days. Rebelling against examples such as those cited, Jeanne Hyvrard provocatively entitles her appraisal of present-day feminist awareness *Mère la Mort, Mother Death* (1976). But the longing for death as a return to maternal love is by no means a sentiment that only women may claim for themselves; staying in the same culture, one need only think of the power that Mother Death exerted over French historian Jules Michelet. (It is not for nothing that Edward K. Kaplan called his selection from Michelet's diaries *Mother Death* [1984].)

Personifying death as male is anything but a universal habit of the imagination, prevalent at all times in all cultures, nations, and languages; it is not even consistent within such communities. Some contrasting pairs of examples may remind us of this. To Death the bridegroom, common in German and English folksongs (to which Bürger's "Lenore" owes its inspiration), there corresponds in several cultures the image of Death the bride: the Germanic goddess Hel, Persephone in Greek mythology, Ishtar in the *Gilgamesh* epic; in Euripides' *Heracles* (verses 481–482) the Keres are apostrophized as "the brides of the dead"; and Death the bride functions as a counterpoint to the "Death and the Maiden" motif, in Ukrainian folksongs as well as in a Latvian Lament of the Dead,<sup>21</sup> not to mention Shakespeare's plays, *King Lear*, for example (iv, 6, 203). Death bringing the plague (or should one say, the plague bringing death?) survives as male in the game of German and Swiss children "Who's afraid of the black man?" (*Wer hat Angst vorm schwarzen Mann?*) and in French Dances of Death; but in Scandinavian folklore and in Italian pictorial representations, in the *Trionfi della morte* – murals, miniatures, cassoni, and poetry such as Petrarch's – this particular Death is normally a woman dressed in black, reminiscent of the furies

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or harpies of Antiquity, as she still is in Arnold Böcklin's Symbolist painting "Die Pest" (1898).<sup>22</sup> Also ambivalent is the angel of death, wreaking destruction as the messenger of the Lord.<sup>23</sup> In Jewish tradition as well as in early Christian and medieval iconography, angels of death and angels generally are male, sons of God, the youths or bearded men of Rembrandt's etching "Abraham Entertaining the Angels" (1656), of Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667), of Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790), of Goethe's *Faust* (II.794ff.), and of Byron's poem "The Destruction of Sennacherib" (ca. 1815), where "the Angel of Death spread his wings on the blast." By this time, however, indeed since the Renaissance at the latest, angels are often female, though of course not always (Caravaggio comes to mind). This female personification keeps gaining ground and becomes clearly dominant in the late nineteenth and earlier twentieth century – one thinks of the angel of death in the American sculptor Daniel Chester French's relief "Death Staying the Hand of the Sculptor" (1893) in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, of Carlos Schwabe's watercolor "Death of the Gravedigger" (*La Mort du fossoyeur*, 1900) as well as of a number of turn-of-the-century paintings by Polish Symbolist Jacek Malczewski and even of Balanchine's ballet *Serenade* of 1934.<sup>24</sup> Still, works such as Jacob Epstein's scandal-prone monument for Oscar Wilde in Père Lachaise (1912) and Wim Wenders' film *Wings of Desire* (1987) remind us that the male angel is not entirely a matter of the past.<sup>25</sup> Another case history illustrating the male/female ambivalence of death figures: There is hardly an anthology of last words that fails to list the dying remark of St. Francis as "Welcome, Sister Death." Why not Brother Death as in Goethe's *Faust* or in Ernst Wolfhagen's 1962 woodcut "Brother Death" (whom Rimbaud, too, seems to ignore in his poetic exclamation: "O mort mystérieuse, ô sœur de charité!")?<sup>26</sup> Yet Robert Schneider's startlingly successful novel *Schlafes Bruder* (1992) revives the once well-known Protestant hymn that claims Death as the "Brother of Sleep," and without the slightest allusion to the classical twins Hypnos and Thanatos at that.

Elsewhere in life and literature Death is unambiguously female. Only a few, deliberately varied examples need be cited. In Cocteau's play *Orphée* of 1927, made into a film in 1949 and more recently turned into a postmodern opera by Philip Glass, Death figures as "Madame," much as

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in Camus's *Etat de Siège* (1948), where Death is the secretary-bureaucrat who registers the victims of the plague in her ledger. In the Mediterranean countries, female Death is not all that unusual, though by no means *de rigueur*. Already mentioned was Petrarch's black-dressed "donna" of furious mien. Variations range from Ronsard's "Hynne de la mort" (1555), where Death is apostrophized as "great goddess" (grand' Déesse), all the way to Baudelaire's "Danse macabre" in the *Fleurs du mal*, where she is a "maigre coquette." Among painters, Gauguin stands in this tradition with his frontispiece to Rachilde's (Marguerite Vallette's) play *Madame La Mort* (1891), where Death appears as a ghost or a specter in the shape of a "femme voilée." Even Rilke was receptive to this tradition, in the fifth *Duino Elegy*:

Squares, o square in Paris, endless showplace,  
where the *modiste*, Madame Lamort,  
twists and winds the restless ways of the world,  
those endless ribbons, and from them designs  
new bows, frills, flowers, cockades, artificial  
fruit – all cheaply dyed – for the paltry  
winter hats of fate.

Plätze, o Platz in Paris, unendlicher Schauplatz,  
wo die Modistin, Madame Lamort,  
die ruhlosen Wege der Erde, endlose Bänder,  
schlingt und windet und neue aus ihnen  
Schleifen erfindet, Rüschen, Blumen, Kokarden, künstliche  
Früchte – , alle  
unwahr gefärbt, – für die billigen  
Winterhüte des Schicksals.<sup>27</sup>

In Spanish culture Death tends to be a woman as well. It is not for nothing that Tomi Ungerer's color lithograph of 1973 featuring an elegantly dressed woman dancing with a tambourine in her hand, with her bright red lips showing that she is anything but a skeleton, is entitled "La Mort en espagnol."<sup>28</sup> In Mexico, easily one of the most death-obsessed countries in the world, as Octavio Paz demonstrated in his famous essay on All Souls' Day in *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, it is "Aunt Sebastiana" or

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“doña Sebastiana,” who to this day represents Death on the highest of Mexican holidays. As a tourist souvenir or a toy, as a piece of candy or a puppet decorating the altar set up on All Souls’ Day in honor of the family’s dead – this Death is always a woman, a skeleton, to be sure, but invariably identified as a woman through her dress or other attributes such as her long hair (“la pelosa” is another name by which Sebastiana is known, referring to her tresses). And this folklore informs art: present-day Mexican and Mexican-American painters and writers still portray Death as a woman, as could be seen in the Mexican Fine Arts Center Museum in Chicago in 1991<sup>29</sup> and (to give another random example) in Eduardo Rodríguez-Solís’s “comedy” *Las Ondas de la Catrina*, performed in New York in 1994 as *The Fickle Finger of Lady Death*. The Mexican conceptualization of death as female may harken back to the personification as Empress approved by the Catholic Church during Mexico’s colonial period.<sup>30</sup> Or does the tradition go back further, beyond colonial conventions, to pre-conquistadorial times? It is well known that Mexican Catholicism today preserves prehispanic symbolism even in its church service; and the ceremonies associated with All Souls’ Day in particular have their links with pre-Columbian rituals honoring the dead.<sup>31</sup> Is it a coincidence that the Aztecs (the tribe with which the conquerors were in closest touch) as well as other peoples, believed that not only a god but also a goddess, his spouse, both carved in monumental sculptures, presided over the realm of the dead? And superior to both of these deities was the goddess Tlaltecuhltli, a terrifying monster representing, much like the goddess Coatlicue, both maternal fertility and death.<sup>32</sup>

In the Slavic world, too, Death is a woman more often than not. In Russian folklore and fairy tales Death is the witch-like Baba Yaga (who evokes other associations as well); in Czech folksong she is Smrt; in the popular superstition of other Slavic countries she may be a white woman with green eyes known in mythology as Giltine, goddess of death.<sup>33</sup> And further east, too, death is not infrequently personified as a woman. The apocryphal gospel of Bartholomew contains a remarkable example of the imaginative realization of the unimaginable in its account of Christ’s descent into hell (a variant of which is also to be found in the *Golden Legend*): Death, who is “our queen” (regina nostra) and the wife of the devil, is bound with fiery chains.<sup>34</sup> The Indian mythological epic *Mahab-*

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*harata* (200 BC – AD 200) tells the story of the creation of Death by Brahma, who had originally created humans to be immortal; a beautiful woman emanates from Brahma's body, bedecked with jewels and crowned with lotus flowers – a goddess by the name of Death. She is to terminate the lives of men and women, the wise and the foolish, the old and the young, in order to prevent overpopulation; and after first trying to avoid this terrible duty out of pity for mankind, she eventually consents.<sup>35</sup>

Germanic mythology and folklore are equally hospitable to female Death. Their deity that wields power over the dead, though she herself does not kill, is the above-mentioned Hel (Halja), who was still alive in nineteenth-century superstition as Jacob Grimm noted; at the same time she is the deity of fertility, indeed the Earth Mother<sup>36</sup> – a conjunction and identification of beginning and end, life and death, procreation and destruction, maternity and deadliness which is at home in many mythologies the world over. (The Fates of Antiquity spin the thread of life *and* cut it; their name, Parcae – the name of the deity of death – is derived from *parere* [to give birth]. Persephone stands for death and ever-renewed life; the Great Mother of several mythologies is the goddess of death. The deadly Baba Yaga is also Mother Nature. Kali symbolizes fertility and death, as does the Aztec Tlaltecuhli.<sup>37</sup>) To return to the Germanic imagination: in the *Gisli* saga a woman appears to the outlaw hero in his dream to announce his imminent death; she has been identified as one of the *dísir*, the goddesses of fertility that are at the same time goddesses of death,<sup>38</sup> as are the Norns, the Fates, most closely resembling the Parcae. Even the nameless elf in the folk ballad “Erlking's Daughter,” a Scandinavian variant of “la belle dame sans merci,” may be seen as a personification of death: in the ballad, which was included in the *Heroic Ballads* (*Kjaempeviser*) and then in Herder's *Folksongs*, she strikes the young rider Oluf on his heart, and “there lay Sir Oluf, and he was dead.”

Even in our own century death, normally the Grim Reaper, may make its appearance in female shape in the superstition, fairy tales, and folklore of German lands. “Sometimes it is a couple, Death and his wife, who come into the country with a scythe and a rake,” according to popular belief.<sup>39</sup> Local legends, too, are familiar not only with Death as a bony



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man (Knochenmann), but also as his wife: a folk story from Uri, Switzerland, begins: “One day Death and his wife (die Tötin), came hiking up the valley of the Reuß”;<sup>40</sup> and especially the folklore of the southeastern corner of the German-speaking region of Europe held on to the Death-Woman (die Tödin) into the twentieth century. She is a white figure, a misty shape stalking field and forest by night – old or young, ugly or beautiful and usually alone, though the couple, Mr. and Mrs. Death, is not unheard of in this superstition either.<sup>41</sup> (The death-as-couple motif can be found in the Austrian Adolf von Tschabuschnigg’s folksong-like poem “Tod und Tödin” [1841], set to music by Carl Loewe: theirs is a petit-bourgeois household – *he* has so much to do with the burial of the dead that it interferes with his love of domestic *Gemütlichkeit*; *she* is up late washing the funeral shirts of the dead in the nearby brook and planting flowers on the graves.<sup>42</sup>) And as already mentioned, this female death figure of folk belief can be encountered under the same name even in a highly literary poem by Paul Celan, included in his *Thread Suns (Faden-sonnen, 1968)*. Finally, the identification of motherhood and death, ubiquitous in folklore and mythology, appears in literature in such far-flung works as Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* (see below, pp. 201–203) and Anna Croissant-Rust’s story “The Corn Mother” (Die Kornmutter), in her narrative cycle *Death (Der Tod, 1914)*: the archaic and the everyday, motherliness and deadliness, the joy of living and the horror of death are combined here in a literary myth inspired by folklore. Much the same is true of the paintings of George Frederick Watts (see below, pp. 203–205). Like other archaic images, these ancient embodiments of death live on to this day in literary and pictorial art.

## II

Death a man, Death a woman – if imaginative personification of the unknown is one of the characteristic features of our species, why does it operate in such contradictory ways? If it defines “human nature,” why does it not define it in a more uniform manner? Why, instead, this polarity of images, chosen deliberately from bafflingly heterogeneous sources – a polarity of images that, on the one hand, unites cultures and historical periods with apparently little else in common and, on the other hand, splits up otherwise homogeneous cultural and linguistic communities?

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One explanation relies on the distribution of power in a given community, contrasting matriarchal (normally agricultural) and patriarchal (normally hunting and warring) societies:

Death will be seen as masculine or feminine according to whether it typically occurs in a phallic-penetrating or vaginal-enveloping form. Thus in a hunting society, or a martial one, death is most likely to occur in the form of some kind of wounding or tearing, whether by the goring, clawing, or trampling of beasts, or by the weapons of man. Such events will tend to be associated with masculinity, and with paternal strength and power . . . In an agricultural or peasant society . . . death is more apt to come from starvation and disease and hence to be experienced as an envelopment and associated with maternal deprivation. It is no coincidence that human sacrifice to blood-thirsty goddesses is typically found in highly developed and stable agricultural societies with considerable specialization and interdependence, such that crop failures cannot be compensated for by branching out into other modes of subsistence, but simply cause mass starvation.<sup>43</sup>

Such thinking assumes, however, that primitive mindsets of this kind continue to be virulent in much later, industrial communities. But these societies are so complex that one cannot *a priori* expect that they are dominated by just *one* concept or image of death, as Malraux still seemed to imply. Moreover, this explanation fails to account for the image of female Death with destructive weapons like lance and scythe in her hands, as, for instance, in the Pisa fresco of the “Triumph of Death,” which according to such thinking would have to be associated with masculine violence instead.

No less simplistic is the explanation derived from psychoclinical observations of the dying that posits that Death is welcomed as a lover, hence it is male or female in accordance with the thoughts of the dying person.<sup>44</sup> Also, present-day readers would find unacceptable the conviction of philologists as late as the first half of the twentieth century that grammatical gender (where it exists) – widely believed to condition our

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imaginative personification of death – is in its turn determined by “psychological factors”<sup>45</sup> in the sense that everything great, strong, intimidating is genderized as male, everything endearing and “reminiscent of the destiny and functions of woman” as female. Such dominant figures as Jacob Grimm and Wilhelm von Humboldt did indeed believe that some sort of imaginative “extension of natural gender to all manner of objects”<sup>46</sup> played a role, if not the only one, in the formation of grammatical gender. But this, of course, begs the question. *Why* is death masculine in some languages and feminine in others? Why should “psychological factors” vary in this manner from one language and culture to the next? Is it not, rather, a matter of the influence of fundamental cultural, perhaps mythological views that vary from one community to another? – which in turn poses the question of the reason for this variability.

The most recent attempt to explain the duality of male and female personifications of death, Gert Kaiser’s observations in his book on the theme of Death and the Maiden, *Der Tod und die schönen Frauen* (Frankfurt: Campus 1995), takes its cue from the Dances of Death of the late Middle Ages and the early modern period. In them, female death figures are seen as “mocking figures” fulfilling “the same function as the abbot’s mitre that Death wears in the Basle Dance of Death or the knight’s armor or fool’s cap donned by Death – a scornful mask” demonstrating Death’s “ability to change to conform to his victims” (p. 123). Coming from a study of male death figures in art and literature though it is, this is an intriguing line of reasoning. It would, however, need to be tested against the long and rich history of death personification before and after the Dances of Death; after all, they constitute only one chapter in the art history of death. And indeed, even in the Dances of Death themselves, Death is not by any means always presented as a sort of mirror image of the victim. Not all women are approached by Death in the guise of a woman, nor are all knights summoned by him in the shape of an armored knight. In Dürer’s woodcut “Death and the Fool” the fool wears the fool’s cap, but Death does not. And vice versa: Death may accost a man in the shape of a woman, for example the priest or canon in Niklaus Manuel’s Dance of Death in Berne; dressed as a fool, Death may come to fetch a person who is by no means identified as a fool, as in Holbein’s

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Dance of Death, in Hans Sebald Beham's engraving "The Lady and Death," or in Chodowiecki's "Dance of Death" where Death, the court jester, summons the queen. We may conclude that an artist's choice of female Death is determined by factors other than the supposed need for a female mask or mirror image. But which factors?

The explanation for the male/female dichotomy of death images most frequently heard and indeed often considered self-evident is the grammatical gender of the word for death in a given language, though the just-mentioned "psychological" explanation of grammatical gender in its turn, so dear to generations of philologists, has by now been abandoned, of course. (The designation of grammatical gender as "masculine" and "feminine" originated with early Greek grammarians.)<sup>47</sup> According to such grammatical gender "theorists," *der Tod* would mandate that death be personified as male, just as *la mort, la morte, la muerte*, as well as variations of *smrt* in the Slavic languages, would make female anthropomorphism inevitable.<sup>48</sup> The contemporary German poet Karl Krolow even wrote a poem establishing this connection between grammatical gender and mythopoetic imagination.<sup>49</sup>

Exceptions may easily come to mind – examples from art and literature indicating that death may be visualized as male in Romance or Slavic language cultures or as female by speakers of Germanic languages. But before turning to such cases, some general linguistic reflexions on grammatical gender and its supposed determination of our perception of reality are in order. Few, if any, cultures do not form images of death. But apart from languages that order their nouns (and their perception of reality?) in only two categories, namely masculine and feminine, as does French for instance, there are also languages such as Finnish and Hungarian or postmedieval English, that do not have grammatical gender at all. So, why would turn-of-the-century Finnish painter Hugo Simberg consistently portray death as male, just as Finns today visualize death as the "boneman" (to translate the epithet into English literally)? And why do Hungarians ordinarily personify death as male, though an artist like Ilona Bizsó Fábíánné portrays death as a female reaper holding a scythe, in a copper engraving of ca. 1920?<sup>50</sup> What principles (if that is the right word) does the imaginative personification of impersonal nouns or concepts follow in languages that have no grammatical gender? When

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Shakespeare, writing some 300 years after the extinction of grammatical gender in English, personifies or anthropomorphizes abstract nouns, he sometimes differs in his choice of gender from his contemporaries. Moreover, in such Shakespearean personifications the Old English gender of a given word “is irrelevant: Old English feminine and masculine nouns may assume the opposite gender when they are personified.”<sup>51</sup> The same is true when Shakespeare poetically personifies English words derived from French, dubbing them as “he” or “she.”<sup>52</sup> On the other hand, when Shakespeare and his contemporaries deviate from Old English grammatical gender in their genderizing of a word, the influence of French (or Latin) may play a role, as in *sun* (feminine in Old English, male in poetic language to this day) or *moon* (masculine in Old English, feminine in poetic usage).<sup>53</sup>

Other languages that do not have masculine/feminine grammatical gender order their nouns according to different semantic categories such as animate/inanimate, human/nonhuman, rational/nonrational, strong/weak, big/small, concrete/abstract – or a combination of such categories. Four such grammatical “genders” or rather noun classes are not infrequent, twenty are possible (not considering nonsemantic, that is formal, morphological or phonological criteria for classification).<sup>54</sup> How do speakers of such languages personify death? As male or female? And why?

But even if a language has grammatical gender in the strict sense, its nouns being either masculine or feminine (or neutral), the relationship between grammatical gender and imaginative representation or indeed reality is by no means consistent and predictable. In Old Norse the word for the hero or brave man is grammatically feminine (*hetja*), the word for a haughty woman is masculine (*svarri*); Latin *nauta* (sailor) is morphologically feminine but of course any adjective will take the masculine ending (*nauta bonus*). Turning to the grammatical gender of words that do *not* designate a man or a woman, we find again that the relationship between grammatical gender and imaginative personification (male/female) is highly complex and not at all self-evident. For example: are *la maison* and *die Uhr* visualized as somehow female? Clearly not. In other words, grammatical gender exerts no normative power over imaginative visualization. Ships are female in English, but not necessarily

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visualized as women.<sup>55</sup> The pope is “sa Sainteté” in French, with any adjective and the personal pronoun requiring the feminine form, even though a speaker of French does not visualize the pope as a woman (Pope Joan notwithstanding). Also, the grammatical gender of some nouns has changed in the course of time, certain words can have different gender depending upon circumstances (for example, *baby* and *doctor*),<sup>56</sup> and grammatical gender may vary in a given period, indeed with one and the same author, even in the same work.<sup>57</sup> In closely related languages identical words, when personified, take on different genders: before the collapse of masculine and feminine gender into one, the moon was female in Dutch, male in Swedish. When words migrate from one language to the other, from Gothic into Old High German, for example, or from Latin or French into German, their grammatical gender may change: *murus* becomes *die Mauer*, *le courage* emerges as *die Courage*, etc.<sup>58</sup> There are even regional variations of grammatical gender, as in present-day German.

Such general considerations render the connection between grammatical gender and imaginative personification unreliable, or tenuous at best. This is particularly true in the case at issue here, as some earlier examples suggest. What do we make of the fact that in German folklore there is a male as well as female Death, though grammatically there is only masculine death? In the Germanic languages of Scandinavia, the home of female death figures, the word for death was grammatically masculine until the Middle Ages, when the masculine/feminine distinction disappeared from their grammar.

The disconnection between grammatical gender and visualization of death is readily illustrated in the art and literature of a number of cultures. (What follows are really only *examples*; the subsequent chapters will introduce others cases and place them into a wider frame of cultural reference.) Jacob Grimm, at the dawn of modern philology, found it curious that Roman art, in spite of the feminine gender of *mors*, “never” represented death as a woman.<sup>59</sup> Instead, “mors imperator,” Emperor death, was the standard phrase, which is still echoed in Ernst Barlach’s woodcut of this title (1919). In the Uta codex, the early eleventh-century gospel of abbess Uta of the Niedermünster nunnery near Regensburg, a much-reproduced miniature of the crucifixion represents death (“Mors”)

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at the foot of the cross in the shape of a man – he is overcome by Christ, the sickle drops from his hand, and the point of a lance hits and kills him.<sup>60</sup> A similar incongruity between grammatical and natural gender confronts a speaker of German in Alfred Kubin's pen-and-ink drawing "The Best Physician" (Der beste Arzt, 1901–02) which presents Death as a lady in evening dress, or in one of the drawings of Kubin's *Dance of Death* (*Totentanz*) sequence, *Die Blätter mit dem Tod* (1918), where Death is a solicitous old woman (no. 8), or finally in Klaus Drechsler's aluminum print of Death as a nurse, "Death with a Child" (*Tod mit Kind*, 1991).<sup>61</sup> Earlier instances from the German-speaking areas include Franz von Poggi's *Totentanz* (1862: Death as an old woman with a basket on her back), Schellenberg's *Appearances of Freund Hein* (*Freund Heins Erscheinungen*, 1785, no. 35: Death as a rococo lady welcoming her suitor) and Hans Holbein the Younger's sequence of woodcuts known as *Großer Totentanz* (ca. 1525) in which Death summons members of the various classes in the shape of a man, but wears female garb when he confronts the empress and the nun (nos. 29 and 30).<sup>62</sup>

The situation is no different in the anglophone world. If in the English-speaking countries death is thought of and portrayed as male "almost without exception," typically as "the old man with the scythe" as the *Times Literary Supplement* reminds us on January 12, 1996 (p. 7), then one

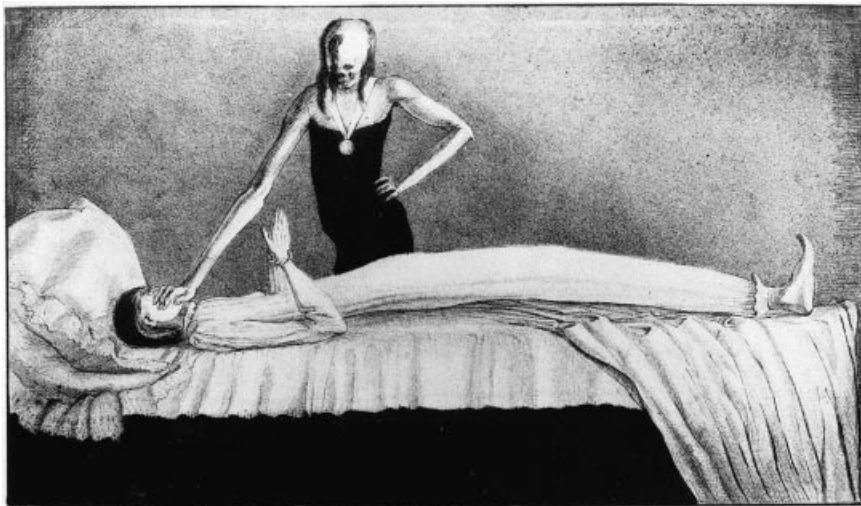


plate 2 Alfred Kubin: The Best Physician (1901–02)

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wonders how the English reader reacted to the unusual appearance of a female death figure in the works of prominent Middle-English authors such as Occleve and Lydgate in the first half of the fifteenth century.<sup>63</sup> One would also like to know whether English readers were perplexed when in Florio's perfectly idiomatic translation of the *Essais* of Montaigne (1603) they found Death referred to as "shee" – in essays that are among Montaigne's most frequently quoted. Would it have been helpful to have remembered Geoffrey Whitney's poem "While furious Mors, from place, to place did flie" (in his *Emblemes* of 1586) where death is personified as a "leane virago" (p. 132)? Edward, Lord Herbert of Cherbury continued bucking the trend in his well-known poem "To his Mistress for her True Picture," which apostrophizes Death as "my lifes Mistress and the sovereign Queen / Of all that ever breath'd" (1665 in his *Verses*).

To be fair, English literature has never been overly hospitable to the female death icon, nor has American literature. It is all the more noteworthy, therefore, that countless anthologies of American poetry include Whitman's elegy on the death of Abraham Lincoln, "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," with its haunting "Come lovely and soothing death, / . . . Dark mother always gliding near with soft feet." And one of the more widely read American novels of the twentieth century, John O'Hara's *Appointment in Samarra* (1934), unapologetically chooses as its epitaph a fable (borrowed from Somerset Maugham's play *Sheppey*) about Death as a woman encountered in a market-place. It is this fable that gives the book, a present-day New England family tragedy, its title and allegorizes its plot with the exoticism of the Near East:

Death speaks: There was a merchant in Bagdad who sent his servant to market to buy provisions and in a little while the servant came back, white and trembling, and said, Master, just now when I was in the market-place I was jostled by a woman in the crowd and when I turned I saw it was Death that jostled me. She looked at me and made a threatening gesture; now, lend me your horse, and I will ride away from this city and avoid my fate. I will go to Samarra and there Death will not find me. The merchant lent him his horse, and the servant mounted it, and he dug his spurs in



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its flanks and as fast as the horse could gallop he went. Then the merchant went down to the market-place and he saw me standing in the crowd and he came to me and said, Why did you make a threatening gesture to my servant when you saw him this morning? That was not a threatening gesture, I said, it was only a start of surprise. I was astonished to see him in Bagdad, for I had an appointment with him tonight in Samarra.

Nor are the pictorial arts of the English-speaking countries strangers to female death figures. At the turn of the century George Frederick Watts's work prominently features the motherly death image, most conspicuously in his painting "The Court of Death," while the late Pre-Raphaelite Thomas Cooper Gotch, in his turn-of-the-century painting "Death the Bride," evokes reminiscences of Ophelia or Persephone with the "bride" emerging from a lush field of poppies. And as late as 1922 John Singer Sargent, in a mural in the library of Harvard University, represented Death as a shrouded woman embracing a soldier fallen in World War I.

An interesting French example of the conflict of natural and grammatical gender is van Gogh's self-interpretation of a late painting depicting a male reaper in a sun-drenched wheat field, wielding a scythe. Van Gogh wrote to his brother Theo in September 1889: "I see in this reaper – a vague figure toiling away for all he's worth in the midst of the heat to finish his task – I see in him the image of death, in the sense that humanity might be the wheat he is reaping . . . But there is no sadness in this death . . ." (*J'y vis alors dans ce faucheur – vague figure qui lutte comme un diable en pleine chaleur pour venir à bout de sa besogne – j'y vis alors l'image de la mort, dans ce sens que l'humanité serait le blé qu'on fauche . . . Mais dans cette mort rien de triste . . .*).<sup>64</sup> Van Gogh speaks of "la mort" but he sees a male figure, the "faucheur" he has painted. Much the same is true of Jean Anouilh when in his "pièce noire" *Eurydice* (1958) he does not introduce Death, as did Cocteau in his revival of the myth, as an elegant lady in evening dress, accompanied by two surgery assistants, but instead as "Monsieur Henri," a cigarette-smoking young man wearing a rain coat whom we encounter in the railroad station and a hotel of a provincial town in France. Ionesco follows the same pattern: the stage

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plate 3 Jean Grandville: *Journey to Eternity*, no. 7 (1830)

directions for *Jeux de massacre* (1970) require that the dumb role of La Mort be performed by a man who resembles a monk in his black cowl. Likewise, in Baudelaire's *Fleurs du mal* (1857, 1861) Death is not always female as in "Danse macabre"; in the concluding poem of the volume we read "O Death, old captain, it is time! Let's weigh anchor!" (O Mort, vieux capitaine, il est temps! levons l'ancre!). Jean Grandville in his sequence of Dance of Death graphics *Journey to Eternity* (*Voyage pour l'éternité*, 1830) only rarely introduces Death as a woman; most personifications are male: coachman, postilion, waiter, dandy, etc., and, most grippingly, a bearded skeletal officer with a sword, epaulettes, and towering bearskin cap sporting a tassel fluttering in the wind; this is how Death marches ahead of a band of volunteers under a banner inscribed "Immortalité" – straight into the battlefield from which they will not return, as one of the well-wishing bystanders seems to sense as she wipes her tears away with a handkerchief.<sup>65</sup> This incongruity of grammatical

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gender and visual representation of death does in fact go back to the Middle Ages in the French-speaking territories. In a fifteenth-century book of hours preserved in the Bibliothèque Nationale one comes across a miniature presenting Death as a crowned cadaver sitting on a grave that is described as “King” Death in the Latin text (“regem cui omnia vivunt”).<sup>66</sup> Contemporaneous with it is the much-noted Dance of Death poem taking its title from the eating of the apple in Paradise *Le Mors de la pomme* in which “La Mort” describes itself as God’s “sergant criminel,” God’s bailiff, foreshadowing Hamlet’s metaphor.<sup>67</sup> And in a miniature by Jean Colombe in the famous book of hours of Duke Jean de Berry (1485–89), Death (*la mort*, of course), a knight on a white steed, in courtly dress, charges with drawn sword over graves into a band of armed soldiers separated from him by a long procession of the dead wrapped in their shrouds.<sup>68</sup> Similarly, in the Italian Middle Ages Death appears, in a marble relief in the church of San Pietro Martire in Naples (1361), as an unmistakably male falconer holding a falcon on his raised hand, surrounded by his real quarry: the human dead of all ranks and classes. The inscription, of course, cannot reverse the convention of grammatical gender, “Eo sono la Morte.”<sup>69</sup>

In Spanish art and literature, too, personifications of death are independent of the grammatical gender of “muerte.” Cervantes and Calderón immediately come to mind. In the second part of *Don Quixote* the knight of the mournful countenance runs into a company of strolling actors; among them is a young man who plays the role of Death in their performances – even though (as an Elizabethan or Jacobean would be surprised to hear) there are women in the troupe (ch. 11). In Calderón’s Corpus Christi play *King Balthasar’s Feast* (*La Cena del rey Baltasar*) Death makes his appearance in the shape of a nobleman with a sword and courtly dress, identifying himself as the son of sin. Similarly, Spanish pictorial art, from the sixteenth century to the present, has been featuring male death figures along with female ones, though only the latter correspond with the grammatical gender of *muerte*.<sup>70</sup> Thus, Dalí’s color etching “Death and the Maiden” in *Apollinaire: Poèmes secrets* (1967) confronts a fleshy young woman with a Quixotic knight on horseback swinging his guitar.<sup>71</sup> A particularly telling example is the woodcut “Song of Stalingrad” (Corrido de Stalingrado) by Mexican artist

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Leopoldo Méndez: it shows a uniformed Russian commissar on horseback, sabre in hand, riding across a battlefield strewn with dead soldiers – his head is a skull.<sup>72</sup> In case one wonders whether the foreign socio-political situation might have determined the gender of Death in this image – assuming that Soviet commissars were usually male – one might turn to José Guadalupe Posada's rather similar leadcut "Calavera Zapatista"; it presents the Mexican peasant leader Emiliano Zapata as a "skeleton in Mexican dress riding on an almost skeletal nag, wearing a huge sombrero on his oversized skull, carrying a rifle over his shoulder and holding a banner with skull and crossbones in his hand."<sup>73</sup> And in our own days Mexican painter Francisco Toledo still stuns the viewer with his fresco "Death Descending Stairs" (La muerte bajando la escalera, 1988): it features a skeleton with more than just a hint of male genitals.<sup>74</sup>

These few cases, chosen from diverse cultures and languages, are enough to suggest that grammatical gender is not necessarily the determining factor when death is personified and, inevitably, genderized. Would it not be more logical to inquire how and why words signifying nothing specifically male or female (such as "death") are endowed with masculine or feminine grammatical gender in the first place? Why *la mort* but *der Tod*? When literary scholars turn their attention to personification as a stylistic device, they too, much like psychologists and linguists, postulate a prelinguistic realm as the locus in which such determinations are made. "The origins of personification lie deep in the past and are related to primitive animism," notes the literary historian and philologist Morton W. Bloomfield in a much-cited study on "A Grammatical Approach to Personification Allegory."<sup>75</sup> Such prelinguistic factors of imaginative visualization, then, may have inspired English authors to ascribe a male or female connotation to words not signifying either gender, long after grammatical gender disappeared from the language. "A writer of English," says Bloomfield, "after about 1300, unlike his German or French counterparts, had more or less freedom in choosing masculine or feminine gender for his personal figures" representing abstract nouns such as *victory* or *life* (p. 244). In other words: the grammatical gender of Old English exercised no influence on this decision. On the contrary, the new situation was comparable to that of lan-

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guages that had never had grammatical gender. Instead of the lingering effect of defunct or obsolescent grammatical gender, quasi-mythical, archaic images (“primitive animism”) indigenous to the culture in question were and are more likely responsible for determining the gender of abstractions like *death* – which may confirm or contradict the visualizations possibly implied in this or that erstwhile grammatical gender. To return to Gustave Moreau’s densely symbolic “The Young Man and Death,” whose genesis showed that an original male death figure was replaced by a sumptuous female one:<sup>76</sup> mythological, archaic images may well have stirred the artistic imagination, not French grammar.

An analogous conclusion is suggested by the observation of a Jungian psychologist that “archaic representations of the demon of death” recur in male *and* in female shape in the dreams of individuals who are at home in only *one* language and, as it happens, one that *does* have grammatical gender.<sup>77</sup> Of similar interest is the experiment of psychologists Aisenberg and Kastenbaum who around 1970 interviewed a broad spectrum of English-speaking Americans about their instinctive or habitual personification of death: If Death were a person, what sort of a person would it be? The subjects were asked to think about this question until an “image” of death as a human person would emerge. The result was that not one image but many, and very different ones, presented themselves to the imagination of men and women who in their daily lives did not have any particular exposure to visual or literary personifications of death. The differences in these images had to do primarily with the gender of Death. While several respondents saw Death as possibly male *or* female, most conceived of it as a man exclusively, and some saw it as a woman exclusively: young woman, old man, comforting woman, terrifying man, female lover, male lover, etc. Clearly, cultural and/or psychic factors were playing a role here, quite independently of grammatical gender, which is (largely) absent in English in any case.<sup>78</sup>

Recent anthropological research into grammar reinforces these findings. Synthesizing over a century of theorizing about grammatical gender, Greville Corbett concludes that skepticism about the formative influence of the grammatical gender on our visualization of abstract words such as *death* is indeed widespread. Grammatical gender (which, to repeat, may change over periods of time) does not by any means

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predispose the speaker of a given language to form a male or female “image”: *table* is grammatically feminine in French, Corbett reminds us, adding that it does not follow that a speaker of French thinks of a table as female. Grammatical gender in turn appears to be determined by semantic factors, i.e., quasi-mythical, folkloric concepts and images current in a linguistic or, more important, cultural community.<sup>79</sup> This is how Jacob Grimm had explained the origin of grammatical gender.<sup>80</sup> We hear an echo of this view in modern linguistics: “The world view of the speakers determines the categories involved” in grammatical classification of nouns (masculine/feminine or animate/inanimate or whatever); as a result, a high degree of complexity, even contradictoriness in the relationship of grammar and meaning, of language and image has to be expected.<sup>81</sup> And as far as literature and the arts are concerned, recent linguistic investigations even concede the possibility and legitimacy of individual variation, indeed of artistic deviation from whatever the pertinent “rule” may be.<sup>82</sup>

If linguistics gives rise to strong doubts, at the very least, about the assumed correlation of grammatical gender of a word and the corresponding mental image realized in art and literature, then the specific question for the historian of art and literature is: what does a deliberately male or female personification of death reveal about artists’ or authors’ perception of reality and, further, about their cultural community and its religious, mythological, or historical perceptions or preconceptions? What light is shed on their creative and imaginative transformation of the world, on their self-understanding and their image-making that gives order and meaning to their experience? Such image-making invariably springs from an encounter with the incomprehensible, baffling “other” in that moment of astonishment or wonder that is at the root of all culture. For it is this wonder that challenges the image-making, name-giving, and hence interpreting propensity to meaning that defines our species. One of the most significant aspects of this propensity is our imaginative coming to terms with death.

### III

As one approaches this question with a view to Western art and literature, it is reasonable to expect that the mythologies dominating this cul-

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tural domain, the biblical and the classical, should have left their marks. Thanatos comes to mind: the Greek personification of death as a graceful, gentle youth turning a still-burning torch earthwards, symbolically intimating the extinction of life. This icon did indeed have an intensive afterlife in European art and literature, especially since its rediscovery by Lessing in the 1760s – or rather, since its “creation” by Lessing through a productive misunderstanding (see below, p. 137). Thanatos naturally appealed to the enlightened mind, or more specifically, to its animosity against Christianity with its intimidating allegory of death as a skeleton or decomposing cadaver. Schiller’s polemical juxtaposition of the two could not be more pointed (he also implies the synthesis, mentioned above, of death and love, Thanatos and Eros):

None but a howling sinner could have called death a skeleton; it is a lovely, charming youth, in the flower of life, the way they paint the god of love, only not so mischievous, a quiet, ministering spirit who lends his arm to the exhausted pilgrim soul to help her across the ditch of time, opens up the fairy castle of everlasting splendor, nods in a friendly fashion, and disappears.

Nur ein heulender Sünder konnte den Tod ein Gerippe schelten;  
es ist ein holder niedlicher Knabe, blühend, wie sie den  
Liebesgott malen, aber so tückisch nicht – ein stiller dienstbarer  
Genius, der der erschöpften Pilgerin Seele den Arm bietet über  
den Graben der Zeit, das Feenschloß der ewigen Herrlichkeit  
aufschließt, freundlich nickt, und verschwindet.<sup>83</sup>

Thanatos is not threatening; he certainly does not kill. The Sarpedon episode in the sixteenth book of the *Iliad* introduces him in a typical role: there he joins his twin brother Hypnos in carrying the Lykian prince slain by Patroklos from the battlefield so he can be buried in his homeland – no suggestion of a torch turned earthwards.

Despite Lessing’s partisanship for Thanatos in the shape of the gentle youth with the downturned torch, there is no denying, as classical philologists have not tired of reminding us ever since Lessing, that the popular culture of ancient Greece visualized Thanatos as a terrifying

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(male) demon (personified to the point of grotesqueness in Euripides' *Alcestis*). Classicists have also long been aware that Greek artworks, in particular fifth-century miniatures on Attic funerary vases (*lekythoi*), portray Thanatos not as a handsome youth but as a somber bearded man who carries the dead from the battlefield.<sup>84</sup> And finally, research has established that Greek representations of death *do* indicate the fusion of Thanatos and Eros that Lessing so vigorously denied,<sup>85</sup> only to be ignored by the hellenophiles of subsequent generations, the Romantics in particular.<sup>86</sup> Still, even in these many (related) shapes, Thanatos was not the sole death image in Greek antiquity. Rivaling male personifications include Hades (Pluto) as the god of the underworld and later Charon as the god of the dead (who lives on in Michelangelo's fresco of the Last Judgment in the Sistine Chapel).<sup>87</sup> A monstrous yet still human variation of Charon is the bloodthirsty Charun of the Etruscans who is regularly portrayed as a terrifying bearded old man with animal ears, wielding a hammer as his preferred instrument of slaughter.<sup>88</sup>

Side by side with these male personifications of death, female death figures also populate classical mythology. Their identities and functions overlapped at times, though each essentially preserved its own meaning over the centuries of Graeco-Roman civilization. The Keres are the rapacious servants of Hades; unlike Thanatos, who does not kill, they are demons bringing death; in the *Iliad* they work havoc on the battlefield, eventually dragging their victims away (Book 18).<sup>89</sup> Equally vivid creations of the mythopoetic imagination are the Parcae or Fates – the single goddess Moira in Homer and then, ever since Hesiod, the trio of Clotho, Lachesis, and Atropos who spin the threads of individual lives *and* cut them off with scissors, thus becoming synonymous with Death, especially in early Greek times.<sup>90</sup> (Atropos still appears as an allegory of death in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century French books of hours and in illustrations of the “Triumph of Death” theme; and, conversely, the more familiar Christian skeleton may be represented with a pair of scissors, as in the 1625 etching “Dordrecht in Holland,” attributed to Sebastian Furck.<sup>91</sup>) Closely related to the Fates are the Erinyes, the Furies in Roman mythology.<sup>92</sup> They, too, wield power over life and death, as does the grim, scythe-swinging woman in the famous fresco in the Campo Santo in Pisa (unless this “Morte” is closer to another classical archetype,



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the Harpy). This list may conclude with the goddess of dawn: Eos (Aurora) abducted her beloved Tithonos from the world of humans – a female variation of the fusion of love and death, Eros and Thanatos.<sup>93</sup> “Aurora the abductress,” Herder noted, was “the Greek image of early, gentle death.”<sup>94</sup>

These death images of Antiquity had a powerful impact on the imagination of later generations. So too did the biblical representations of death, especially those of the Old Testament. The angel of death appears as the servant of Jahweh (Gen. 19:2; 2 Sam. 24:15–16; Is. 37:36), identified later in Jewish thought and folklore with Satan under the name of Samael.<sup>95</sup> There is also Nimrod, the hunter Death (2 Sam. 22:6), the shepherd (Ps. 49:15), and the reaper (Jer. 9:21; his scythe or sickle, by the way, is also the attribute of Chronos). The most concrete personification of death of pre-medieval times, however, in the Coptic *History of Joseph the Carpenter* (late fourth century), has remained rather marginal in subsequent iconology: here Death (*moy*), summoning the father of Christ, comes across as a coward; he is moreover visually reminiscent, it has been suggested, of Set, the murderer of Osiris in Egyptian mythology, and thus of a Death seen partly in human and partly in monstrously animal shape.<sup>96</sup>

Such classical and biblical images of death were surely instrumental in the fashioning of male and female personifications of death in post-classical art and literature, even when not expressly evoked. But these images were not alone. True, when one looks at the history of European art and literature with an eye for the recurrence and appropriation of traditional icons of death current in formative earlier cultures, a wealth of such reprises comes into view: the rich afterlife of Thanatos, for example.<sup>97</sup> More interesting and more telling, however, is originality in the sense of non-conformity to the heritage of formative images and ciphers, be they the mythological constructs of Antiquity and the Bible or the symbols developed independently since then, such as the “bone-man,” Freund Hein, Madame La Mort, Aunt Sebastiana, etc. Of course, one would not see the forest for the trees if in this pursuit one were to amass a “complete” iconology of death, with all its untold ramifications, not to mention repetitions. The more promising question to ask would seem to be: which images of death dominate in a given period of art and

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literature? What are the significant deviations from such a pattern, e.g., female images in a period or culture favoring male personifications, and vice versa? What conclusions can be drawn from the mainstream *and* from the exceptional cases – conclusions concerning the encounter of a time, culture, or individual with the *tremendum* and *fascinosum* that everyday language so baldly calls “death”? For male Death and female Death are of course only the roughest of categories; within them more telling variations are possible: woman as the object of fear, or fulfillment of erotic desire; man as a terrifying power, or as the eagerly welcomed partner – quite apart from further modifications suggested by keywords such as young and old, beautiful and ugly, motherly and fatherly.

Tracing the interplay of such images, one might delineate a cultural history of death in the Western world. Such a history, ranging across national boundaries, would seem to promise a more multifaceted panorama than conventional “intellectual history,” even conventional “history of death,” was able to provide, from Walther Rehm to Philippe Ariès. Trends might come into view that run counter to those sweeping currents of intellectual life charted by traditional historiography intent on discerning lines of manifest development of the European “mind,” *conscience*, or *Geist* (entities that, in practice, were usually thought of as largely monolingual and monocultural, which enhanced the generalizing and simplifying bent of this approach). A more nuanced and differentiated comparative approach such as will be attempted here is likely to come closer to the rich and complex life of the products of our creative imagination than did the all too schematic abstractions of intellectual history pioneered in the 1920s in Germany and still popular.<sup>98</sup>

Such a cultural history may be worth attempting. “Whether we know it or not, whether we abandon ourselves to them or resist them, our thinking is informed by many concepts and images from the past . . . Our understanding . . . endeavors to share the experiences that have taken such shapes. But why? Aren’t there more urgent questions than the one concerning the image of death in literature? . . . Just as it is a legitimate form of self-preservation not to live in constant anticipation of death, so it is another to do so now and then. What was possible? What is no longer possible? What is still possible?”<sup>99</sup> If, as the observation quoted from Marie Lenéru and Maeterlinck has it, it is death that should be con-

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sulted about life; if, as Dag Hammarskjöld noted in his diary, “it is our conception of death which decides our answers to all the questions that life puts to us,”<sup>100</sup> then the past and present images of death prevalent in the Western world (and I regret this geographical limitation) may heighten our understanding of those who shaped them – and ultimately of ourselves.