CHAPTER TWO

VERBO-VISUAL MIRRORS OF MORTALITY IN THOMAS HOCCLEVE’S “LERNE FOR TO DIE”

Among the illustrated vernacular manuscripts of Suso’s “Scientia,” Oxford, Bodley Arch Selden Supra 53 (ca 1430) has a special prominence, as it transmits the only extant poetic translation of Suso’s *Horologium*, Thomas Hoccleve’s “Lerne for to die,” a Middle English rhyme royal poem integrated into Hoccleve’s *Series* (ca. 1421–22). The Arch Selden manuscript, like those considered in the previous chapter, also includes an image that utilizes visual rhetoric to realize a novel interpretation of this scene of death (fol. 118) [Fig. 1]. Though the image is familiar to students and scholars of Hoccleve, frequently reproduced (as on the cover of Ellis’ recent edition of the *Series*), it is infrequently discussed in any detail, despite its manifest interest as a mediation of Hoccleve’s text. Unlike the Suso illustrations discussed in the previous chapter, this image eliminates all references to group identity and the spiritual future of the soul, boiling the scene down to three figures: “th’ ymage of Deeth” (henceforth, “Ymage”) lying in his deathbed; Disciple, standing on his left; and a skeletal figure with a spear approaching from the right, much like the Death figures in the Brussels and Additional manuscripts. Placed at the beginning of the dialogue between the narrator and Ymage, though not at the beginning of the translation, the visual image interprets the rhetorical situation of the “De Scientia” as an interior discourse, omitting Sapience entirely from the scene and figuring Death as a character, despite the absence of any allegorical death figure in Suso’s text.

The Arch Selden image is evocatively spare, built out of a series of simple visual doubling gestures: Ymage’s caved ribs are mirrored in the skeletal figure of death, whom the artist has rendered with skin still encasing his chest, indicating a not fully decomposed corpse. Ymage and Disciple, meanwhile, wear the same headgear, and have the same facial features, including a distinctive angular nose: Disciple sees in Ymage a double of himself, distorted by the wrack of sickness and impending death. Whereas

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1 The Arch Selden manuscript is one of nine manuscripts of Hoccleve’s poem: two holograph copies, and seven others. See below for further detail on the holograph copies.
Suso’s text by no means suggests that Discipulus confronts himself in the Imago Mortis, the Arch Selden image converts the text’s abstract didactic message into a visual self-reflection, a literal realization for Disciple of the venerable monastic tradition of internalizing the death of the Other as one’s own: *sum quod eris* (I am what you will be).

These pictorial elements suggest the Arch Selden illustrator astutely read Hoccleve’s text, activating self-reflexive tendencies in the *Series* (1421–