



READING DEATH AS AN IDEOLOGICAL TOOL IN JOHN LYDGATE'S *DANCE OF DEATH*

John Lydgate'in *Ölüm Dansı*'nda Ölümü İdeolojik Bir Aygıt Olarak Okumak

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Abstract

The *Danse Macabre* tradition emerged in the medieval art and literature as a result of the Black Death in the fourteenth century Europe to remind people of the transience of the earthly pleasures and imminence of death. In the *Danse Macabre* poems, mostly the personification of death summons the individuals to a dance. *Dance of Death* is originally a French poem translated into English by the English monk and poet John Lydgate in the fifteenth century. As a work written in the *Danse Macabre* tradition, it is an example of medieval didactic poetry with its dialogues between the personified death and the individuals from different estates in the society. The Death invites various sinful or sinless individuals regardless of their sex, rank, and age to die. Attendance to this invitation reminding the medieval people of their own mortality and sinfulness is obligatory, and it is conducted under the governance and the authority of The Death. Accordingly, the aim of this article is to trace the *Danse Macabre* tradition in the poem, and discuss to what extent the poem's thematic materials coincide with those of the Althusserian ideological state apparatuses, by asserting that, above its religious didacticism, the dance of the dead led by The Death in the poem alludes to the Althusserian religious and cultural ideological state apparatuses.

Keywords: John Lydgate, *Dance of Death*, The *Danse Macabre* tradition, Death, Althusserian ideology.

Öz

Ölüm Dansı geleneği Orta Çağ sanatı ve edebiyatında on dördüncü yüzyıl Avrupa'sında Kara Ölümün bir sonucu olarak insanlara dünyevi zevklerin geçiciliği ve ölümün yakınlığını hatırlatmak amacıyla ortaya çıkmıştır. *Ölüm Dansı* şiirlerinde, genellikle kişileşmiş ölüm bireyleri bir dansa davet eder. *Ölüm Dansı* şiiri on beşinci yüzyılda İngiliz bir keşiş ve şair olan John Lydgate tarafından İngilizceye çevrilen, aslı Fransızca olan bir şiirdir. *Ölüm Dansı* geleneğinde yazılmış bir eser olarak, kişileştirilmiş ölüm ve toplumun farklı sosyal sınıflarından bireyler arasında geçen diyaloglarıyla Orta Çağ öğretici şiirinin bir örneğidir. Ölüm, cinsiyet, sosyal konum ve yaşlarını gözetmeksizin birçok günahkâr ve günahsız bireyi ölmeye davet eder. Orta Çağ insanlarına kendi fanilikleri ve günahkarlıklarını hatırlatan bu davete katılmak zorunludur ve Ölüm'ün yönetimi ve yetkisi altında gerçekleştirilir. Bu bağlamda, bu makalenin amacı şiirdeki *Ölüm Dansı* geleneğini izlemek ve şiirin tematik materyalinin hangi ölçüde Althusser'in ideolojik devlet aygıtları kavramıyla örtüştüğünü, şiirin dini öğreticiliğini ötesinde, Ölüm'ün başını çektiği ölümlerin dansının Althusser'in dini ve kültürel ideolojik devlet aygıtlarına gönderme yaptığını ileri sürerek tartışmaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: John Lydgate, *Ölüm Dansı*, Ölüm Dansı Geleneği, Ölüm, Althusseryen ideoloji.

Introduction

The *Danse Macabre* tradition in art and literature is the product of the medieval European folk culture rooted in the aftermaths of the Black Death of 1348 in Europe, and it has subsequent strikes in the European society and literary productions in the fourteenth and the fifteenth centuries. Despite the fact that this plague caused thousands of deaths in Europe, it

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contributed to the emergence of a new literary tradition, and provoked the poets to write on unavailability of death for everyone regardless of their sex, age, and rank. The *Danse Macabre* poems as the manifestations of the psychological reactions to the plague strengthen the idea of the necessity of redemption since death is sudden. As a consequence, this triggered the fright of dying as a sinful person, and led people to indulge in philosophical discussions on death. While the Black Death initiated an argument on ontological nature of human beings and their fragility, it reinforced God's authority on people, in addition to a change it brought in mentality and behaviour. It brought pessimism by breaking down secular mentality of putting trust in earthly riches and pleasures, which also constitutes the subject matters of the *Danse Macabre* poems. The cultural consequences of the Black Death contextualized in the *Danse Macabre* literary tradition revealing the mental and behavioural change help the poets explain the enigma of why human beings shall surpass their earthliness. Since medieval people were already obsessed with death, this *momento mori* - in other words, remember that you must die motto-, "served to demonstrate to contemporary viewers how Death wreaks chaos and disorder by disrespecting the social hierarchy of this world and by despatching its victims indiscriminately, regardless of age, wealth, or status. Everyone is equal before Death", making the powerful kings and the others equal by erasing their social identities (Oosterwijk, 2014: 197). This inspired several *Danse Macabre* verses including John Lydgate's *Dance of Death*.

Lydgate (c. 1371-1449), a medieval English monk and poet, translated the poem into English from French after seeing it accompanied with its mural painting on the wall of the church of the Holy Innocents, in Paris, where he stayed in 1426. This poem, to arouse horror of death, mainly purposes to remind its audience of the necessity of giving up the earthly pleasures to be redeemed. However, with its erasing the social hierarchy and making everyone equal in the face of death, it suggests several arguments with respect to the religious ideology and institutions with regard to the individuals led by the Death to a common destination, the grave. In this respect, this article argues that the Althusserian religious and cultural ideological state apparatuses are applicable to John Lydgate's *Dance of Death* once it is considered that the Althusserian notions of hierarchy and oppression in the society are imposed by means of death and also by the Church which represents the Christian ideology and authority. The scholarly interest in *Dance of Death* mostly concentrates on the readings of the poem with its relation to the Black Death, medieval idea of salvation, and the fact that death breaks the social hierarchy in medieval society. There are also several articles concerned with the use of the *Danse Macabre* image in art and architecture. However, literature on its Althusserian reading remains having been neglected. Therefore, the Althusserian reading of the poem intends to offer a novel argument. The argument allocated is worth attention due to the fact that the poem, contrary to a festive dance, presents a distorted version of it by equating each participant not in a joyful mood but in a dance led by The Death, an allegorical character summoning its victims to a dance leading to their graves. Therefore, it is possible to read the poem within the medieval religious ideology because of the fact that the personification of death stands for the medieval religious ideology itself. Since the individuals do not feel any physical pain, and they are grabbed by The Death's hand with a kind invitation, the poem pretends to present its readers a creepy carnival consisting of a group of people who are there to celebrate their deaths. Hence, the poem functions as a moral warning reminding people to get prepared for their death by

drawing a lesson from the repentant individuals who were once sinners and now ask for God's forgiveness; but more importantly, it offers a new reading of oppression by the religious institution and its ideology. The objective of this article is to discuss to what extent the poem's thematic material -the religious ideology produced and used as a tool by the Church to teach Christian morality- coincides with those of the Althusserian ideological state apparatuses. For this purpose, in the following paragraphs, the origins of the Black Death, how it can be related to the development of the *Danse Macabre* tradition are mentioned. Furthermore, the Althusserian understanding of the mentioned apparatuses is explained so that the ideological reading of the poem becomes possible.

The Black Death and the Origin of the *Danse Macabre* Tradition

Due to the fact that each pandemic triggers social changes, the Black Death in the fourteenth century had devastating social and demographical impacts in Europe. As Martyn Whittock explains, this disease identified as the bubonic plague swept the populations while it was moving westward across Europe for several years, and it was so destructive that "of all the intrusive new killer diseases of the Middle Ages none compares with the Black Death" (2009: 116). It caused entire villages being abandoned, the plague sufferers being left alone even by their families and friends (Vögele & et al., 2021: 7). As a horrific disease, it arrived the eastern end of the Mediterranean in 1347, then spread to France, Spain, Italy, and England in 1348. The medicine failed to cure the victims, and people realized that those who pray cannot protect them, and those who fight run away, so it is needless to work to feed them. Indeed, "the plague forces men to reappraise the fundamental relationship between themselves and God" since God does not discriminate the innocent or the sinful in his judgements (Mortimer, 2009: 200-201). When all remedies fail, chroniclers turned to the stars, snakes, and God to understand the plague's origins and how it is transmitted, though still considering the sin at its root (Cohn, 2002: 710). Since death manifested itself everywhere, the death-stricken people associated this catastrophe with the Christian philosophy of sin and punishment. The hope for renewal and salvation of the soul brought a strict wave of piety. Therefore, from this atmosphere of fear, *Macabre* came out as the symbol of death.

The etymology of the word *Macabre* is obscure and controversial among scholars;² yet, one of the possible origins Robert Eisler presents in his detailed survey on its origins is that the tradition might have been derived from a Hebrew or Jewish jargon in the fourteenth century France for the particular death dances. The Jewish funeral confraternities used to have an annual ceremony to celebrate the traditional day of the birth and death of Moses during which they used to wind through the graves of the cemetery (1948: 206). Eisler also points out that:

The idea of a dance of the souls of the departed has been borrowed by Jews and Christians. 'In the world to come God as the dance-leader will conduct a dance for the righteous.' In the Marcionite apocryphal *Acts of John* Jesus leads a mystical dance of his disciples. According to St. Augustine this dance was known and practised by the Priscillianists of Spain and other heretics. It may be derived from the dances practised by the Jewish mystics described in Philo's *De vita contemplative*. St. John Chrysostom, who condemned secular dancing,

² For the etymological discussion on *Macabre*, see EISLER, Robert (1948). "Danse Macabre", *Traditio*, Vol. 6, pp. 187-225. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27830174>

declaring that 'where there is dancing there is the devil', says that Christians have got their feet not for this indecent exercise but 'so that we can dance with the choirs of the angels' (1948: 195).

Furthermore, in Eisler's etymological survey, a possible derivation of the French word *macabre* from an Arabic origin is mentioned. This indicates a 'funeral dance' or 'dance of the buried' described as a dance of the death in the ceremony called *en nadb* (1948: 198). Despite the diversity in its etymology, the *Danse Macabre* as a subject first emerged in Western European art and literature in several medieval panels and wall paintings. The *Danse Macabre* was a favourite theme in Western and Middle European literature and painting, and it developed into a literary and pictorial art form around 1400. The dance of the dead was painted as a monumental fresco to remind people of the transience of life, and "in the form of a round dance, people of different classes (from bishops and queens to beggars and children) stand hand in hand with a depiction of death, referring to equality in the face of death and the unpredictability of the last hour" (Rittershaus & Eschenberg, 2021: 331). The dance was depicted on the walls of the churches or cemeteries, and the pictures of "the living were portrayed according to their social standing and were accompanied by a corpse or skeleton" (Mackenbach, 1995: 1285). The earliest known mural of it was painted in a gallery of the Cemetery of the Innocents in Paris in 1425, though it is no longer extant, apart from various paintings on the walls of some other French churches (Gertsman, 2003: 143). The mural depicted represented members of medieval society arranged in several sequential images, and the personification of death was represented as a decomposing corpse. Each pair of figures was accompanied with verses, one stanza in which The Death addresses a person, and one stanza in which the person responds, first in protest and then in reluctant acceptance (Blatt, 2018: 143).

Even if the *Danse Macabre* as a literary motif owes its origins to the impacts of the Black Death, Sophie Oosterwijk states that medieval people were already familiar with the pictorial descriptions of bodily corruption which reminded them of the mental preparation for death and the necessity of salvation. Such images were described in *exempla*, or put on the cadaver tombs in a state of decomposition to remind viewers of the fact that death is universal and impossible to avoid (2014: 200-201). Moreover, in between the tenth and the fifteenth centuries, there were plenty of lyrics concerned with the sentiments evoked by the idea of death (Bús, 2008: 84). In addition to this, there is a claim that the *Danse Macabre* developed out of drama, and can be grouped together with the dramatic representations that were separated from the Passion and Resurrection cycles (Clark, 1950: 336), and it is possible to trace the *Danse Macabre* theme in the Chester mystery cycle (Oosterwijk, 2002-03: 250). As a literary product of the plague years, the *Danse Macabre* image turned into a traditional motif standing for death, and helps people question about salvation. Hence, it is obvious that the *Danse Macabre* tradition offers moral connotations in relation to the fear of dying, more importantly, dying as a sinner.

The Death and *Dance of Death* as Ideological Tools

Once the origin of the tradition is traced, the basic drive behind the concept of the *Danse Macabre* tradition was the Black Death which haunted the medieval people with its unpredictability and unavoidability. Its context also fits into an analysis from the perspective of Althusser with its convergence of the authority of death with Christian ideology. The impression of the Althusserian ideology overlaps and is enhanced by the way that the poem

presents a commentary on the social hierarchy and authority in medieval society and religious institutions. A collaboration between the medieval religious morality and hierarchy exists in the poem. This sophisticated interplay between the facts and their representation offers not only a medieval historical perspective but also revolves around the questioning of authority. Apart from the various issues discussed below, The Death personified and presented as the authority figure no longer stands only for the medieval preoccupation with death, but its treatment provides the readers with an Althusserian interpretation of an ideological tool for repression.

Lydgate's poem mostly follows its French model, and before it was destroyed in 1549 it "was included in a famous series of Dance of Death paintings in the cloister at Old St. Paul's Cathedral in London; [...] Because of this famous scheme at St. Paul's, the *danse macabre* came generally to be known in England as the 'dance of Paul's,' and it inspired further (mostly lost) depictions of the same theme up and down the country" (Oosterwijk, 2002-03: 254). Even if the lay and secular characters are hierarchically listed in the poem, it is certain that all people are equal in the eye of The Death. Although the poem begins with the figures of the highest positions of social hierarchy, The Pope, a descend in the order is clear as well as the alteration of the order between the religious and secular figures. Hence, as Johan P. Mackenbach points out, equality of all individuals before death is "a reminder that a high social rank does not protect against death" (1995: 1258). The poem presents the encounters between The Death and the individuals for a message converging the necessity of morality and fear of death in Christian faith by depicting especially the clergy members who neglect their duty and have deceptive façade, in addition to all other laity and clergy whose devotion is questionable as they have indulged in the earthly achievements and luxuries. The Death's playful and sarcastic mood creates mockery as it plays with the subordinate mortals who are fair and foul, while reminding them of their mortality and the judgment of God awaiting them.

By combining death and salvation before dying, *Dance of Death* provides its audience with the amalgamation of the Christian ideas of death and the necessity of salvation for the peaceful rest of the soul in the Otherworld. However, the moment of death, though presented by means of a dance, is not a celebrative occasion. It pretends to be a carnival with its participants from all social classes, sexes, and ages such as The Cardinal, The King, The Knight, The Abbess, The Burgess, The Physician, The Sergeant, The Merchant, The Labourer, and The Child. However, it is different from the medieval carnivals where people regardless of their ranks, sexes, ages celebrate and become equal in hierarchy. For Mikhail Bakhtin, carnival rooted in the antiquity and at its peak in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, is a joyful communal performance which liberates one from fear, brings one person close to another, opposes to gloomy and dogmatic seriousness which hinders change, and absolutizes a set social order. What makes a carnival significant is the fact that the carnival world liberates man from seriousness (Bakhtin, 1999: 160). Bakhtin's ridiculing and refusal to acknowledge the authority of the official institutions to extend their hegemony is in contrast to what is formulated in *Dance of Death*. The Death, assumed to be depicted as a cadaver or in shape of a skeleton, is recognized as an impartial judge by all once they are visited by it, since its arrival evokes a frightening response. The imperative tone in The Death's addressing the individuals marks it as the figure of authority, and reinforces the idea that it has the control over the people. Therefore, The Death

in the poem is closer to the Althusserian ideological tool with its victimization of the masses of people and its ideological recognition of the Church.

Louis Althusser (1918-1990), a French Marxist philosopher, in 1970s formulates new concepts about the relationship between state and its subjects in his essay titled "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" in which he analyses the state, its educational and legal systems, as well as the relationship between the state and his subjects. He claims that the ideologies are instantiated by several institutions like church, school, and family; and if one embraces the practices of these institutions, one becomes their subject. Althusser claims that "the school (but also other state institutions like the Church, or other apparatuses like the army) teaches 'know-how', but in forms which ensure *subjection to the ruling ideology*" (Althusser, 2014: 236). Likewise, The Death, in the poem, as the agency of the Church, and hence the ruling ideology, teaches people about the unavoidability and suddenness of death; and by arousing fear of death, ensures their subjection to the ruling ideology, the dogmatic didacticism of the Church. The clerical and lay individuals stereotypically represent the fleshly desires, and none of them are given any chance by The Death to repent or live longer. The Death is more powerful than all of them, because it is mighty enough to end the lives of the most privileged such as the noble warriors known for their physical strength. So, The Death is boastful and distinguished from them because of its distinctive might. The triumph of The Death is culminated when it makes its final speech, has the final resolution, and it does not spare anyone. It victoriously says that there is no escape from death, and God rewards the ones who deserve it (Lydgate, 1969: 141). Its words, apart from its potency, reveal the frustrations of the corrupt individuals who lose their hope for salvation. The Death's only exception to life-taking is made when it treats The Labourer amicably and spares him from punishment after his death to reward him for his honesty and hard labour on earth. Since no one in society is exempt from death, The Death's manifestation of omnipotence over everyone makes them vulnerable figures frustrated with their final punishment.

Althusser lists "a relatively large number of Ideological State Apparatuses in contemporary capitalist social formations: the educational apparatus, the religious apparatus, the family apparatus, the political apparatus, the trade union apparatus, the communications apparatus, the 'cultural' apparatus', etc." (Althusser, 2014: 248). The Althusserian idea of Ideological State Apparatuses which is applicable to the poem is limited to the religious one, the Church only, and therefore it excludes the government, the police, the courts, the army, the prisons, the schools, and the family which Althusser also includes as other Ideological State Apparatuses (Althusser, 2014: 243). The poem, in the Althusserian perspective, aptly presents the Church as a force of repressive intervention in the interest of the religious authority. Althusser stresses that in the pre-capitalist period there was one dominant Ideological State Apparatus with religious, educational, and cultural function. By so, he explains that "during the Middle Ages, the Church (the religious Ideological State Apparatus) accumulated a number of functions which have today devolved on to several distinct Ideological State Apparatuses, new ones in relation to the past I am invoking, in particular educational and cultural functions" (Althusser, 2014: 248). The Church, hence, is not different from the State which is a powerholder for functioning its objectives. Both Repressive State Apparatus and Ideological

State Apparatuses function by violence and ideology, while the Ideological State Apparatuses function predominantly by ideology and secondarily by repression (Althusser, 2014: 244).

To be educative, though it did not use physical violence to oppress the individuals, the Church made use of the ideological repression, and hence introduced the dogmatic discourse stressing the authority of God, the unavailability of death, and the certainty of the Judgement Day. In the poem, this discourse is used by The Death who represents God's authority on the individuals at the moment of their deaths. The Death's, and therefore God's, authority is out of question and the ridiculing of the dogmas is impossible. The joyous disorder of an ordinary dance is replaced with the maintenance of God's present order in the dance of the dead, and the hierarchy is broken only when all individuals, - The King, The Pope, The Merchant, The Magician, The Lady, The Child, The Labourer, and etc. - are equalized in the face of the dance presented as a ritual. Adebayo Williams pays attention to the fact that ritual is a part of the cultural dominant in feudal societies, and therefore ritual is a part of a complex apparatus of cultural reproduction by the dominant groups (1993: 67). According to Althusser, unlike 'bad subjects', the good subjects work by ideology and they are inserted into practices governed by the rituals of the Ideological State Apparatuses (Althusser, 2014: 269). From the Althusserian perspective, hence, the dance, like a religious ritual, serves as a vehicle for establishing the contact with God, the essence of the divine authority, through The Death. Althusser believes that an individual adopts a particular attitude and participates in certain regular practices which are those of ideological apparatuses depending on the ideas chosen freely by the subjects, such as one's going to Church or doing penance as a believer. Throughout this, every subject is endowed with the ideas that one's consciousness inspires him. In other words, one is to act according to his idea. For an individual "the existence of the ideas of his belief is material in that *his ideas are his material actions inserted into material practices governed by material rituals which are themselves defined by the material ideological apparatus from which derive the ideas of that subject*" (Althusser, 2014: 259-260). Accordingly, the dance of the individuals, materialized as a ritual, acts as an ideological apparatus due to the fact that the dance, bringing all people together does not function for questioning God's authority or parodying the divine authority, but for confirming it, and all individuals feel themselves obliged to consent to it at the moment of dying.

The poem presents the moment of dying both as an individual and a collective experience, because the individuals are grabbed by The Death one by one; yet, the dance of the death they participate in is not different from the Last Judgement when all individuals gather to wait for their final judgement. For instance, when The Death addresses The Bailiff and says "þe Iuge wole 3ow charge Wiche hath ordeyned / to exclude al falsnes That eury man / shal bere his owne charge" (Lydgate, 1969: 135), it pays attention to the fact that The Bailiff is summoned to give account because the judge - God - ruling over falsehood will judge him, and everyone must answer his own charge. The Last Judgement reminded of by The Death is a part of the religious discourse introducing the forthcoming punishment for the sinners, the eternal reward for the redeemed ones, and the reunion of the souls with their resurrected bodies. For the purpose of imposing these ideas and the necessity of salvation, the Death uses a discourse through which it interpellates each individual as a sinner. Each individual by being reminded

of their sinful nature becomes subjects of The Death, and so, they are urged to submit to The Death's order. Similarly, Althusser claims that ideology addressing individuals transforms them into subjects by interpellating them (Althusser, 2014: 264). He suggests that:

the interpellation of individuals as subjects presupposes the 'existence' of a unique and central other Subject, in whose name the religious ideology interpellates all individuals as subjects. All this is clearly written in what is rightly called the Scriptures. [...] God thus defines Himself as the Subject *par excellence*, He who is through Himself and for Himself ('I am that I am'), and he who interpellates his subject, the individual subjected to Him by his very interpellation, i.e. the individual named Moses. And Moses, interpellated-called by his name, having recognized that it 'really' was he who was called by God, recognizes that he is a subject, a subject of God, a subject subjected to God, *a subject through the Subject and subjected to the Subject*. The proof: he obeys him, and makes his people obey God's Commandments (Althusser, 2014: 267).

This argument of Althusser is applicable to the individuals in *Dance of Death*, as they are depicted as the subjects of God, and hence they are subjected to God, and they obey or understand the necessity of believing in God's commands. The Death duplicates God to remind His subjects of what prepares them for the Judgment Day. The structure of the poem makes it possible to follow The Death's addressing, or hailing, the individuals and their responding to it. In the Althusserian understanding, these individuals are hailed or interpellated as subjects. Men and women of different social classes and ages in a long row are led away by The Death, giving the readers a sense of visualization of the dancing figures though it lacks an actual performance. In this sinister dance which lacks celebration but arouses fear, what brings all people together and hence breaks the hierarchy is The Death's call for death. In the Althusserian point of view, The Death acts as an ideological tool teaching people about death and meanwhile represses them by taking control of their lives and enables their subjection to the ideology of the religious authority. The individuals who become subjects experience '*interpellation* or hailing' since they recognize that they are addressed by the religious authority and they have to obey it.

Lydgate introduced in his *Dance of Death* a named personage, Maister Jon Rikelle apart from four other new characters, three of whom are female figures (the abbess, the lady, and the gentlewoman) who are not extant in the all-male French poem, and the juror (Oosterwijk, 2010: 190). The poem, consequently, becomes a portrait gallery of the medieval society with the inclusion of the woman characters by getting rid of the male-centred representation. Despite the lack of long talks between The Death and the individuals, there is a series of serious dialogues following one another among each individual and The Death. The Death and the individuals talk in their own turn. Meanwhile, the readers can identify them and receive specific information about their life, status, and power, and hence, understand why they resist to or accept death. Some of them are aware of the futility of their struggle against death while some lament their life in wealth and comfort is disrupted. Yet, in common, they recognize that they are weaker than The Death. For instance, when The Death calls The Pope, the following dialogue takes place between them:

Death to the Pope
 O 3ee þat be set / most hie in dignite
 Of alle estatis / in erthe spiritual
 And like as Petir had þe souereinte
 Overe þe chirche / and statis temporal

Vpon þis daunce / 3e firste begyn shal
 As moste worthy lorde / and gouernour
 ffor al þe worship / of 3oure astate papal
 And of lordship / to god is the honour

The Pope aunswerith

First me bihoueth / þis daunce for to
 lede

Wich sat in erþe / hiest in my see.
 The state ful perillous / ho so takith
 hede.

To occupie / Petris dignite.

But al fort hat / deth I may not fle.

On his daunce / with other fort o trace.

ffor wich / al honour / who prudently
 can se.

Is litel worth / that doþe so sone pace. (Lydgate, 1969: 131-132)

As understood from their dialogue, The Death's power is affirmed, as well as the authority of the institution it represents - the Christian Church- is ensured and reinforced. The Pope hailed to die consents to be the subject of The Death, and therefore of God. In addition to this, it is reminded by The Death that no one's authority is everlasting except for its, and death equalizes everyone regardless of their social status when it addresses The Abbess by saying: "Thou3 3e be tendre / and born of gentil blood / While þat 3e lyve / for 3oure silfe prouide ffrom aftr death / no man hath no good." (Lydgate, 1969: 135). Such individuals who are indulged in the Seven Deadly Sins by putting trust in their wealth, rank, and beauty are reminded of the fact that they are all subjects of the Death, and therefore, they are subjected to The Death and they have to obey it.

For Althusser, schools and churches use suitable methods of punishment to 'discipline' their flocks (Althusser, 2014: 244). Therefore, the repression of the Church, though it is secondary to ideology for Althusser, is stressed. This also reinforces the hegemonic ambition of the Church as the representative religious institution, because the dance of death serves to the interest of the Church. It claims the necessity of getting prepared for a sudden death that prevails over the earthly concerns of human beings. Hence, the dance is not only conducted under the authority of the hegemonic institution, but also is adopted by the individuals as the sign of their submission to the hegemonic power by their acceptance of death. The Death, in the poem, is distinguished because of its supremacy, being unavoidable, and arousing fear for all people; thus, it maintains its invincibility and denomination inflicted on it by the Church's ideology. The moralistic garb becomes more apparent once realization dawns on those who participate in the dance, and they, consequently, repent for their life of sin and negligence of God. Whether the sinful ecclesiastics and lay individuals are redeemed or not is not mentioned in the poem, yet it is certain that once they are summoned by The Death, they realize their flaw or pride apart from the transience of life.

The scary nature of death is apparent once The King explains how his body has ended up with fall and decay once it is stripped of his flesh and eaten by worms (Lydgate, 1969: 141). This is the only scene where the corporeal decomposition is mentioned in the poem. Nevertheless, this decomposition of the body is not only the indicator of meaningless of the

material body but also the moral decay that has been well-deserved by the dead person. In medieval Christian mind, death provides a transition because “death was not only the end of life but the start of the afterlife” (Mackenbach, 1995: 1291). Plus, as Howard Williams states, the dead body is a focus of aspiration of miraculous healing once it is considered within the context of the cult of the saints (2009: 83), making it a medium for transformation. Hence, death acquires two functions by doubling its nature both as the life-taker and the life-giver. The idea of reformation or regeneration is extant since the repentant sinners invite the other sinners to ask for God’s forgiveness more than frightening them; and therefore, they impose the possibility of salvation for the repentant. Consequently, the readers can respond to or incorporate into the judgements of the individuals in the poem, and thereby they can also confront with their own shortcomings, sins, and judgements once the border between the living and the dead is erased. Just like this ambiguity in the nature of death, the individuals also find themselves in an ambivalent situation according to the Althusserian understanding, because as subjects who submit to a higher authority – The Death and God, here -, they are “stripped of all freedom except that of freely accepting submission” (Althusser, 2014: 269).

The Christian commandments related to death and punishment, as well as the fear of dying sinful are on the foreground in the poem, making it a declaration of Christian ideology. In the Althusserian reasoning, “ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence” and the allusions to the reality are to be interpreted to “arrive at the conclusion that in ideology ‘men represent their real conditions of existence to themselves in an imaginary form’” (Althusser, 2014: 256). There are cynical men who dominate the others on a falsified representation of the world which they have imagined (Althusser, 2014: 257). Accordingly, the stress on the punishment of the sinners and the necessity of salvation, which is also highlighted in the poem, is an imaginary transposition of the clergymen who imagine the doom awaiting people after death; yet, it is presented to the individuals as a reality since it is repetitively dictated by The Death. To ensure this religious ideology, for instance, The Friar, points out that death makes a quick ending and it is too late to repent by saying “To late ware /whan men bene on þe brinke. The worlde shal faile / and al possessioun ffor moche faileth / on þing þat foles thinke.” (Lydgate, 1969: 141). The Clerk’s respond, despite being dogmatic, is also humorous as he tries to explain he shall not die because he is young. Although humorous expressions are scarcely used in the poem, they are employed for the sake of satire, just like in The Death’s address to The Abbot. The Death says that The Abbot has a reason to be shy as he has a big head, a large and a fat belly; yet, still he has to die and leave his abbey to an heir “Who þat is fattest” (Lydgate, 1969: 134-135). The humorous statements in the poem are not employed for the sake of the displacement of the serious language and the gloomy atmosphere; on the contrary, they are there to create sarcasm. Such a manifestation of the Death is not for the sake of erasing its repulsiveness but rather stressing its imperial nature and the defencelessness of the individuals when they are summoned by it. Their acceptance of their sinfulness and submission to The Death’s call is preceded by The Death’s sardonic statements about their earthliness and vanity. The Death mocks and scorns the individuals for their being blinded with their high living standards, wealth, beauty, youth, and rank to remind them of the fact that they are worthless, and this world is temporary. This endows The Death with both positive and negative connotations, since it embodies both humour and terror at the same time.

Lastly, Althusser pays attention to the fact that “it is essential to realize that both he who is writing these lines and the reader ‘who reads them are themselves subjects, and therefore ideological subjects (a tautological proposition), i.e. that the author and the reader of these lines both live ‘spontaneously’ or ‘naturally’ in ideology” (Althusser, 2014: 262). Thus, the poem serves to the ideology of the Church as the representative of the religious authority. Therefore, the literature and the monk/poet develop into the tools which are imitative of the Althusserian Ideological State Apparatuses. The poem becomes the voice of the medieval Christian ideology, while Lydgate becomes a tool for the transmission of the same ideology. So, Lydgate contributed to the spread of the Church’s ideology by translating this poem into English, and consequently he became a subject of the religious ideology as well as the poem itself.

Conclusion

Lydgate’s *Dance of Death*, by underscoring the differences among them, suggests the equalizing force of death to the individuals who are on the threshold of death and atonement, which is based on the medieval Christian ideology. It not only reminds the living of all ranks the indiscriminating and the inevitable death but also the necessity of an immediate repentance and betterment of their lives. Once the murals of the *Danse Macabre* image combined with the poems on various medieval church walls for the sake of religious didacticism, it symbolized the unexpected death, and stressed the necessity of salvation for all human beings. This religious tool for instruction also bears an affinity to the religious and cultural ideological state apparatuses by calling to mind the arguments of Althusser on the nature of religious institutions. In other words, the *Danse Macabre* tradition and imagery that came out of it in the medieval Europe connotes to the Althusserian ideology with the identification of The Death as the figure of authority and the representation of the Christian ideology. By basing on the Althusserian idea that “the ideologies were *realized* in institutions, in their rituals and their practices, in the ISAs” (Althusser, 2014: 271), the Christian ideas of sinfulness and redeemability of humankind; the inevitability, abruptness, the equalizing power of, and finality of death encourage the reading of the poem as an ideological text with the dogmatic feature the poem takes on. The poem preserves both the homiletic and the Althusserian overtones, and brings a critical insight to the social stratifications and religion. Although the social hierarchy is disrupted as the lowest members of the society are equalized with their social superiors, the laity and the clergy converged; the Church’s conception of death is kept extant, and therefore, the transcendental message of the Church amalgamates with a non-hierarchical medieval society. Consequently, the Althusserian reading of the poem provides its readers with an opportunity to consider how its ideological reading can shape its interpretation by crossing the boundary of its religious reading only. More importantly, the poem itself becomes a cultural tool to promote the medieval religious authority since as a monk, Lydgate, by translating the poem, promotes the religious ideology by making use of literature.

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