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

Karl S. Guthke

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## 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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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



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*Mensch und Tod* (Düsseldorf: Tritlsch, 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.