

Walk This Way: A Contextualization of the Dance of Death in MS M.359

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the personification of death in the Dance of Death depicted in the margins of a French, fifteenth-century Book of Hours. It contextualizes the Dance of Death with regard to its artist and his workshop, its time and place of facture, its position within the margins of the Office of the Dead in a Book of Hours, and in relation to other, monumental Dances of Death. The Dance of Death is compared to other image cycles within the decorative program of the same manuscript - including themes of leprosy, St. Lazarus, blindness, personifications of the seven virtues, the fifteen signs of the apocalypse, and the life of St. Job. Similarities between these themes indicate a consistent and largely didactic plan behind the image program for the manuscript that is meant to guide the reader toward contemplating his life and presumably amend any errors therein. Wolfgang Iser's phenomenological approach to reading is employed to trace how this particular Dance effects that didactic plan, both from its place in the Office of the Dead and as opposed to those Dances which are presented in large-scale mural form. This thesis proposes that the manuscript was probably commissioned by a wealthy man who may have had connections to the Parisian court of John of Lancaster, the Duke of Bedford, and who may have had ties with the clergy and/or hospital ministries.