Medieval society is popularly believed to have been obsessed with death: the motto memento mori (remember that you must die) is used to characterise the period, whereas the Renaissance is summed up by Horace's aphorism carpe diem (seize the day). The two labels are essentially two sides of the same coin, but the first suggests a morbid state of mind with an unhealthy focus on mortality whereas the second seems much more positive and indicative of a change in mentality. The Dutch historian Johan Huizinga devoted a whole chapter of his 1919 study Herfsttij der Middeleeuwen (translated originally as The Waning of the Middle Ages) to the constant reminders of one's own mortality that we find in art, literature and drama of the fifteenth century, citing the Danse Macabre as a prime example of how the transience of earthly beauty was visualised in this period.1

Memento mori is indeed the primary message of the Danse Macabre, a medieval textual and/or visual motif that acquired a widespread popularity across Europe in the fifteenth century.2 However, the Danse conveyed yet another message: it also served to demonstrate to contemporary viewers how Death wreaks chaos and disorder by disrespecting the social hierarchy of this world and by despaching its victims indiscriminately, regardless of age, wealth, or status. Everyone is equal before Death – even mighty kings – and the naked dancing corpses underline how every vestige of one's social identity is erased in death. In a world in which every citizen knew their divinely ordained place in Christian society, this brutal truth must have been disturbing rather than comforting as it calls into question the value of rank and social order. Yet the Danse did not just address the individual on a social and moral level. As this chapter will also show, it was probably two royal deaths in quick succession, and the national trauma and social disorder they left in their wake on both sides of the Channel, that led to the creation of two famous Danse Macabre mural

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cycles in Paris and London. These in turn inspired the spread across Europe of a motif that has continued to appeal to this very day, precisely because it functions at both a moral and a social level and because it still has the power to shock and unsettle the viewer.3

This chapter aims to contextualise the Danse and analyse its multiple messages through a close reading of two of the earliest texts: the French poem that was incorporated in a famous mural in the cemetery of Les Saints Innocents in Paris in 1424–1425 and the Middle English adaptation by the monk-poet John Lydgate (c. 1371–1449), which in turn formed the basis of another famous cycle of paintings at Old St Paul’s Cathedral in London. Unfortunately both schemes were lost centuries ago, but the woodcut edition that was first published by Guy Marchant in 1485 provides us with at least an impression of the Paris mural half a century earlier, even if its illustrations evidently do not form a reliable copy as is so often thought.4 For comparison and to illustrate the continuing fascination with the Danse, reference will also be made to the famous series of woodcuts designed by Hans Holbein the Younger designed around 1524, but published only in 1538 under the title Les simulachres & historiees faces de la mort.5

The Theme of Death in Medieval Culture

It was hard to avoid being reminded of one’s own mortality in the Middle Ages. The dead were buried within the community, either in the churchyard or inside the church.6 Those who could afford it commissioned tombstones or

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3 There are thriving Danse Macabre societies across Europe today, such as the Association des Danses Macabres d’Europe in France and the Europäische Totentanz-Vereinigung in Germany.
4 The book format forced Marchant to divide up the cycle into two pairs per page, while the dress and shoes worn by the figures in the woodcut are typical of the 1480s and not of the 1420s. Of the original 1485 edition only one incomplete copy survives in the municipal library in Grenoble; it is reproduced in facsimile in Der tanzende Tod. Mittelalterliche Totentänze, ed. Gert Kaiser (Frankfurt am Main: Insel, 1983), 70–107. In subsequent editions Marchant expanded the Danse with additional characters.
5 For example, see Werner L. Gundersheimer, The Dance of Death by Hans Holbein the Younger: A Complete Facsimile of the Original 1538 edition of Les simulachres & historiees faces de la mort (New York: Dover, 1971).
6 For example, see Vanessa Harding, The Dead and the Living in Paris and London, 1500–1670 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), and for the earlier medieval period Patrick J. Geary, Living with the Dead in the Middle Ages (Ithaca/London: Cornell University Press, 1994).