
THE EVOLUTION OF THE THREE LIVING AND THE THREE DEAD: FROM MORAL MEANING TO MEMENTO MORI

Bella Bunten

The tale of the *Three Dead Kings* or *The Three Living and the Three Dead*¹ survived the centuries in at least 15 variants². Broadly, the story follows three young aristocrats who embark on a hunt only to find themselves accosted by a trio of undead³ who appear from the murky depths of the woods and reveal themselves to be direct ancestors of the young hunters, or otherwise members of the past elite depending on the version. The skeletons, each in varying states of decay, reveal to the men that their vanity and materiality in life led to their spending eternity in Hell. The skeletons hope that this message will convince the young men to change their ways, in hopes of achieving a better afterlife. Typically, the young men heed this lesson, and often go on to build a church to prove their piety as such was the fashionable mode of devotion in the Middle Ages.

Transmitted in multiple vernacular languages as well as Latin⁴, the story of three young aristocrats encountering three skeletons while on a hunting trip was a familiar vignette in the Middle Ages; familiar enough that by the fourteenth century images of such an event no longer required their text to be understood.⁵ It is such images that will be the subject of this paper, particularly those created as manuscript illuminations. It is worth noting, however, that depictions of the *Three Living* appeared in various forms, particularly as church wall paintings; notation also suggests the presence of the *Three Living* in a mediums that no longer exist, specifically a diptych and a sculpture commissioned by Jean, duc de Berry in the 15th century.⁶

¹ Hitherto referred to as the *Three Living*.

² Ashby Kinch, *Imago Mortis: Mediating Images of Death in Late Medieval Culture* (Boston: Brill, 2013), 115.

³ Undead, as defined by the Oxford Dictionary, means “technically dead, but still animate.”

⁴ Elina Gertsman, *The Dance of Death in the Middle Ages* (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2010), 23.

⁵ Christine Kralik, “Dialogue and Violence: the Three Living and the Three Dead” in *Mixed Metaphors: The Danse Macabre in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, edited by Sophie Oosterwijk and Stefanie Knöll, (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011) 133-154.

⁶ Kinch, 115.

This essay will not deal with the Italian version of the *Three Living* because as noted by Paul Binski⁷, not only was the macabre less prevalent in Italy but the Italian *Three Living* follows its own distinct tradition centered around the figure of a hermit who is entirely absent from English versions of the subject, and only nominally present in French variants⁸. Instead, this paper will be concerned primarily with French and Flemish renditions, and to a lesser extent English works as manuscript illuminations of the *Three Living* tapered off on the British Isles after 1350⁹.

The purpose of this paper, then, will be to problematize the notion of the motif of the Three Living and the Three Dead as being defined by the double or *doppelgänger*. That is to suggest that by the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, as the image became more associated with the Office of the Dead, it was no longer concerned with the moralizing quality of the interaction between the Three Living and the Three Dead but rather with using the *Three Living* as an image of memento mori; an image to make the viewer contend with the realities of death and decay.

This paper is building upon the work of Christine Kralik in her article “Dialogue and Violence in Medieval Illuminations of the Three Living and the Three Dead”. She tracks the turn towards violence in depictions of the *Three Living*, and ultimately comes to the conclusion that “a representation of an attack on the living by the dead was likely to move the reader-viewer to recognize the urgency of fervent prayer and preparation for death more effectively than a representation of a simple dialogue.”¹⁰ This paper does not contradict that conclusion but rather seeks to expand upon it, by suggesting that the transition in imagery was not simply an attempt to

⁷ Paul Binski, *Medieval Death: Ritual and Representation* (London: British Museum Press, 1996), 123.

⁸ Kinch, 118.

⁹ Susanna Greer Fein, “Life and Death, Reader and Page: Mirrors of Mortality in English Manuscripts,” *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal* 35, no.1 (March 2002) pp.69-94, p. 74.

¹⁰ Kralik, 154.

draw people to contemplate death but rather as stated above, later images of the *Three Living* had lost their moralizing quality, and become memento moris.

The first part of this paper will be dedicated to illustrating the differences between early and late depictions of the *Three Living and the Three Dead*. Most scholarship – particularly that which deals with both the *Three Living* and the *Danse Macabre* – emphasizes the distinct difference between the meanings of the two macabre motifs. The *Three Living* is frequently identified as a moral tale, meant to inspire its viewers to reflect on their lives and repent whereas the *Danse Macabre* is emblematic of the totality of death, and death’s role as the great equalizer. In other words, the encounter with the three dead is an act of warning; the Dance of Death is an inevitability.

Important to such interpretations of the *Three Living*, is the idea of the double touched upon by Binski, Gertsman, Kinch, and notably Greer Fein who wrote an article on the phenomenon. In *Medieval Death*, Binski says that

The confusion brought about by the use of the *doppelgänger*, or ‘double’, motif is related to the notion of the uncanny, simultaneously denying and affirming mortality in an experience which, because of its inner contradictions, can never be quite assimilated, and which through its repression repeatedly throws out the same circular oppositions of dead and living.¹¹

Gertsman, similarly, proposes that “in doubling their victims the corpses appear simultaneously familiar and foreign”¹² and later that

Here, the illicit quality of the encounter is doubly strengthened: the living are made to confront the future corruption of their bodies, while the dead return into the world of the living, reversing, unexpectedly and impossibly, their initial journey into the realm of death.¹³

¹¹ Binski, 138.

¹² Gertsman, 27.

¹³ Gertsman, 29.

Greer Fein focuses on the English versions of the motif found in manuscripts of which there are five.¹⁴ In her article she relates this idea of the double to the physical layout of the image writing that:

In mediaeval art, the spectral motif follows, especially in its earliest forms, a simple iconography of placement: Three Living on the Left, Three Dead on the right, an open gulf between them. This flat pictorial design is essentially binary, with the space between the threesomes established as a mirror-point, the site of inversion between the realm of the Living and that of the Dead. The crossover point does not generally figure in modern analyses of the motif, but it ought to, because it matters greatly. In mediaeval Christian terms, it is the sacral divide between the here and the hereafter, between time and atemporality. The symmetry of the binary image sets this divide before the viewer, at the centre.¹⁵

She continues on to write:

Typically according equal space and/or text to each half, Living and Dead, it *looks* like a mirrored reflection. At the same time, it operates as a reflection for the viewer (in its ternary aspect described by Binski), by a process that depends on a more crucial binary divide, that is, the line between the viewer and the work... The spectator embodies, in *actual* living flesh, the living half of the icon, while the artistic work remains a monitory sign frozen in timelessness. The image thus takes primal hold upon anyone who would contemplate it. The viewer is participant, willing or not.¹⁶

In early images of the *Three Living*, this concept as delineated by Greer Fein is fairly clear. In the Psalter of Robert de Lisle¹⁷, dated to approximately 1310¹⁸, the cast of characters are depicted against abstract backgrounds. The three kings on the left, draped in decadent robes, stand against a largely undecorated background though there is a suggestion of landscape drawn into the bottom of the frame in which the artist has placed them. The king farthest to the left stands distant from the other two kings and holds a scepter between two hands with fingers interlaced. The other two kings stand much closer together, the king nearest the three dead

¹⁴ Greer Fein, 74.

¹⁵ Greer Fein, 70.

¹⁶ Greer Fein, 71-72.

¹⁷ Figure 1.

¹⁸ Binski, plate VIII.

almost appears to be standing in-between them and the middle king in red and green, whom he is holding hands with. This king, in blue and gold¹⁹, also has a falcon perched on one hand, a common motif in illuminations of the *Three Living*²⁰ and a simple way of indicating that the disturbance takes place during a hunt.

On the right side of the page, the three dead stand against a green background embellished with a floral pattern. Unlike the side with the three living, there is no suggestion of terrain, implying that the three dead are not part of the natural world. From left to right, the skeletons act as a sliding scale of decomposition, with the skeleton farthest to the right barely more than bones, and his burial shroud wholly decimated. This skeleton, curiously, stares directly at the viewer, and grins, taking an expression rather like that of a jack o' lantern. This implication of the viewer can be read as a ploy in which to get them to internalize the same message as the three kings. It is worth noting that this image appears alongside an abridged version of the text of the tale.

This layout is echoed in an earlier manuscript from the BnF, Ms. 3142²¹, dated to sometime between 1275-1300²². The three living and three dead are again situated within a rectangle with the living on the left, and the dead on the right. Although this image has no suggestion of a background, the figures' feet do break the established border. Indeed, the feet of the dead skeletons are reminiscent of other depictions of the dead in the Middle Ages, particular tomb figures. The skeletons then, though ostensibly standing, could also be read as lying down as if decorating a coffin. Thus, they skeletons embody the uncanniness of the encounter between the

¹⁹ There was some class discussion about what this color is. I am not the best at naming colors, and as such, have settled on gold.

²⁰ Just in this paper, the motif of the falcon can be seen in Bnf MS 25666, figure 3, the Hours of Bonne of Luxembourg, figure 4, the Petite Heures of Jean, Duc de Berry, figure 5, and MS 3142, figure 2.

²¹ Figure 2.

²² Robert Freyhan. "English Influences on Parisian Painting of about 1300", *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs* 54, no. 315 (June 1929): 320,325-26,328-30. JSTOR.

three living and three dead, and indeed their own nature as undead beings by being physically portrayed in a state of death and undeath, both standing and laying.

Two things are worth noting about this image. First, the hand positions of the three living are almost identical to those in the de Lisle psalter, with the exception of the top hand of the middle figure which appears to rest on the shoulder of the first king, whereas the same figure in the de Lisle psalter holds his hand in front of him. The second thing of note is that while, according to the text of the legend, the dead are meant to appear progressively desiccated, the first corpse appears more damaged than the middle figure. In particular, his shroud is much more tattered. Otherwise, this image fits well into visual pattern of doubling – the figures, much like those in the de Lisle psalter, could very well be part of Greer Fein’s mirror.

Another early depiction of the Three Living and the Three Dead can be found in BnF Ms. 25666, also from about 1300²³. This image, confined to an initial, lacks the luxury of space afforded to the others, and as such the living and dead are in much closer quarters, and the third corpse barely makes it into the frame. As in the other two representations, the living closest to the three corpses holds a falcon. Significantly, the three dead break the border of the initial, while the three living do not, suggesting they are on a separate plane from the living. Greer Fein’s mirror makes another appearance, albeit in a much smaller space.

In a development not yet noted in this paper, in the Hours of Bonne of Luxembourg²⁴, dated before 1349, the living and dead are actually placed on two separate pages. Putting the living and dead on separate pages can be read as an extension of the border drawn between the figures in the de Lisle psalter. The book, as opposed to an illustrated divide, now marks the physical boundary between the dead and the living. This is not an uncommon trend in depictions

²³ Figure 3.

²⁴ Figure 4.

of the Three Living and Three Dead. Be that trend as it may, seating the living on horses eliminates the blatant mirroring of the earliest depictions of the Three Living. In this vein, the Hours of Bonne of Luxembourg are notable in that they encapsulate visual themes that will become significant in later depictions of the *Three Living*. In particular, many later depictions of the *Three Living* show the living as riding horses as in Bonne of Luxembourg's manuscript. The living are also more expressive than in previous depictions; the closest king has his back turned to the dead, and the horses appear to be almost uncomfortable. The falcon motif continues in this image, although the living man farthest from the dead holds it as opposed to the one closest. This depiction is also consistent with earlier trends in that the dead appear progressively more decayed.

Moving to the last decade of the 14th century, Greer Fein's mirror becomes less obvious. In the Little Hours of Jean, Duke of Berry²⁵, dated to 1390²⁶, the living and the dead share the same plane. Set in what appears to be a graveyard of sorts, the image is rather dissimilar to earlier images of the *Three Living*. Aside from the spatial change, none of the three dead are shrouded, and the two outermost dead seem to be equally decayed. In one consistency, the man closest to the dead, the one clothed in red, is holding a falcon.

The Three Living and the Three Dead appear in another of the Duke's manuscripts, that jewel of the middle ages, the *Tres Riche Heures* dated to 1416. The *Three Living* appear at the bottom of folio 86v²⁷. In this image the dead occupy the left side of the space, whereas the living occupy the right. Unlike in the Duke's previous manuscript, the living are depicted on horses, and look to be *fleeing* from the three dead, who, unlike in any of the other manuscripts seen so

²⁵ Figure 5.

²⁶ Gertsman, 28.

²⁷ Figures 6 and 7

far, are depicted in movement. In this image, all of the dead appear to be in roughly equal states of decay. They look similar to the army of the dead depicted on folio 90²⁸; almost as if they took a break from their military duties to frighten a trio of aristocrats.

In this image, Greer Fein's mirror has all but disappeared. No longer are the dead presented as doubles of the living, indicative of the future that is going to befall them, whether that be the spiritual afterlife or the physical decay of the body. The dead, instead, are antagonists, something to be afraid of, something from which to run away. Two of the three living barely manage to make an appearance; thus the image is even further distanced from the idea of doubling. Indeed, this manuscript is indicative of the later trend of the *Three Living*. The three dead, who are not threatening in the original text, suddenly become so. The motif of the Three Living and the Three Dead joins into the tradition of depicting death as an aggressive entity, a trend actually seen on the same page as this version of the *Three Living*. In the top left-hand corner, death rides a unicorn.

Regrettably, this is the only appearance of a unicorn in this paper, but there will be several more trios of bloodthirsty undead. Moving to Bruges, a manuscript dated between 1480-1485²⁹ continues the theme of depicting the three dead as in motion. Located in the upper left-hand corner of the folio, the three dead almost appear to be waving at the three living, who are the most expressive trio seen yet. The figure farthest to the right holds his head in hands in a moment of emotional turmoil, while the figure nearest the dead rears back on his horse. The central man looks to be praying. The horses, too, are depicted as under duress. The white horse in the center is rearing up his front legs in fear. The three dead are all depicted as being in equal states of decay, again none are seen with their burial shrouds.

²⁸ Figure 8.

²⁹ Figure 9.

Another manuscript from Bruges, dated to around 1499³⁰, goes a step further and not only depicts the three dead as chasing after the three living, but shows them as being armed. This image starts the Office of the Dead, whose text is depicted on the facing folio. Once more, the skeletons are more or less equally rotted but, in a turn, not yet seen in this paper, they are attacking the living. A man lays in the foreground of the image, about to meet his end at the hands of the skeleton in front of him. The other two undead are moving to attack the other two members of the living. It seems unlikely anyone is going to make it out of this encounter alive. This fact is particularly significant as a defining feature of the tale of the *Three Living and the Three Dead* is the idea that the living will, after encountering the three dead, go on to amend their way of life. However, in this image no such action is possible. The dead, then, are not acting as moral messengers but rather as harbingers of death. These two pages, truly, are radiant repositories of macabre imagery. Similar to the image seen before, the border is black and decorated with skulls. The skulls, facing in several directions, appear along the bottom of the page, and another skull scene from a side-view makes its home in an initial. Banners on each page read “memento mori”, remember death, a sentiment that the image certainly conveys.

Returning to France, another manuscript dated to roughly 1499³¹, again shows the three dead attacking the three living. Again, this page starts the Office of the Dead, the start of the text of which is seen at the bottom of the page. In this image, the three dead hold up their weapons in an attack the living do not seem likely to survive. This image retains some of the more traditional elements of the *Three Living*. The living man clad in red holds a falcon on his arm, and the dead closest to the viewer still wears his burial shroud. However, in spite of these homages to the

³⁰ Figure 10.

³¹ Figure 11.

original form, this image still depicts the three dead as killers as opposed to sages imparting a moral lesson.

The London Rothschild Hours, also known as the hours of Joanna I of Castille, dated to 1500 and held in the British Library³², are an excellent example of this motif of armed skeletons attacking riders. This image also begins an Office of the Dead and is notable in that it is one of the few depictions of a woman as one of the three living. This image is closely modeled after one in the Hours of Mary of Burgundy, although, I could not find a digital image to show. Again, the scene shown positions the three dead as about to slaughter the living. These dead, though equally decayed, all retain their burial shrouds. The lower border of the page is again decorated with a motif of skulls, as seen in previous manuscripts. The woman, in the center, holds a falcon as seen in several of the previous manuscripts. The inclusion of the female rider is important in that it highlights the way in which the meaning of the image has changed from pertaining to a moralized double to a memento mori image. The woman does not have an obvious double, and indeed, if one considers that perhaps the image of the woman is actually a donor portrait, the meaning of the image seems all the more to be to remind her of the inevitability of death. I suggest that the woman does not have an obvious double, because although all the skeletons in this paper lack genitals, it was a common trend in depictions of skeletons from this time period, to denote female skeletons by showing them with sagging breasts.³³ Thus, if the artist intended to depict one of the skeleton's as the woman's double, it is likely they would have depicted a breasted skeleton, yet there are none in the image.

³² Figure 12.

³³ Figure 13

Strikingly, the dead in both this manuscript and the last two hold weapons markedly similar to those seen in solo images of death. A manuscript held by the Walters³⁴, dated between 1480 and 1490 and made in Bruges, depicts Death holding an arrow as well as a mirror³⁵. Like the previous two manuscripts, this image also begins the Office of the Dead. This image, of a lonesome death holding an arrow appears also in a manuscript from the Morgan Library³⁶. Together, these images show that later depictions of the *Three Living and Three Dead* were moving into the territory of the memento mori, and away from their earlier call to moral change.

However, it worth noting that several of the images in this paper – figures 5, 6, 10, 12 and 16 included crosses. The cross in figure 12, the London Rothschild Hours, even includes a depiction of Jesus. Gertsman states that “in the majority of late-medieval Encounter images, the dead and the living are painted as separated by a cross, which not only signifies a frontier between the two realms but also alludes to Christ’s passion.”³⁷ Taken in that sense, the cross could be interpreted as possessing a similar function to the border drawn in the de Lisle Psalter, or the separation of the living and the dead onto separate pages, however, the cross only serves to delineate separate spaces in one manuscript in this paper, the *Tres Riche Heures*, figure 6. Otherwise, the living and dead tend to occupy the same space, even in the presence of the cross. In figure 16, which is discussed below, the cross only appears on the folio containing the dead. All in all, I do not believe that the presence of these crosses mediates the presence of the violent undead enough to suggest that they (the crosses) retain the original message of the tale. Thus, I still contend that these later images, even ones including crosses, have a new meaning.

³⁴ Figure 14.

³⁵ I found this image in *Time Sanctified*. Roger S. Wieck, “The Office of the Dead” in *Time Sanctified: The Book of Hours in Medieval Art and Life* (New York: George Braziller, Inc, 1988).

³⁶ Figure 15, also found in *Time Sanctified*.

³⁷ Gertsman, 39.

The suggestion that such crosses are meant to invoke Christ's Passion, however, is intriguing and certainly supported by the London Rothschild Hours which include a figure of Christ crucified. The relationship between the Passion, and the *Three Living and Three Dead* would be a fascinating topic for further study, and one I will hopefully get to engage in at some point.

Moving to the final folio of the *Three Living and the Three Dead* of this paper, found in a book of hours from Western France, dated between 1490 and 1510³⁸, we again see the living and dead on separate pages. In several ways, this image is similar to ones we have already seen. The dead don shrouds, the central living man, in yellow, holds a falcon, and these two pages serve as the beginning of the Office of the Dead. Yet, this image is more sinister than the ones seen before. The living men's expressions of fear are easily read, and the central skeleton on the right page is the most gruesome seen yet. In wonderful detail, his bones peak through his desiccated flesh revealing a layer of infected, pink tissue.³⁹

This image, then, is an excellent end point for this paper, for while it retains several of the elements of the original story of the *Three Living and the Three Dead*, it ultimately no longer functions as a medium of moral message, but rather as a memento mori. Its function, and indeed, the function of violent depictions of the *Three Living*, is to remind the viewer of the reality of death, to have them "remember death"; and there's truly barely a better way to remind viewers of the reality of their impending doom than by casting that doom as a trio of rotting, scythe bearing, blood-thirsty skeletons.

³⁸ Figure 16. Image and Attribution from Stella Panayotova, Deirdre Jackson and Paola Ricciardi. *Color. The Art and Science of Illuminated Manuscripts*. 340-341 (London: Harvey Miller, 2016.)

³⁹ Figure 17.

Bibliography

- Binski, Paul. *Medieval Death: Ritual and Representation* London: British Museum Press, 1996.
- Freyhan, Robert. "English Influences on Parisian Painting of about 1300", *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs* 54, no. 315 (June 1929): 320,325-26,328-30. JSTOR.
- Gertsman, Elina. *The Dance of Death in the Middle Ages* Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2010.
- Greer Fein, Susanna. "Life and Death, Reader and Page: Mirrors of Mortality in English Manuscripts," *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal* 35, no.1. (March 2002):69-94
- Kinch, Ashby. *Imago Mortis: Mediating Images of Death in Late Medieval Culture* Boston: Brill, 2013.
- Panayotova, Stella and Deirdre Jackson and Paola Ricciardi. *Color. The Art and Science of Illuminated Manuscripts*. London: Harvey Miller, 2016.
- Wieck, Roger. *Time Sanctified: The Book of Hours in Medieval Art and Life* (New York: George Braziller, Inc, 1988.
- Kralik, Christine. "Dialogue and Violence: the Three Living and the Three Dead" in *Mixed Metaphors: The Danse Macabre in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, edited by Sophie Oosterwijk and Stefanie Knöll. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011.