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gendered encounters in the Three Living
and Three Dead*

Article

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‘*Conpains, vois tu ce que je voi?*’: Gendered Encounters in the Three Living and Three Dead.

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This paper addresses an unusual image of the legend of the *Three Living and the Three Dead*.¹ The legend presents an encounter between three men and three corpses, usually through a combination of word and image. The three Dead deliver their warning to the three Living, who express horror, fear and repentance. The legend feeds into the abundant material concerning the relations between the living and the dead in the medieval period. It emerges in the sphere of moralising and didactic literature as it developed from the thirteenth to the fourteenth centuries through mendicant and courtly writings. In French-speaking regions, it survives in five poems as well as other fragmentary traces.²

The iconography of the dialogue between the *Three Living and the Three Dead* was disseminated in manuscripts and wall paintings. After 1424, it was often combined or conflated with the *Danse macabre*, which has its own specific inception and history as both a political and a didactic text, and which need not concern us here.³ As Nigel Saul has pointed out, it is effective to approach the macabre as ‘*memento mori*, a visual challenge to the conscience of the living,’ but individual examples work in different ways.⁴ There are multiple layers to the late-medieval preoccupation with mortality that cannot be reduced to generalisations. While acknowledging that the surviving poems in Middle French represent one of the oldest and most enduring aspects of the later medieval preoccupation with death as the mirror to life, I will aim to explore how there may be a further level of

reading that is possible for the poems and by extension, the images that usually accompany them.

This visual tradition uses a triad of shocking exemplary figures to provoke a redefinition of the gaze that the living cast upon their world. The *Three Living and the Three Dead* poems add a dramatic, declamatory dimension to the encounter. Its transmission in a variety of contexts, from wall paintings to books of hours, connotes a meditative, intimate function. It is rarely violent, and in that respect it differs from other written and oral traditions of the period that depict encounters between the living and the dead.

Although it is commonly referred to as a legend, there is no evidence that the poem or its iconography existed before the late thirteenth century. In his edition of 1914, Stefan Glixelli suggested that the poetic tradition might be traced back to vernacular adaptations of epitaphs in which the dead speak to the living:

Tu que la vas ta boca clauza
 Guarda est cors qu'aisi repauza ;
 Tals co tu iest e ieu si fui
 E tu seras tals co ieu sui ;
 Di pater noster e no t'en fui.⁵

(You who are going your way with a closed mouth, look at this body, resting thus. Just as you are, so was I; and you shall be the same as I am. Say an 'Our Father' and do not run away.)

Variations on the classicizing Latin epitaph formula '*Quod es fui quod sum eris*' (What you are, I was; what I am, so you shall be) appear to have been fashionable across many regions from the late twelfth century.⁶

Ashby Kinch has traced the emergence in French and English book culture of the *Three Living and Three Dead*.⁷ Particularly interesting for Kinch is the patronage of these poems and paintings by the upper nobility at a time when, after the Third Lateran Council (1215), ecclesiastical control over living-dead relations was increasing. Kinch acknowledges in particular the Franciscan investment in this

nascent tradition.⁸ As noble families sought to enhance their prestige in the here-and-now through commemorating their ancestors, Kinch suggests that deploring worldly power while boasting of it is a paradoxical rhetorical strategy that underpins the use of the *Three Living and Three Dead* in the most luxurious of books.⁹ Both Kinch and Elina Gerstman develop Suzanne Fein's identification of the key device of the tradition as gaze that the Living and the Dead cast at each other across the gutter of a book or across the gap between two picture frames.¹⁰ In quite a different interpretation, Christine Kralik describes this composition as a 'conversation', albeit where the Dead are located in a separate field from the Living.¹¹

The earliest extant image of Baudouin de Conde's *Dit des trois mors et des trois vis*, is in a Northern French manuscript, possibly Parisian, of the last decade of the thirteenth century (Paris BNF fr. 378, fol.1)(fig.1).



Fig. 1: MS Paris BNF fr. 378, fol.1 (Paris, c.1280-1300). Reproduced with permission from the Bibliothèque nationale de France.

It opens the manuscript and the collection of *dits*, but it is not intended as a frontispiece. The image that accompanies the poem is in line with the iconography that would become standard: three noblemen stand facing three cadavers. The Three Living are in a frame with a red background, and the Three Dead are in a separate

frame, with a blue background. Both sets of figures are of the same height. The Living and the Dead appear to be gazing across the dividing lines of their respective frames, to meet each other's' eyes.¹²

Gerstman has analysed a similar design produced in a manuscript around the same time. This image (Paris, Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal MS 3124) also illustrates Baudouin de Condé's poem. It is believed to have been commissioned for Marie de Brabant (1254-1322), either during her reign as queen of King Philip III of France (reigned 1270-1285), or in her two decades as dowager. Despite the horror expressed by the Living, the encounter is sedate, ahistorical, non-narrative, and calm. Furthermore the Living and the Dead do not touch each other.¹³ Gerstman argues that the ahistorical, unspecified location ensures that the encounter is emblematic and universal.¹⁴

Gerstman also suggests that the encounter takes place in 'absolute emptiness' and the Living are doubled by the Dead, mirroring each other's clothing and postures. One of the corpses gazes straight ahead, confronting the viewer.¹⁵ The gap between the Living and the Dead is, in Gerstman's interpretation, both nothingness and silence. Death cannot be described and therefore the only way to evoke its destruction of presence is, precisely, by presenting absence. The viewer is invited to imagine the loss of time, place and body by contemplating the gap on the page.¹⁶ A similar point can be made for the image in BNF fr. 378. The Living are on a decorated red field whereas the Dead are on blue. There is a clear gap between the two frames. The sightlines between Living and Dead consist of an exchange of glances. However, the spaces that the Living and Dead inhabit are patterned fields and there is no evidence of the emptiness that is noted by Gerstman. Furthermore, none of the three Dead have turned their gaze on the viewer of the page.

Baudouin de Condé's *Dit* places the encounter in a frame of cause and effect. The cadavers are divine punishment for the arrogance and warmongering of three wealthy, powerful young noblemen:

.I. jour pour lor orgueil marcier,
 Leur apert .i. mireoir Diex,
 Tourble et obscur à veoir d'iex

Et lait; (ll.8-11)

(One day, to humble their pride, God sent them a mirror that was murky and dark to look upon, and ugly.)

Their role is to be terrifying counter-images of the young men's prideful selves. The Three Dead are looked upon by the Three Living, and perceived as victims of the 'bite' of Death.¹⁷

Li .iii. vif voient li .iii. mors
De grief morsure deus fois mors,
Prime de mors et puis de vers.
Premier les regardent devers
Les vis, et puis les cors après ;
Si voient que mors les a près
Menez, et après mors, li vier,
Par mains tans, l'esté et l'yver. (ll.19-26)

(The Three Living see the Three Dead to be dead twice-over from a vicious bite, first that of Death, and then that of the worms. First they look at their faces, and then at their bodies. They see that Death has taken them off, and after Death, the worms have done so in all seasons, in Summer and Winter.)

Accordingly, the First Dead orders the Living to examine them in the same way, '*Segneurs, regardés nous as vis/ et puis as cors*,' (My lords, look at our faces, and then at our bodies, ll.68-69). The First Living expresses fear, but the Second Living realises that he is seeing himself in this 'mirror' (ll.36-46). The Third Living gives a detailed description of the transformation that the Three Dead have endured, and stresses that their loss of their fleshly parts, notably their faces, has erased their social and familial identity (ll.50-66). The First Dead identifies the three cadavers as those of noblemen (ll.80-81). The Second Dead provides a pious reading of death as the consequence of the Fall and of original sin (ll.106-22), and the Third ends the poem with a request for a prayer from the Living (ll.161-62).

The content of the poem is identical to that of the poem that follows it, '*Compains, vois tu ce que je voi?*', but this piece has a startlingly different illustration that breaks completely with the gap between the Living and the Dead. It also disrupts the poems' use of masculine protagonists (fig. 2).



Fig. 2: MS Paris BNF fr. 378, fol. 7v. Reproduced with permission from the Bibliothèque nationale de France.

Here, a black-clad nun is flanked by two shrouded cadavers in a frame with a patterned blue background. In a second frame, on a red patterned field, two women, one of them dressed in grey, the other a fashionable noblewoman, stand on either side of a skeleton. The images fit with the poem '*Compains*' only in that the Third Dead is said to be *sechiés*, a skeleton (Glixelli, IV, line 121).¹⁸

The image is arresting for a number of reasons, notably its apparent anticipation of the *Danse macabre des femmes* (1482).¹⁹ In this image, as in that much later tradition, the Dead are placed inside the same frame as the Living, and there is an implicit interaction between them. However, the *Danse macabre des Femmes* confronts the women with the personification of Death, *la Mort*, rather than the solitary, more individualized cadaver ('le mors') of the original *Danse macabre*.²⁰ The only surviving example of a French poem about the meeting between female Living and Dead is a fragment from the fourteenth century, and all three Living in that piece are noblewomen.²¹ Kathy Krause has suggested in a detailed discussion that the feminine Living may be attributed to the depiction of female figures in other miniatures of ms. 378, in illustration of texts that have no feminine protagonists.²² The fact that two poems of the Legend feature in the same part of this manuscript may also have prompted an attempt to distinguish between them visually. Krause suggests that this gendered distinction was designed to affirm the common experience of death, regardless of gender or of social rank, and she describes the women's different clothes as 'a mini-panorama of female estates (religious, younger and/or poorer, older and/or richer)'.²³

However, the illumination in ms. 378 depicts not just three Living women (as opposed to men) but three Living women of whom two appear to have dedicated their lives to religion. In another thirteenth-century manuscript, Paris BNF fr. 25566, three poems of the legend are copied together, in what Kinch calls a little anthology.²⁴ The miniature in BNF fr. 378 constitutes one of four depictions of the *Three Living and Three Dead* in this manuscript: two poems and two images. In this case, the image alone provides a new version: three Living women engaged in a true conversation, as equals, with three Dead who may or may not be female. Their encounter takes place in two shared spaces, one blue and one red. The women are distinguished from each other by their marks of social status as a nun, a noblewoman and a third figure who might be a semi-religious woman of the Third Order of Saint Francis. There are no corresponding signs of gendered or social identity on their three Dead companions.

The three Living women are not social equals, and their respective spiritual status might also offer a clue. The two women who flank a single cadaver are a secular noblewoman and a woman who, as I noted above, might be a Tertiary. Their miniature is not level with the other, where a nun is accosted by two corpses. The nun is placed slightly higher than the other frame, putting her literally as well as spiritually ‘on a higher plane’ than her more world-bound sisters. As Krause notes, the nuns in ms. 378 are not invariably virtuous, so the encounter between this well-placed individual and her Dead interlocutor may not be devoid of anguish.²⁵

‘Conpains’ features without its image in a trilingual manuscript (Latin, French and Occitan) that was destined for a nun of either the Franciscan or Cistercian orders, British Library MS Egerton 945 (c.1300). This is a devotional book with musical notation for liturgical songs as well as prayers and an Occitan adaptation of Bonaventure’s *Scala divini amoris*.²⁶ This points firmly to the circulation of the *Three Living and Three Dead* within a feminine devotional and pastoral context not long after its inclusion in the compilation of courtly and didactic works of ms.378. Egerton 945 contains prayers in the feminine first person, and some of the miniatures depict a nun dressed in grey, praying and taking communion (folios 214r, 237v). It also points to the coexistence of the *Three Living and the Three Dead*, at its inception, with didactic schemes of spiritual self-improvement that were often aimed at women readers. The Psalter of Bonne of Luxembourg (c.1348) is another example of the inclusion of the Legend and its image with didactic schemes taken from the *Speculum Theologie*.²⁷ I would suggest therefore that the grey-clad woman depicted in ms. 378’s image of the Three Living women and Three Dead may well allude to mendicant-inspired devotional movements.

The poem ‘Conpains’ does not imply feminine speakers at all, so the use of female figures is not a straightforward illustration of the text that it accompanies. ‘Conpains’ stresses the shocking effect of the encounter with the dead on a male speaker (*conpains* is a masculine noun, as is *li mors*) :

C’est des trois mors et des trois vis²⁸

Conpains, vois tu ce que je voi?
A pou que je ne me desvoi,
De grant paour li cuers me tramble.
Vois tu la ces trois mors ensamble,
Com il sont hideus et divers
Et pourri et mengié de vers ?
Teles devendront nos jouventes,
De tel marchié aurons tés ventes
Qui nous vint de no premier père, 10
Car chascuns qui naist le conpere;
Car tuit en suefrent la mort sure
Et après des vers la morsure.
Qui a l'ame ne met conroi,
Conte ne duc, prince ne roi
N'auront deport ne que ribaut ;
Car james ne feront ris baut,
Puis k'en tenebres seront mis
D'enfer, ou tout bien sont remis.

(Companion, do you see what I am seeing? I am on the brink of going mad, my heart is trembling with great fear. Can you see there, those three dead men together, how hideous and different they are, all rotted and eaten up by worms? That is what our youth will become. That will be the sales we will have made from the transaction that our first father bequeathed us, because everyone who is born has a part in it. Everyone suffers certain death, and after that the bite of the worms. Anyone who does not put a bridle on their soul - be they a count or a duke, a prince or a king - will have the same leisure as a ruffian. For never shall they laugh on high, for they shall be placed in the darkness of Hell, where all possessions are stored.)

As Kralik suggests, some versions of the Legend placed the encounter more firmly in the realm of the Living, in order to invoke the power of images in devotional and meditative practice. The image

of the encounter invited the viewer to imagine a connection between themselves and those dead for whom they were praying.²⁹ The issue of a meditative feminine reader is relevant for Kralik's and for Gerstman's analyses of the Legend in two quite different manuscripts contexts, and for quite different reasons. Paris MS Bibl. de l'Arsenal 3124 is designed for a woman reader (possibly Marie de Brabant) and another fifteenth-century manuscript very likely depicted its female patron as one of the three Living.³⁰

The third major version of the early French tradition, Nicole de Margival's 'Trois damoiseles furent jadis', also has exclusively masculine protagonists. It is an expanded, narrative version of 'Conpains'.³¹ The First Living expresses his horror and fear. The Second Living answers him by announcing that he now wishes to change his life to one of penance (ll.25-26), for he can now see how he will age, through '*ces moustres la aparens*' (these *monstra* that are visible, there)(line 33), and he knows that Death will mow him down (line 35). The Third Living comes to a penitent distance from life by exploring the absurdity of a deity that creates life only to undermine it with sin and the consequences of the Last Judgement (ll.50-53). The First and Second Dead expound on the exemplum that they are providing, both in as part of the book-learned knowledge of the Living, and as the physical evidence of decay that makes everyone recoil from the cadaver. The Third Dead, the *sechiés* (skeletal) one, points out that his high social rank has been lost, for no-one desires to look at a body that is '*si hideus et si nus*' (so hideous and so naked)(line 125). He advises the Living to take care of their souls, as these are their only lasting treasure.

In Nicole de Margival's expanded version of 'Conpains' (c.1300), the Third Dead reveals to the Three Living that the cadavers are, respectively, a bishop, a count and a king, and that they have been damned (ll.165-74). However, these cadavers do not ask for intercessory prayers, and claim no personal relationship with the Living. The First Dead in Margival's poem offers himself merely as a good exemplum, '*Bel exemple poés a mi*' (line 110), and foregrounds his distressing appearance:

Despit et lait cors ai de fait :

Despit l'a Mors, Mors l'a deffait ;
 Deffait l'a Mors, Mors l'a despit ;
 De fait ai cors lait et despit. (ll.129-32)

(I have, it is a fact, a despised and ugly body. Death has disdained it, Death has unmade it. Unmade it has Death, Death has disdained it; it is a fact that I have an ugly and despised body.)

The *Three Living and Three Dead* privileges the visual impact of the cadaver without using the Dead as a source of information about Purgatory or Hell. In this respect, the Living are also often remarkably incurious. It seems necessary to reassess interpretations of the legend as either an example of a cultural tradition concerning revenants, or a response to a theological tradition of penitential works preaching Purgatory and intercessory prayer. It is closer to the early fourteenth-century exemplum of the vain woman who is provoked into repentance when her servant replaces a mirror that has displeased her with a skull and explains that she has done so 'for there is no better mirror of glass in the whole world for you to see yourself in'.³²

Setting aside questions of origins, influence and patronage, it is useful to consider how these poems and their images functioned for their readers (male and female). They have a clear performative dimension. As has been noted by Jessica Brantley, the dramatized or quasi-theatrical dimensions of medieval devotional and meditative practice are not well-known, and this consideration should be applied to the macabre tradition as much as to others.³³ Meditation is of course invited explicitly in the *Three Living and Three Dead*. The Dead are the *imago mortis* and the Living exhibit different reactions to that, both spontaneous and long-term. But what of the viewer and reader of these images and texts?

This possibility that these texts and images were designed for meditative use has been invoked for Reformation-era images of grisly encounters between the Dead and the Living drawn by Hans Baldung Grien (c.1484-1545). Joseph Leo Koerner drew attention to precisely this meditative challenge at the heart of the arresting, shocking image:³⁴

What is strange, however, what is novel in Baldung is not what his images of the macabre mean, but *how* they mean. Death in Baldung becomes a “hermeneutic” - that is to say, a mode of figuration that occasions or even demands that images be regarded as signs pointing beyond themselves to truer and usually absent images beyond the painting. Itself as empty of specific content as it is of life, the corpse signals the presence of meaning elsewhere.³⁵

The corpse signals the meaning beyond the immediate fear of mortality shared by the fictional Living protagonist and the living viewer. It also gestures towards an identity beyond gender, inasmuch as the skeletal form is only known to be *li mors* from the accompanying text. The image of the Three Living women and three Dead is arresting in this respect: we can no longer assume that a skeleton is by definition male.

The poem ‘Conpains’ was used as the textual support for one of the best-known iconographic versions of the Legend, an illuminated folio of the De Lisle Psalter and De Lisle Hours (MS British Library Arundel 83 II, fo.127, c.1310, possibly London).³⁶ In the De Lisle Psalter, the poem ‘Conpains’ is shortened and altered in that the Three Living are three kings. The first speaker is the First Living King (*Primus Rex Uiuus*), and his interlocutor is a dead king, *Primus rex mortuus*. As Fein has noted, the text in the De Lisle Psalter is compressed into a single folio exchange that enables the figures to mirror each other, and the words to do likewise.³⁷ Notably, this version of ‘Conpains’ opens in subtly different style to earlier copies, in that the First Living King speaks to several second-person addressees and uses the imperative:

Primus rex uiuus
 Compaynuons, veez ceo ke ieo voy
 A puy ke ieo ne me deuoy.
 De grant pour le quoer me tremble.
 Ueez la treis mors ensemble.
 Cum il sunt hidus et divers.
 Puiriz et mangez des uers.

(*First Living King*: Companions, look at what I can see, I am nearly going mad. My heart is quaking with great fear. See here: three dead men together, how hideous and different they are, rotted and eaten up by worms.)

In the original version, the familiar, strictly singular ‘tu’ form is used: ‘*Conpains, vois tu ce que je voi?*’, and ‘*Vois tu la ces trois mors ensamble...(?)*’³⁸ Assuming that the *primus rex vivus* uses ‘veez’ in the plural (as would imply the -s in *Compaynuons*), the First Living makes himself part of a group and he seems to be ordering both his fellow-monarchs and the reader to look at what he is seeing. His own emotion (his fear that he is about to go mad) is reduced by the claims that he makes to authority over his two companions, as well as over the reader who is encountering the image.

The English verses at the top of the folio also contain no narrative element. In Fein’s transcription, the Three Living say: ‘*Ich am afert. Lo whet ich se. me pinkep hit bep deueles pre.*’ (I am afraid at what I see. I think it is three devils). This mistaken identification of the corpses as devils is quite different to the Francophone verses, where their all-too human mortality seems to be the source of horror.³⁹ The image opens up two different reactions for the Living, according to the language of the protagonists. The Anglophone Living King thinks he sees three devils, whereas the Francophone king has no doubt that he can see three corpses. The viewer of the image is invited to compare and to judge these two responses: are these illusions or reality? Are the kings dreaming or can the dead walk? If different languages enable different thoughts, what of the gender of these viewers and readers? Do different genders see different things too?

The De Lisle Psalter was commissioned by Robert de Lisle but bequeathed to his two daughters, and thereafter it was left to a convent in South-East England. It is a book of hours that contains a didactic *Speculum Theologiae* (possibly Franciscan but with Cistercian influence) that was used for confessors’ manuals as well as in other pastoral contexts.⁴⁰ Its readership is therefore similar to the nuns who owned, used and annotated the mendicant-inspired Egerton 945 in the Périgord, around the same time. There were no Living Kings

designated as the viewers and readers of either book. Rather, the morbid encounter is viewed, read and meditated upon by women. The two books and their readers offer a possible key to the representation of women in BNF fr. 378, a courtly compilation produced in or near Paris. There was a wide-ranging diffusion of the Legend in a devotional, mendicant context in other regions, notably Italy.⁴¹

Narratively-speaking, the encounter in 'Conpains' takes place in a vacuum, for we are given no indication of where or why the cadavers have appeared in front of the living. The miniature in fr. 378 brings these two questions into clearer focus because those three Living women connect with their three Dead, with no gap between them. They meet on shared ground, within the frames of their miniatures, and the gap between the six protagonists is dissolved to the point that they might well be able to touch each other.

Kiening argues that the encounter between the Living and the Dead rests on the depiction of the Dead as a hideous mirror-image of the Living, or rather a prediction of what will soon befall the Living.⁴² He suggests that the penitential Christian element is in fact an attempt to Christianize the tradition, as the encounter is marked with what he terms an 'anarchization' of the Dead. By the end of the middle ages, the three Dead are terrifying Others, armed with weapons, rising from their graves like three aggressive ghouls.⁴³ Once again, the image of the three female Living and their genderless Dead undermines any simple ascription of the 'double' to such schemes. The two frames are placed in an asymmetrical relationship with each other, and the feminine Living and genderless Dead cohabit. They are not mirrors of each other. Their differences are foregrounded, just as the women are designated as members of three quite separate social groups. Kralik has demonstrated recently that the violent, spear-wielding Dead are a late fifteenth-century fashion, mostly confined to the Low Countries, therefore they cannot be viewed as the survival of a longstanding tradition.⁴⁴

Caciola has traced a tradition across north-western Europe of stories about encounters between the living and revenants, recent victims of violent deaths, or of people who have lived an evil life. According to Caciola, whose work is influenced by Schmitt's major

survey of medieval ghost lore, animated and vengeful cadavers were viewed in opposition to placatory dances of death that sought to fix the dead bodies into their proper homes.⁴⁵ Caciola suggests that the *Three Living and Three Dead* echo popular culture because the three cadavers are not skeletal, and they are sometimes encountered at a standing cross. They are recently buried, possibly buried at a crossroads, like the vengeful dead of the tales. Caciola's seductive theory, again, does not quite map on to these French texts. The Three Dead have not died in any way that is either violent or sinful. They are simply the dead. They are not aggressive towards the Three Living. Whereas the murderous cadavers in Caciola's survey are only quelled by being burned or dismembered, the Three Dead are not assaulted by the Three Living. They appear only in order to be seen, and to provide a verbal gloss on the horror that they inspire in the living.

In these earliest poems and images in French-speaking contexts, the Three Dead are animated but they do not preach, and they are not wandering cadavers. They are neither damned, nor vengeful, nor outside their proper place.⁴⁶ Despite Schmitt and Caciola's persuasive arguments that they represent three distinctive stages of the commemoration of the dead (the weekly, monthly and yearly anniversary), as can be seen in the De Lisle Psalter, many iconographic examples show three desiccated cadavers. In 'Conpains', the Third Dead is skeletal, and Nicole de Margival's Second Dead states that he has been dead for nearly eighteen months (ll. 134-35). However, the Three Dead do not provide the Living with any commemorative or intercessory reason for their appearance. They happen to be present, or to appear before them, and their sole purpose is to shock the Three Living into a new awareness of their own mortality. As they are only partly interested in requesting intercessory prayers from the Living, they are not to be conflated with epitaphs or tomb monuments.⁴⁷

Returning to the image in fr. 378, the Three Living women and their Three Dead occupy the same space and exhibit no violence. Nor do they display fear. The silence of their interaction, their lack of words, seems all the more powerful. In this small and inscrutable illumination can be seen a powerful message that contradicts the overt message of 'Conpains' and of Baudouin de Condé's *dit*. The three

Living women are able to interact with the Dead. Perhaps misogyny plays a role, in the sense that Eve brings mortality to humankind, but in this context, misogyny is not invoked explicitly. The image offers an alternative, silent poem: the encounter opens a channel of communication, and it even invites the viewer to peaceful cohabitation. In this image, the gap in the text and the image has been abolished and the Dead can stand side-by-side with the Living, on common ground. Thus the legend of the *Three Living and the Three Dead* becomes more than a *memento mori*. It transcends its concern with the fear of mortality in order to offer a meditation on the power of images and on the fallibility - even the malleability - of the human form, inciting the viewer to reconsider his or her perception of the world at large as much as that of the self. It may seem strange to find a positive message in this most frightening of traditions, but paradoxes abound in the macabre. As Koerner suggests, the cadaver can be viewed as a 'hermeneutic', a means of opening up a new understanding of life and its completion.

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Notes

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- 1 For an extensive study of the iconography of the Three Living and Three Dead in French-speaking regions, see Vifs nous sommes, morts nous serons. La rencontre des trois morts et des trois vifs dans la peinture murale en France (Vendôme: Le Cherche-Midi, 2001). For an excellent online resource, see <http://www.lamortdanslart.com/3m3v/3m3v.htm> (accessed 12 April 2018). For general introductions to this theme in medieval culture, see Danièle Alexandre-Bidon, *La mort au Moyen Âge*,

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- XIIIe-XVIe siècle, Paris, Hachette, 1998 ; John Shimmers, *Medieval Popular Religion, 1000-1500: A Reader* (Broadview Press, 1999), 'Death and Judgement,' pp.525-37 ; Paul Binski, *Medieval Death: Ritual and Representation* (London, 1996); Jean-Claude Schmitt, *Ghosts in the Middle Ages: The Living and the Dead in Medieval Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999). In terms of medieval French literature, there is a good online bibliography : <https://www.arlima.net/mp/mort.html> (accessed April 12 2018).
- 2 The extant poems are edited together in *Les cinq poèmes des trois morts et des trois vifs*, ed. Stefan Glixelli (Paris: Champion, 1914).
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