
Kenneth Rooney opens the first chapter of his interesting book with an account of the late medieval alliterative poem usually called *The Three Dead Kings*, found uniquely in Bodleian Library MS Douce 302, a collection of poems mainly by the Shropshire priest John Audelay, though the story of ‘the three living and the three dead’ is found widely in Europe. The poem tells of three young aristocrats who, in the course of a boar hunt, encounter three skeletons, ‘gostis’ of their dead fathers who draw attention to their states of physical decomposition and the sufferings meted out to them beyond the grave for the sins they had committed in their lifetimes — wrongful acquisition of land, fleshly lusts and cruelty to their underlings. They are agents for the moral reform of their sons, who say mass, build a church and depict the scene of their encounter with their fathers on the wall.

This poem encapsulates many of the themes of the book. As Rooney points out, this is not a book about death but about the dead: it ‘traces the literary reception of the dead in their contextual and cultural position in relation to the idea of the macabre’ (17). It does not deal only with literature, however: as the author of the poem recognizes, there were many artistic depictions of ‘the three living and the three dead’. Rooney produces several schematic illustrations of it, from murals and from manuscripts (see plates 4–9), but oddly not that from Bodleian Library MS Laud Misc. 7 where the six figures are depicted in a lively hunting scene (see Philippa Tristram, *Figures of Life and Death in Medieval English Literature*, 1976, plate 26). However, more generally, one of the best features of the book is the lavish illustrations with which the author engages as he develops his themes.
What Rooney means by ‘the idea of the macabre’ or, as he later puts it, the ‘macabre idiom’, is a way of representing, in literary or iconographic terms, ‘the corpse stricken by the attributes of decay’ (12), and his long opening chapter explores ways of representing the progressive disintegration of the dead body. These range from traditional ‘Erthe tok of erthe...’ or the ‘signs of death’ poems, which list what happens to body parts in an objective and schematic way, to graphic accounts, such as that of Ordericus Vitalis, of the botched burial of William the Conqueror: the masons had made the sarcophagus too small and the body had to be doubled up so that ‘the swollen bowels burst, and an intolerable stench assailed the nostrils of the bystanders and the whole crowd’, and this allows Ordericus to moralize about ‘how vain is the glory of the flesh’ (54–5). Burial was meant to isolate the decomposing dead from the living, but the need to re-use graves meant that decomposed, or partly decomposed, bodies had to be dug up. And there is much good material in this chapter on the ways in which ‘the dry bones speak’, metaphorically, and prompt moral reflection on contemptus mundi, the equality of all in death, and vanitas. Tombs could also be broken into and there are some harrowing stories of necrophilia and its disastrous consequences, and of things which breed out of decomposing bodies: in one story from Mandeville’s Travels a monstrous birth presages the destruction of a whole city (80–3). Decay could also be slowed by embalming and one of the best sections of this chapter concerns bodies or parts of bodies preserved as relics: Rooney skilfully and interestingly contrasts Boccaccio’s tragic story of Isabella’s preservation of her murdered lover’s head in a pot of basil (Decameron IV. 5) with the preservation by the Princess of Hungary, in a sarcophagus in her bedroom, of what she thinks is the body of the Squire of Low Degree, but ironically it is the remains of the treacherous Steward, who had tried
to kill him (72–80). But, as Rooney points out, ideas about bodily decay occur in all sorts of unusual places: in one stanza of his flyting against Walter Kennedy, William Dunbar uses language which suggests decomposition about his rival’s face and compares him to Lazarus, who rose from the dead after several days, and the ‘spreit of Gy’ a revenant in a fourteenth-century ghost story (86–90).

As this book develops, revenants or ghosts become more and more important: they are the conduit between the living and the dead. On death the living and the dead were supposed to be separated — the dead consigned to Heaven, Hell or Purgatory — but in literary texts of all kinds the boundaries between Purgatory and the living world could become blurred. Like the Ghost of Hamlet’s father, the spirits of the dead could be allowed ‘for a certain term to walk the night / And for the day confined to fast in fires’ until their ‘foul crimes’ are burnt and purged away’ (Hamlet, I. iv. 10–13). The motives for the intrusion of the dead upon the living could be many — here it is ‘revenge’. But there are stories of ‘the grateful dead’ who protect those who helped them in their lives or stories about revenants who desire to shorten their time in Purgatory by persuading the living to pray for them.

Perhaps the most interesting, however, are the monitory stories about revenants who advise about behaviour on earth which is likely to attract punishment in the afterlife. Rooney’s wide reading enables him to adduce many of this kind, but perhaps the best is The Gast of Gy — said to be based on the story of Guy d’Alet, a wealthy citizen of a town near Avignon, who died in December 1323/4, and who, like a poltergeist, haunted the bedroom of his widow. She alerts the local Dominican prior, Johannes Gobi, who seeks to conjure the spirit to presence and determine the reason for his haunting. The ghost has no corporeal being, but does have a voice and can speak. After much questioning by the Prior it emerges that the ghost of Guy has returned to ‘schewe my wyf
hire peril’: they had committed a sinful sexual act to which he had not confessed and for which he is being punished and he wishes her to confess and escape punishment (168–78). At one level it is an exemplum which makes a doctrinal point about the necessity for full confession before death, but at another it is about love beyond the grave: as Rooney puts it, it is a story ‘that engages its audience through human gestures’.

Rooney also has interesting things to say about other dialogues with the dead, including Pearl, and discusses debates between the body and the soul. An interesting variant of this is The Disputation betwixt the Body and Worms, found uniquely in British Library MS Additional 37049, a Carthusian miscellany from one of the northern charterhouses. The poem is prefaced in the manuscript by a coloured drawing of a transi tomb, with the effigy of a splendidly dressed woman above and a skeletal corpse below which is being attacked by worms and what are probably meant to be toads. The opening of the poem makes clear that it was inspired by this sort of lavish late-medieval monument: ‘take hede upon my figure here abowne…’ (see plate 2). Rooney also discusses the skull as a memento mori and writes interestingly about Henryson’s and Skelton’s poems on this topic, though the subject was ubiquitous in all sorts of objects. Memento mori watches in the shape of skulls, for example, became fairly common in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. One such, made by Pierre Moysant (alias Moyse) of Blois, is very elaborate. The skull is silver gilt and is generously incised (see F.J. Britton, Old Clocks and Watches and their Makers, 1977, p. 109). On the forehead is death as a skeleton with his scythe and sandglass, standing between a cottage and a palace, and around the picture is a text from Horace:

Pallida mors aequo pulsat pede pauperum tabernas regumque turres.

[Pale death visits with impartial foot the cottages of the poor and the towers of the rich, Odes I.iv.13–14]
But the idea of ‘death the leveller’, who takes indiscriminately both rich and poor, is addressed mainly in Rooney’s final chapter on ‘the dance of death’. He concentrates on Lydgate’s long poem translated from the French, which exists in two redactions, dating probably from the 1420s. This poem survives in fifteen manuscripts, which indicates its popularity. But again the subject was a common one and could be addressed in all sorts of places: the epitaph of Agnes Halke (1502) at St Alphage’s, Canterbury, for example, reflects ruefully on the doubtful distinction she had of being the first person buried in that churchyard, ‘Afore alle other to begynne the dans…’, which is presumably ‘the dance of death’ (see T.J. Pettigrew, Chronicles of the Tombs: A Select Collection of Epitaphs, 1857, p. 175).

Rooney’s conclusion, characteristically, is modest and understated: ‘Ultimately, the representation of the dead in any aspect of medieval art and writing represents the consequences of death and sin for its audience, and becomes part of the medieval tradition of displaying the dead for the benefit of the living’ (276). But his book amounts to much more than a demonstration of the truth of a generalization such as that. What he has shown admirably in this rich and informative study, through many examples intelligently analysed and drawn from a wide variety of sources, is just how original and imaginative these responses to the representation of the dead could be.

John Scattergood
Trinity College Dublin
scatterj@tcd.ie