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978-0-521-64460-0 - The Gender of Death: A Cultural History in Art and Literature

Karl S. Guthke

Excerpt

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INTRODUCTION / WHY THIS BOOK?

Is Death a woman? How does one come upon such a question? Through an error. Some years ago, in a slide lecture at Harvard University, Finnish Symbolist Hugo Simberg's watercolor "Death Listens" (Kuolema kuuntelee, 1897) was shown. The painting, which has recently met with intense interest in various quarters,¹ takes us into a simple room in a peasant's wooden house. Under the wall clock in the background an old woman lies in bed while a barefoot boy in the foreground sits on a stool, playing the violin; Death, leaning on a chair opposite him and listening thoughtfully, is the familiar skeleton. But one thing was striking about this unpretentious yet riveting composition (which, curiously, reverses the conventional constellation of Death the fiddler and his victim): this Death, of whom only the skull, hands, shins, and feet are visible, is a woman – dressed in a cape and a skirt. Why a woman? A matter of grammatical gender, I was told: while the word for death is masculine in German, it is feminine in other languages, e.g., "la mort," "la muerte." But then, Finnish has no grammatical gender. Before finding that out, however, I had looked into Sakari Saarikivi's richly illustrated *Hugo Simberg*² and discovered – Simberg's Death is a man! Since the mid-nineties, Simberg had repeatedly featured a unique personification of death in his paintings, as a sort of private mythology: a skeleton dressed in the jacket and knickerbocker trousers of the Finnish peasant of his day. What in the lateral view of "Death Listens" appears to be the skirt of a woman are in fact widely cut and more than knee-length culotte-like breeches, as several others of Simberg's representations of Death make unmistakably clear.³ In his watercolor "Dance on the Bridge" (Tanssi sillalla), for example, two such Death figures dance with women wearing Finnish country outfits, while three men stand by somewhat disconsolately.

With this discovery, the "case" was closed, but the question "Is Death a man or a woman?" posed itself all the more insistently. The instinctive answer, that the gender of Death would be determined by the grammatical gender of the word for death in the language involved, was not con-

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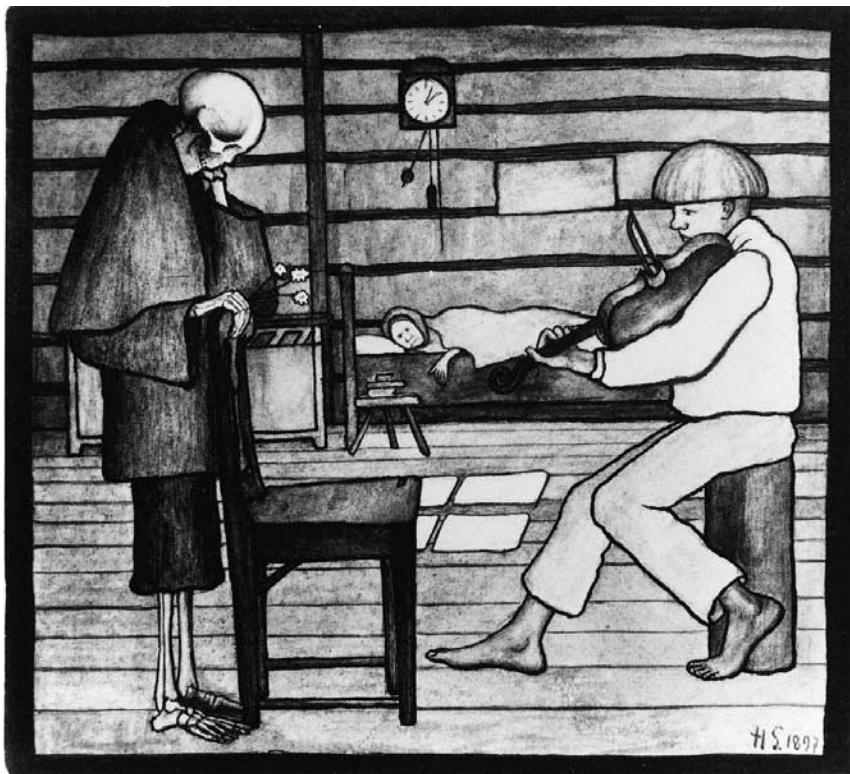


PLATE I Hugo Simberg: Death Listens (1897)

vincing. Why should Dalí, in his color etching “Death and the Maiden” (1967), represent “la muerte” as a faintly quixotic cavalier and guitar player on horseback?⁴ Why should Stefano della Bella, the most prominent seventeenth-century Italian etcher, in the first image of his cycle “The Five Dead” (*Les cinq morts*), have Death gallop over the battlefield in the shape of a supreme commander clutching a flag and a trumpet?⁵ Why is “la mort” in Anouilh’s *Eurydice* (1958) and in Ionesco’s *Massacre Games* (*Jeux de massacre*, 1970) a man? Nor did French linguistic sensibilities, it appears, rebel in the eighteenth or in the twentieth century, when French satirists personified death as a man in their graphics, be it as a political orator in the aftermath of the Revolution, as the gambling partner of a miser, or as the waiter presenting the bill to Adolf Hitler.⁶ On the other hand, why is Death, “der Tod,” in Klaus Drechsler’s aluminum

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print “Death with a Child” (*Tod mit Kind*, 1991) a woman dressed in a billowing skirt, a nurse perhaps, who hurriedly carries away the baby in her bony arms?⁷ In Paul Celan’s poetry, Death makes its appearance not only as “a master from Germany” but also, less famously, in a poem in *Thread Sums* (*Fadensonnen*, 1968), as “die Tödin,” the Death-Woman. The graphics of Félicien Rops have it both ways as well: Death is presented sometimes as a man, sometimes as a woman – as a female dancer in a seedy night club in the etching “Dancing Death” (*La Mort qui danse*, 1865?), but as a skeleton in tails, with a monocle in his eye-socket, in the etching “Le Vice suprême” (1884).⁸ Why is it, finally, that in Rilke’s fifth *Duino Elegy*, it is “Madame Lamort” who sells “the paltry winter hats of fate” and that in George Tabori’s play *Mein Kampf* (1987) it is “Frau Tod” (Frau Death in Tabori’s own English version) who picks Adolf Hitler as her tool? If grammatical gender did indeed determine the gender of our personifications of death, these examples would all point to some sort of incongruity, and yet they are not exceptional cases; they can easily be multiplied, leaving us wondering: what is the rule and what is the exception?

Observations of a different kind call attention to the problem that seems to be announcing itself here. In Edvard Munch’s well known lithograph “Kiss of Death,” the skull kisses the cheek of a young woman whose flowing tresses identify her as a representative of a type quite common in Munch’s oeuvre – clearly, this is the familiar death eroticism of the *fin de siècle*, what else?⁹ But this picture was first published as an illustration for Strindberg’s short play *Simoom* (*Samum*, in the journal *Quickborn*, 1899) – and there, surprisingly, the situation is entirely different. In the play, set in colonial Africa, a folkloric local witch holds a skull up to a captive Frenchman, telling him that he is seeing his own death’s head in a mirror. (The shock deprives him of his sanity and his life.) So in “Kiss of Death,” the long-haired figure, visible only as head and shoulders, would be a man; he, and not a woman, would be receiving the kiss of Death?¹⁰ Our thoughts are getting lost in the psycho-labyrinth of those sexual confusions of the turn of the century which are re-emerging today in the widespread fascination with androgyny.

Gustave Moreau’s celebrated painting “The Young Man and Death” (*Le Jeune Homme et la Mort*, 1865) presents a similar challenge.¹¹ In the

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densely allegorical world of this picture, Death, an unequivocally female angel of death with hourglass and sword, appears behind the half-nude young man in the foreground. An entirely unthreatening, oddly absent expression is on her face. In two preparatory sketches, however, Death was not a woman but a winged greybeard.¹² How are we to explain this change from one image of death to another, from the male to the female?

Surely, such observations cry out for further inquiry. Yet curiously, it turns out that while there is indeed some writing on the general subject, hardly any of it proves illuminating. As so often, the older studies are richer in information than in judgment, while it is the other way round with more recent ones. Still, patient collecting of “evidence,” sometimes trying, sometimes fascinating, occasionally helped by serendipity that played “pertinent things . . . into one’s hands virtually in the manner of a procurer” (as Thomas Mann has it in *The Story of a Novel: The Genesis of “Doctor Faustus”*), was eventually rewarded, I think, by insights into thematic and iconologic contexts of male or female personifications of Death and into the factors in intellectual and cultural history that gave rise to them and endowed them with specific meaning.

The classical mythological tradition, it turned out, was not alone in playing a role in the determination of the gender of Death in art and literature. The Bible had a powerful impact as well. If, for example, the Middle Ages believed that death was the wages of sin, then the question arose: was it Adam’s sin or Eve’s which brought death into the world? And, according to an alchemy of the imagination widespread at the time, the answer to this question then suggested that death had to be visualized as male or female, respectively. The Renaissance and Baroque periods, on the other hand, tended to identify Death and the devil. This makes sense if we remember that, according to the Book of Wisdom (2:24), it is the devil, rather than Adam or Eve, who brought death into the world. And just as the devil may appear in male or female shape in folklore and in art, so may Death; and as he or she does so, Death comes to be eroticized in an unprecedented manner, creating new tensions and relationships between the Grim Reaper figures and their victims. Instead of fearful and gruesome biblical Death, the skeleton, it was the Death of Antiquity, Thanatos, stylized as the gentle, friendly youth with a still

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smoldering downturned torch, that fascinated the Romantic Age, revealing its radically changed attitude to death, or rather life. This attitude then also allowed artists and writers to “domesticate” Death as a friend, indeed “the last best friend” (Robert Southey), but as a bridegroom as well (not without a secularizing reminder of Jesus as the bridegroom of the truly Christian soul) or, more rarely, as a bride – both of them fervently desired. In a later period, extending from what is loosely called decadence all the way to our own days, the eroticism implied in the bridegroom or bride metaphor has an impact in yet another personification rampant in art and literature: Death as the dangerous, yet irresistible, sexual seductress, be it in the raucous ambiance of a floorshow or in the austere aura of quasi-religion. (*The Italian Blackshirts*, by the way, marched to “Life, thou art my friend; death, thou art my mistress.”) In turn, the seductress in this period calls forth the complementary image of the seducer at the masked ball of life.

These remarks can, of course, no more than hint at the wealth of images that the creative impulse has produced over hundreds of years of imagining the unimaginable in the Western world. At any given time, related and contrary images of death naturally cluster around the dominant ones. Different cultural contexts, different group-specific views as well as different individual attitudes create different images of death. They are male and female images that each comprise a wide variety of further differentiations: old and young, beautiful and ugly, fatherly and motherly, terrifying and seductive, contemptible and venerable, and so on.

Such images may or may not reveal something about the “nature” of death (a topic of great interest in popular theology today); they may or may not contribute something to the ideologies of feminism or its opponents – or to the loosening up of these ideologies. There is no doubt, however, that they open our eyes for aspects of “the world as interpretation,” that is, for humans, individuals and groups, orienting themselves in their world by making such images and thereby, ultimately, defining themselves. The history of such images in literature and art might offer a variation on the cultural history of the West that may appear eccentric at first glance but does not lose its fascination on closer inspection. To preserve and arouse this fascination, the following pages, in spite of their

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bookish footnotes, have been written in the manner of an essay: as an initial foray into extensive and multifarious uncharted territory.

The first chapter is systematic in orientation; it touches upon a number of works that will be discussed in context and in greater detail in the subsequent, historically oriented chapters. In those chapters the intention is, as it has to be in a pioneering study of this kind, to present as great and varied a wealth of examples as is compatible with a sensible overview.

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I

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.¹ 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.² 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,³ transforms the unin-

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tellible 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.⁴

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“Strange are these creatures, strange indeed, / Who what’s unfathomable, fathom,”⁵ 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.”⁶ 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),⁷ 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.⁸ 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