Social Inequality and Death as Illustrated in Late-Medieval Death Dances

Johan P. Mackenbach, MD, PhD

ABSTRACT

Late-medieval murals and books of the then-popular "dances of death" usually represented the living according to their social standing. These works of art thus provide an interesting opportunity to study the relationship between social inequality and death as it was perceived by the works' commissioners or executers. The social hierarchy in these dances of death is mostly based on the scheme of the three orders of the feudal society; variations relate to the inclusion of female characters, new occupations, and non-Christian characters. Many dances of death contain severe judgments on high-placed persons and thus seem to be expressions of a desire for greater social equality. However, a more thorough analysis reveals that the equality of all before death that these dances of death proclaimed held nothing for the poor but only threatened the rich. Because of a lack of reliable data, it is not yet completely clear whether during the late Middle Ages all were indeed equally at risk for premature mortality. Available evidence, however, suggests that the clergy and nobility actually had a higher life expectancy than people placed lower in the social hierarchy.

Despite modern changes in the perception of, and knowledge about, social inequality and mortality, these dances of death still capture the imagination, and they suggest that the phenomenon of socioeconomic inequalities in mortality could be used more to emphasize contemporary moral messages on social inequality. (*Am J Public Health.* 1995;85: 1285–1292)

Introduction

The fattest will be putrified first.

Guyot Marchant
Danse Macabre (1485)

During the late Middle Ages, the "dance of death" or "danse macabre" was a favorite theme in Western and Middle European literature and painting. Originally, this may have been a real dance or procession, but around 1400 it developed into a literary and pictorial art form, usually consisting of a series of poems illustrated by a procession of the living and dead. The living were portrayed according to their social standing and were accompanied by a corpse or skeleton. The two most frequent types of death dance were those depicted in mural paintings (on the walls of a church or cemetery, with texts underneath) and those published as books illustrated with woodcuts.[1–6]

One of the most famous examples is the book published in 1485 by the Parisian printer Guyot Marchant; this book reproduced one of the first mural paintings of the dance of death, the now lost *Danse Macabre* of the Saints Innocents cemetery in Paris. Table 1 shows the social order in this dance of death. Beginning with the apparently highest social position of the time (i.e., the pope), we descend the social hierarchy, alternating between religious and secular "occupations." Well below the middle level we pass the physician, and finally we arrive at the very bottom of the social ladder, represented by Franciscan monk, infant, clerk, and hermit. Figure 1 reproduces some of the woodcuts from this immensely popular dance of death.[7]

This genre of book editions reached its artistic apogee in Hans Holbein's dance of death, completed in 1525 in Basel, Switzerland, but not published until 1538 in Lyons, France, as a result of the troubles of the Reformation. Holbein's sequence of woodcuts still reflected the social hierarchy of his time; however, because he focused more than Marchant on individual representations his woodcuts no longer showed a procession of the living and dead. Therefore, his dance of death was no longer medieval in character but anticipated the Renaissance. Figure 2 shows reproductions of some of Holbein's woodcuts.[8]

The historian Huizinga,[9] in his book *The Waning of the Middle Ages*, situated the theme of the dance of death against the background of the fierce emotions that death generated in times of war and pestilence. He wrote: "While it reminded the spectators of the frailty and the vanity of earthly things, the death-dance at the same time preached social equality as the Middle Ages understood it. Death levelling the various ranks and professions."[9] In order to convey this message, the dance of death gave an account of social inequality during life and used the apparent equality of all men before death as a reminder that a high social rank does not protect against death and may even make it more difficult for the soul of the deceased to reach heaven.

The dance of death was a member of a larger family of death themes that also included macabre representations on funeral monuments, huge scenes of the triumph of death, *artes moriendi* (manuals on how to die properly), and so forth.[10] The popularity of these death themes may

The author is with the Department of Public Health, Erasmus University, Rotterdam, the Netherlands.

Requests for reprints should be sent to Johan P. Mackenbach, MD, PhD, Department of Public Health, Erasmus University, PO Box 1738, 3000 DR Rotterdam, the Netherlands.

TABLE 1—The Order of Social Positions in Guyot Marchant's *Danse Macabre* of 1485

No.	Social Position
	Author
1.	Pope
2.	Emperor
3.	Cardinal
4.	King
5.	Patriarch[a]
6.	Constable
7.	Archbishop
8.	Knight
9.	Bishop
10.	Squire
11.	Abbot
12.	Bailiff
13.	Man of learning[b]
14.	Bourgeois
15.	Canon
16.	Merchant
17.	Carthusian
18.	Sergeant
19.	Monk
20.	Usurer/poor man
21.	Physician
22.	Lover
23.	Parish priest
24.	Laborer[c]
25.	Advocate
26.	Minstrel
27.	Franciscan
28.	Infant
29.	Clerk[d]
30.	Hermit
	Dead king
	Master

Note. In the second edition, the following were added: Legate (5), Duke (6), Schoolmaster with pupil (19), Man-at-arms (20), Promotor (prosecutor in ecclesiastical court) (31), Gaoler (32), Pilgrim, (33), Shepherd (34), Halberdier (39), and Fool (40).
Source. Compiled from Kaiser.[7]
[a]Of Constantinople.
[b]Sometimes interpreted as "astrologer."
[c]Farm laborer.
[d]Young clergyman.

partly be related to the ravages of the great plague epidemics, the first of which occurred in 1348 and then recurred at irregular intervals throughout the 14th and 15th centuries. The Black Death certainly left its mark, not only in the major art forms of the period[11] but also in other aspects of culture such as testaments, bequests, and other "strategies for the after-life."[12,13] According to Philippe Ariès, historian of Western attitudes toward death, these changes were also related to a process of individualization of the experience of death. Contrary to earlier periods, when it was believed that there would be a collective "last judgment" at the end of history, it was now believed that every individual would be judged immediately after death.[10] In this new spiritual climate, a good preparation by the individual for his or her own death became increasingly important.

The dance of death can be seen as an illustrated sermon that summons the faithful to do penance for their sins before suffering an untimely death (and, in those times, many deaths must have been untimely!). It was believed by the late-medieval church that an unprepared death greatly increased the risk of being sent to hell, and so the preaching friars, such as the Dominicans and Franciscans, urged believers to contemplate their sins and better their lives before it was too late. The first death dance poem was probably written in a Dominican monastery sometime in the 14th century, and this Latin version was then translated into German, French, and other languages for preaching purposes.[4] Throughout its history, the dance of death remained loosely associated with the preaching orders, and several were actually executed in Dominican or Franciscan monasteries. Furthermore, many dances of death contained a representation of a preacher at the start and/or end of the procession. Although in many cases we do not know exactly the commissioners of these works of art, this link with the preaching orders does give us some information on their backgrounds and intentions.

The call to people to contemplate their sins and better their lives was directed at those of all ranks, not only because all men were mortal but also because, according to the belief of the time, higher demands would be made upon higher placed persons when they were to be judged.[7,14] This line of reasoning can be illustrated with some citations from Guyot Marchant. His introduction reads:

> You [the reader] see the higher placed persons start [the dance]
> for there is nobody who will escape death.
> It is sad to think of this:
> All is made of one substance [the mortal flesh].

And the verse that recounts the answer of the patriarch of Constantinople to his dead companion is as follows:

> To rise too highly is not wise.
> A high estate spoils innumerable people
> but only a few want to acknowledge this.
> To rise highly makes them succumb.[7]

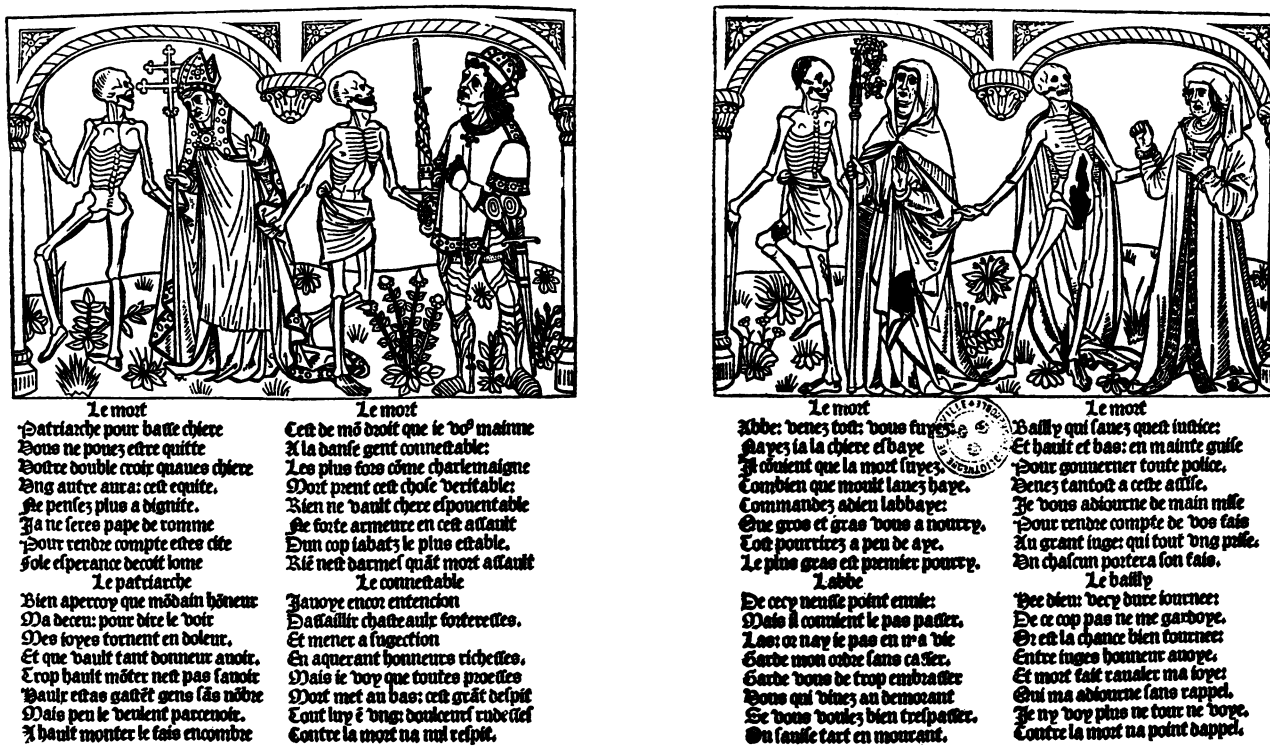
In this paper, I describe the way in which the relationship between social inequality and death was portrayed in late-medieval dances of death (i.e., dances of death painted or published before 1550). First, I summarize the various representations of the social hierarchy in these dances of death. Second, I analyze the way in which social inequality was justified or criticized in the dances. Finally, I discuss whether, indeed, all men were equal before death in the late Middle Ages.

Social Stratification according to the Late-Medieval Dance of Death

The representation of various social positions occupied a central place in the dances of death. They can be used to study social stratification in the late Middle Ages or at least to obtain some insight into the way social stratification was perceived by the commissioners or executers of these works of art. As previously stated, the commissioners were mostly clergymen, often from the Dominican and Franciscan orders. Although these orders had a critical attitude toward the church establishment, it was certainly in their interest to propagate the church's conceptions of the organization of society.[15]

This probably explains why the dances of death often retained the scheme of the three orders of the feudal society, which was already outdated in the 14th century. The three orders were the clergy, the nobility, and the "third estate," which originally contained only farmers but later also accommodated the new urban classes.[16,17] Attention has already been drawn to Guyot Marchant's alternation of religious and secular personalities (Table 1), and although many dances of death breached this rigid scheme to some extent (e.g., by including an empress after the emperor), it can surely be referred to as the "classical" version of the representation of the social hierarchy in the late-medieval dance of death. The main alternative, which occurred much less frequently, was a scheme in which religious and secular characters were separated and represented in two rows.[15]

Table 2 gives an overview of the main late-medieval dances of death and of the way the social hierarchy was represented. Many important examples are from France and from Germany and its southern



Source. Reproduced with permission from Kaiser.[7]

FIGURE 1—A selection of Guyot Marchant's woodcuts: patriarch (5) and constable (6), abbot (11) and bailiff (12).

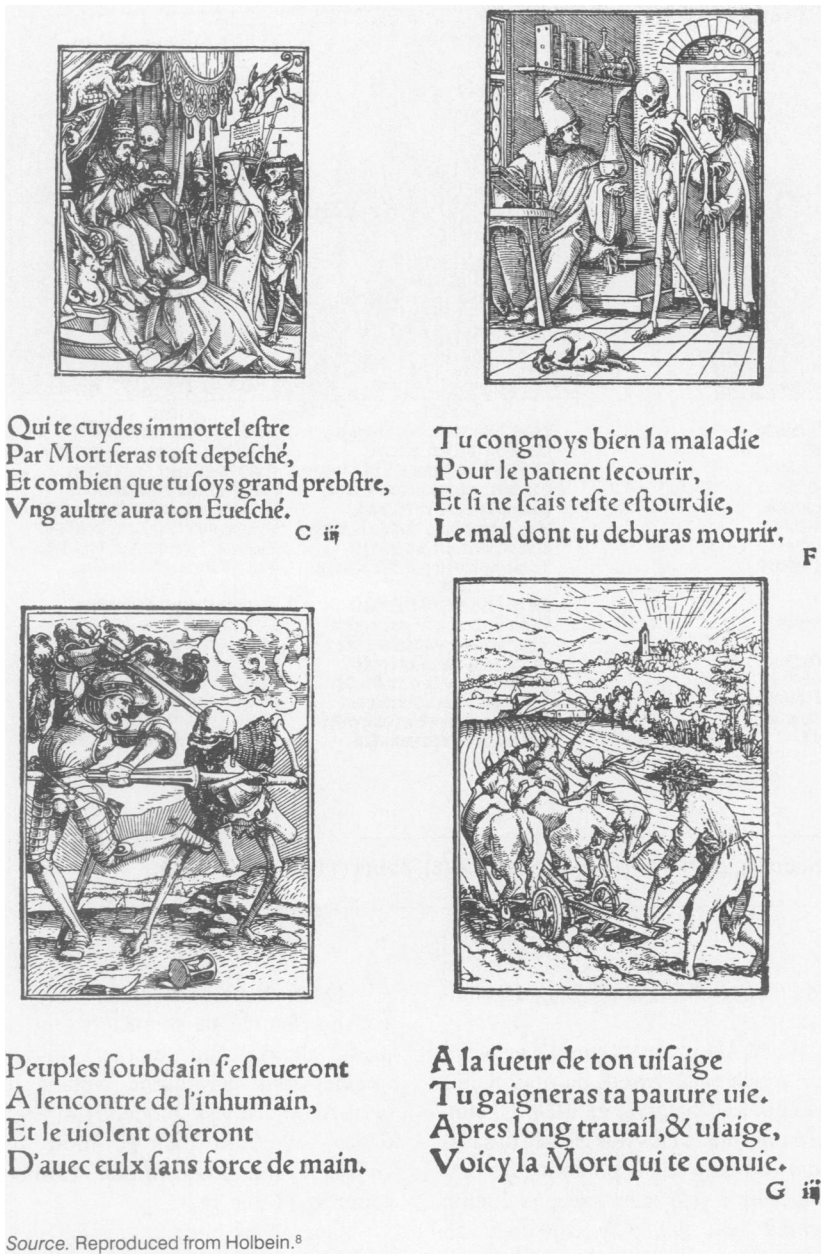
neighbors, especially Switzerland. The most important British example is a mural painting since lost in a cloister next to St. Paul's Cathedral in London. A dance of death was painted on the walls of this cloister that closely followed the *Danse Macabre* of the Saints Innocents cemetery in Paris. The paintings were destroyed in 1549, but the poems (translated from the French by John Lydgate) were preserved. Lydgate added five characters to the French original (i.e., lady of great estate, abbess, amorous gentlewoman, juror, and fool). Several manuscripts containing this English "daunce of machabray" have been preserved, some of which incorporated even further additions to the original list of characters.[1,2]

Table 2 shows that the classical version of the representation of social hierarchy was indeed the most frequent. However, sometimes variations were brought into this basic order, shedding an interesting light on the perceptions of the structure of local societies. The main variations are indicated in Table 2: the insertion of female characters, the insertion of a number of occupations originating in the towns of the period, and the addition of non-Christian ("pagan") characters.

Guyot Marchant's *Danse Macabre* of 1485, which was based on the Saints Innocents wall painting of 1424/25, contained only men. This was clearly unsatisfactory to many of his potential customers, because a year later a second edition appeared that not only contained an expanded version of the original *Danse Macabre des hommes* but also included a *Danse Macabre des femmes.*[7] The order in which the women in this dance of death were represented is given in Table 3. The main characteristics of the representation of the social positions of women are surprisingly familiar to modern readers. Only a limited number of positions (such as the abbess, vender, theologian, lady's maid, midwife) were defined in terms of the woman's occupation. Most social positions of women were derived either from their husband's occupation (e.g., wife of the knight, wife of the squire, and, to some extent, queen and duchess) or from their female social roles in the family and the community at large (widow, newlywed, pregnant woman, old lady, witch).

Other dances of death simply inserted some female characters (e.g., empress, abbess, nun, mother) into the original, male-only order. Notably, this occurred much less frequently in French dances of death than in those from Germany and other Middle European countries (Table 2).

One of the most interesting aspects of the representation of society in dances of death concerns the way in which all kinds of new occupations were taken into account. In the 14th and 15th centuries, the archaic scheme of the three orders was cracking and slowly falling to pieces.[16] The "third estate" had been growing in importance for quite some time, but we find only a faint reflection of this in the late-medieval dances of death. The number of overt representatives of the clergy and nobility (including military occupations derived from the nobility) was out of proportion to their social prominence. As an example, we may again refer to Guyot Marchant's *Danse Macabre,* which included only a very limited number of representatives of commerce and trade (bourgeois, merchant, usurer; see Table 1).



Source. Reproduced from Holbein.[8]

FIGURE 2—A selection of Hans Holbein's woodcuts: pope (1), physician (26), knight (31), and peasant (38).

Middle European dances of death, in general, included a higher proportion of these urban occupations (Table 2). The dance of death of the Dominicans' monastery in Basel, also called the *Grossbaseler Totentanz* (in contrast to the *Kleinbaseler Totentanz* in the Klingenthal monastery in Klein-Basle), may serve as an example. It was painted to commemorate the plague epidemic of 1439, which killed 5000 people, including a number of highly placed clergymen who happened to be in the town for a major church council. Although an older example was used, a number of new characters were represented, such as herald, sheriff, guardian, and cook. As a result of these insertions, the Grossbaseler dance of death appears much more modern overall than the more archaic types such as Guyot Marchant's. This work was destroyed in 1805, but reproductions were published by Merian in 1621. Figure 3 contains some of these reproductions.[7]

The Grossbaseler dance of death was also the first to include a Jew and several other non-Christian characters. Most dances of death did not include persons who stood outside the mainstream of Christian society. Nevertheless, the message was also thought to apply to them, and, as a consequence, some of the social orders ended with non-Christian characters such as Jews, Turks, and "heathens" as a general category. The texts concerning the Jews frequently had a distinctly anti-Semitic flavor, referring to stereotypes of the Jews' guilt over the death of Christ and of usury and cunning tricks. It is important to note here that plague epidemics not only gave rise to many dances of death but also led to pogroms, as it was sometimes believed that the cause of plague was poison spread by the Jews.[18] The Spanish dance of death included not only a rabbi but some Moorish personalities. The non-Christian personalities were almost always placed near the end of the row.

Were Death Dances about Social Justice?

Superficially, the link between the desire for greater social equality, as manifested during the late Middle Ages, and the message of the death dances seems obvious. Many dances of death contained very severe judgments on higher placed persons, and inevitably readers or spectators were reminded of the rebellious movements of the time, such as the German peasants' revolt of 1524/25.[19] For example, Holbein's image, cut during this revolt, of a knight being killed by a rather ferocious impersonation of death must at least have reminded the reader of these events and may have even been intended to do so (Figure 2).[8] Also, many death dances had a peasant or land laborer at the rear of the row, and these characters were usually judged much less negatively than the other personalities. There may even have been some compassion, which was often conspicuously lacking in the portrayal of other characters. For example, Holbein, together with many other authors of death dances, presented death to the peasant as a redemption from all earthly laboring (Figure 2).

Some of the texts seem to be quite explicit in their social critique. Guyot Marchant's *Danse Macabre* was relatively mild, but some of the German and Swiss death dances were considerably more severe with regard to their characters. The *Knoblochtzer Druck* (also called *Der*

TABLE 2—Overview of the Main Late-Medieval Dances of Death and Their Representations of the Social Hierarchy

Country/Locality	Year[a]	Preserved	Representation of Social Hierarchy: No. of Positions	Representation of Social Hierarchy: Order[b]
France				
Mural paintings and sculptures[c]				
La Chaise-Dieu	ca. 1415?	Yes	23	Cw
Paris (Saints Innocents)	1424/25	No	30	C
Kermaria	ca. 1430?	Yes	25	Cw
Meslay-le-Grenet	ca. 1490	Yes	19	C
La Ferté-Loupière	ca. 1500	Yes	19	C
Kientzheim	ca. 1517	No	25	Cw
Rouen[d]	1526	Yes	11	S
Manuscripts and books				
Paris (Marchant)	1485	Yes	30	C
Paris (Vérard)	ca. 1485	Yes	30	C
Britain				
Mural paintings and sculptures[c]				
London (St. Paul)	ca. 1430	No	35	Cw
Germany				
Mural paintings and sculptures[c]				
Ulm	1440	No	24	Cw
Lübeck (Marienkirche)	1466	No	23	Cwu
Berlin	ca. 1485	Yes	28	S
Dresden[d]	1534/37	Yes	23	Sw
Manuscripts and books				
Codex palatinus	ca. 1350?	Yes	24	Cw
Heidelberger Blockbuch	ca. 1465	Yes	25	Cw
Handschrift Kassel	ca. 1470	Yes	35	Mwu
Knoblochtzer Druck	ca. 1485	Yes	38	Mwu
Lübecker Druck	1496	Yes	28	Cwu
Handschrift Zimmern	ca. 1520	Yes	38	Swu
Switzerland				
Mural paintings and sculptures[c]				
Basle (Dominican's monastery)	ca. 1445	No	38	Cwup
Basle (Klingenthal)	ca. 1475	No	39	Cwu
Bern	1516/20	No	41	Mwup
Manuscripts and books				
Basle (Holbein)	1525	Yes	34	Cwu
Austria				
Mural paintings and sculptures[c]				
Metnitz	ca. 1500	Yes	25	Cw
Former Yugoslavia				
Mural paintings and sculptures[c]				
Beram	1474	Yes	10	Sw
Hrastovlje	1490	Yes	11	Cw
Italy				
Mural paintings and sculptures[c]				
Carisolo	1519	Yes	17	Sw
Pinzolo	1539	Yes	18	Sw
Spain				
Manuscripts and books				
Danza general de la muerte	ca. 1400?	Yes	33	Cp

[a]According to Hammerstein.[5]
[b]The various orders have been characterized as follows: C = classical order (as with Guyot Marchant), sometimes with small variations; S = religious and secular personalities separated; M = original order mixed up; w = women inserted; u = typically urban professions or social positions inserted; p = pagan characters added.
[c]Mural paintings unless otherwise indicated.
[d]Sculptures.

TABLE 3—The Order of Social Positions in Guyot Marchant's *Danse Macabre des femmes* of 1486

No.	Social Position
1.	Queen
2.	Duchess
3.	Governess
4.	Wife of the knight
5.	Abbess
6.	Wife of the squire
7.	Prioress
8.	Noble lady
9.	Bourgeoise
10.	Widow
11.	Vender (female)
12.	Bailiff (female)
13.	Spouse
14.	Foster mother
15.	Virgin
16.	Theologian (female)
17.	Newlywed woman
18.	Pregnant woman
19.	Chambermaid
20.	Supplicant (female)
21.	Old lady
22.	Franciscan nun
23.	Host (female)
24.	Novice (female)
25.	Shepherdess
26.	Woman at the gallows
27.	Village woman
28.	Old woman
29.	Trafficker (female)
30.	Woman in love
31.	Midwife
32.	Girl
33.	Nun
34.	Witch

Source. Compiled from Kaiser.[7]

Doten Dantz mit Figuren [the death dance with figures] or *Oberdeutscher achtzeiliger Dotentanz* [an Upper German death dance with poems consisting of eight lines each]) is a good example. The emphasis here, as so often, was on one particular type of sin (i.e., the love of money). In the introduction, a dead king speaks the following words to the reader:

> Let all men think of me
> and beware of the temptations of the world.
> I was rich and held in high esteem.
> Gold and silver I could spend,
> but now I am in the power of worms.

The cardinal, after having been criticized by his dead companion, admits:

> I have stuffed myself greedily
> with the goods of this world,
> like a robber does.

The abbot:

> I would like to have been
> a poor monk for all my days. . . .
> There will be complaints from the priests
> that I have taken so many gifts,
> and that I have suppressed the poor with force.

Source. Reproduced with permission from Kaiser.[7]

FIGURE 3—A selection of Merian's reproductions of the Grossbaseler dance of death: empress (3), beggar (21), sheriff (28), and Jew (33).

And, as a final example, the dead companion of the "official" says to him:

> If you had administered justice to the poor as you did to the rich,
> you would have gone to this dance cheerfully.[7]

Nevertheless, when reading the texts carefully from beginning to end, it becomes clear that a desire for greater social justice cannot have been the main background of death dances. First, all the reproaches were followed by an exhortation to do penance and save one's soul, thereby emphasizing individual salvation instead of earthly justice. But also it is quite clear that no one, perhaps with the exception of humble people such as peasants or land laborers, escaped these harsh reproaches. The same *Knoblochtzer Druck* let the dead companion say to the artisan:

> You have the habit of staying awake late at night
> to make clothes, fur coats and shoes,
> to pay, sell, loan and bail,
> but you care only little for your soul.

And this death dance ends in the vigorous image of a charnel house:

> Here lie the bones, large and small.
> Whether man or woman, knight or servant,
> everybody has the right to lie here.
> The poor with the rich, the servant with the gentleman. . . .
> Those who are noble and powerful,
> rich or beautiful,
> do not raise yourself above the others.[7]

The Grossbaseler dance of death did not even have compassion for the lame beggar (Figure 3). It portrays him as a leper: he has lost one of his feet, and he has to twist his left arm strangely around his stick because of his deformed hand. The small flask hanging at his beggar's bag is also a frequent attribute, and it may contain the ointment given to lepers during the last mass, before they were expelled as living dead, or simply his drinking supply (lepers had to carry their own).[20] Despite his tragic fate, death says to him:

> Hop this way with your crutch,
> death wants to pull you down now.
> You are worth nothing to the world,
> come and join my dance too.

The beggar answers with the following bitter words:

> A poor cripple here on earth,
> as a friend he is not wanted.
> Death, however, wants to be his friend,
> he takes him away together with the rich.[7]

It appears as if the desire for social equality had been subtly transformed into something much closer to the transcendental message of the church. In these dances of death, there were clear reminiscences of a desire for social equality, but the preaching friars had cleverly integrated this desire into the official teachings of the church, thereby neutralizing the revolutionary potential. As so perceptively noted by Kaiser, this form of equality had nothing of a promise to the poor but only threatened the rich.[7,21] It was a downward leveling of all that was propagated, and because the reward for earthly poverty was admission to heaven, there even was an element of justification of poverty and social inequality in these dances of death.

Were All Persons Equal before Death in the Late Middle Ages?

The conjunction of social (in)equality and death, as viewed in these dances of death, raises the issue of whether the risks

of dying were indeed equally distributed throughout the population during these times. Of course, the equality of all before death was primarily understood in an existential sense, but there was also an implicit assumption of equality in a more literal sense. If the high clergy and nobility clearly had a higher life expectancy than ordinary persons, the whole idea behind the dance of death would have been less self-evident. It sometimes even appears as if the authors of death dances assumed that higher placed persons had higher risks of dying prematurely than ordinary people. In Guyot Marchant's *Danse Macabre,* the dead person who summons the abbot says:

> You will putrify in a little while.
> The fattest will be putrified first.[7]

Currently, the existence of socioeconomic inequalities in mortality is widely acknowledged among public health professionals, and these inequalities are regarded by many as a core issue that serves as a powerful illustration of the impact of social and economic conditions on health. Paradoxically, whereas the obesity of the abbot was a sign of his high living standards, nowadays obesity is more frequent among the lower social classes and is one of the many factors contributing to their higher risks of mortality.[22,23]

The awareness of socioeconomic inequalities in health dates back to the 19th century, when great figures in public health like Villermé, Chadwick, and Virchow devoted a large part of their scientific and practical work to this issue.[24–26] This was made possible by the availability of national population statistics, which permitted the calculation of, for example, mortality rates by occupation or by city district.

The only reliable source of mortality data in the general population that existed before national population registers were implemented (i.e., generally before the 19th century) was the parish register of baptisms and burials. The time at which church registers were first kept varied from country to country and from region to region, but most of the earliest parish registers date back to the 16th century.[27] Only a very limited number of analyses of socioeconomic inequalities in mortality have been made on the basis of data from these registers. One of the best and most widely known is a study of socioeconomic inequalities in mortality in 17th-century Geneva, in which it was shown that the life expectancy at birth of children born in the lowest occupational class was only 18 years and that the life expectancy of the highest occupational class was 36 years.[28] Data for other European cities from the 18th century confirm this picture of huge differences in mortality rates between persons with higher and lower social ranks.[29] It is less clear whether the same differences were found in rural areas because the evidence is much less consistent.[30]

It is not certain whether socioeconomic inequalities in mortality also existed before the 17th or 18th century. Some believe that these inequalities emerged only when the large epidemics started to recede and when the first improvements in nutrition, housing, and individual and public hygiene began to have an impact.[31,32] This impression is based in part on a study of the mortality experience of the British peerage that suggests that the life expectancy of this upper-class group was no different from that of the general population until it began to diverge after the middle of the 18th century.[33,34]

It is nevertheless difficult to believe that higher placed persons did indeed have the same survival chances as the majority of the population in the 14th and 15th centuries. This was a period characterized by frequent mortality crises. There were dramatic short-run fluctuations during which mortality rose to levels 2 or 3 times higher than in "normal" years when calculated over wide areas and to levels 10 or more times higher when calculated over more restricted areas. These mortality crises arose from three frequently interlinked causes: war, pestilence, and famine. War was a cause of epidemics, as a result of the circulation of soldiers, and also of famine, as a result of pillage and the destruction of harvests. Famine, in turn, caused epidemics.[27] Of the three causes, famine, or more generally undernutrition, provides the most obvious link with socioeconomic conditions. This is clear from the association between mortality crises and food prices at the aggregate level,[35] but must also have been true at the individual level. The rich certainly had a lower risk of dying from undernutrition than the majority of citizens, who were probably malnourished even in "normal" years.

Whether the risks of dying from the effects of war and epidemics were also unevenly distributed throughout the population is less clear. Perhaps those of nobility status were more likely to be killed in combat. Furthermore, knowledge regarding the spread of infectious diseases was very limited and inaccurate, so even the rich or mighty must have had difficulty escaping the death risks of epidemic diseases. Nevertheless, the better nutritional status of the rich may have provided some protection.

In addition, anecdotal evidence suggests that mortality from the plague was higher in the lower social classes. This disease is especially relevant because the popularity of death dances in the 15th century has frequently been ascribed to the ravages of the plague epidemics, which appeared to kill rich and poor indiscriminately.[18] Reports of health commissions in plague-ridden towns frequently mentioned that there were large differences in mortality between rich and poor.[36] There were probably a number of reasons for these differences. For example, the poor had worse housing conditions (e.g., crowded houses where rats and fleas were common) and fewer possibilities for observing hygienic practices (e.g., washing and replacing clothes). Attempts by communities to control the spread of the plague by isolating (in pest houses) those people who were believed to have spread the disease (e.g., the poor, wanderers and beggars) probably also tended to increase the death toll among the poor.[37] In addition, the very rich had the opportunity to escape from plague-ridden towns by going to their country houses, thereby undoubtedly reducing their risks of infection. Boccaccio used this as a motive in his *Decameron:* a group of young men and women from the upper classes fled from Florence during the first great plague epidemic of 1348 and went to a country estate to kill time with erotic stories.[38]

Final Remarks

In this paper, I have described the way in which the relationship between social inequality and death was portrayed in late-medieval dances of death. Three different themes have been discussed: the representation of the social hierarchy, justification and criticism of social inequality, and the empirical evidence of socioeconomic inequalities in mortality at the end of the Middle Ages.

For each of these three themes, even a superficial comparison with the present-day situation reveals the important changes that have taken place during the 500 years that have passed. Social stratification in present-day Western societies is primarily based on economic distinctions such as those between occupational

classes. The clergy and nobility have been submerged, and it is the "third order" that has formed the basis for the now dominant occupational classes. It is likely that the extent of social inequality has been reduced over time, but such inequality is still perceived by many as being unjust. The solace that the medieval critic of social inequality perhaps found in the apparent equality of all before death is no longer acceptable to us. For the deeply Christian medieval mind, death was not only the end of life but the start of the afterlife, and the bitter inequalities during life on earth could, to some extent, be traded off against the equality of life in heaven. For the secular 20th-century mind, it is now or never, and it is the awareness that this is the only life we will ever have that makes substantial inequality in the length of life so deeply disturbing. Finally, we can state more confidently than our medieval forebears that such inequality exists because of the abundant availability of statistical data and research findings that record inequalities not visible to the individual observer.

Despite all of the changes, these late-medieval dances of death still capture the imagination. They have provided Western civilization with images that are so powerful that, throughout the centuries, artists have tried to develop their own, "modern" versions.[39] During the late Middle Ages, the images of cadavers with slit bellies or of grimacing skeletons and the cruel texts were used deliberately to impress the readers or spectators and to ensure that the church had every opportunity of bringing home its spiritual message. Although this message was not about social justice, it did include an exhortation to those who held privileged positions in society not to abuse their position and to carry out acts of mercy. In a society much harsher than ours, this may, to some extent, have helped mitigate the effects of social inequality.

Today many of us are no longer interested in the spiritual message of the dances of death, but, similar to the commissioners and executors of the dances, we are concerned with the relationship between social inequality and death, and we may even have a moral message based on this relationship. We now know that social inequality is linked strongly to mortality, and one might even say that the link with mortality is tangible proof that social inequality is not only an abstract concept but "really exists." In fact, the higher mortality rates among those who are socioeconomically disadvantaged provide one of the strongest possible arguments in favor of egalitarian values. Remarkably, the "visibility" of social inequality provided by this link with mortality has never produced powerful images; rather, it has produced only dull bar diagrams. Perhaps, with some creativity, this link could be used more to emphasize an important moral message of our time: Would it not be agreed by many that societies in which those who have less of everything also die earlier are truly sick? □

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