

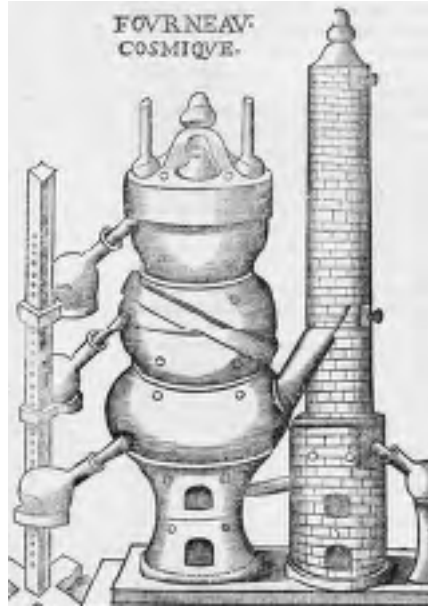
ATHANOR XXXVIII



FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY DEPARTMENT OF ART HISTORY

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Cosmic over or Athanor from Annibal Barlet, *Le Vray Cours de Physique*, Paris, 1653.

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Günther Stamm Prize for Excellence

Mia Hafer was awarded the Günther Stamm Prize for Excellence for "Indices in Ivory: Aspiring Affective Piety with a Walrus Ivory Christ" presented at the 2021 Art History Graduate Student Symposium.

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Sight, Sound, and Silence at the Oratorio of San Bernardino in Clusone

Angelica Verduci

At the top of a hill in the medieval town of Clusone (Bergamo, northern Italy), a steep staircase leads into the porch of the seventeenth-century Basilica of Santa Maria Assunta. Moving towards the left, the beholder is led to the quiet courtyard of the fourteenth-century Oratorio of San Bernardino, only to be suddenly overwhelmed by a spellbinding mural painting, which is depicted on the eastern outer façade of the edifice (Figures 1 and 2).¹ From the top down, a gigantic skeleton, royally attired, embodies Death, who stages its triumph on an open tomb. Written scrolls flutter in the air and announce that Death is the harbinger of a universal fate to which everyone is subdued.² On Death's sides, two smaller skeletons point a bow and a rifle at a mixed crowd of people, some in distress and some already deceased. Below, a long procession of skeletons invites their living counterparts to a deadly dance. Above the viewer's eye level, a fragmentary depiction of the Hellmouth is still discernible on the left, while a group of men, hooded and garbed in white, appears at the bottom far right.³

Executed between 1484 and 1485, this *Triumph of Death and Dance of Death* fresco is the creation of a local

artist known as Giacomo Borlone de Buschis, who painted these macabre scenes at the request of the *Battuti* or *disciplini Bianchi* of Santa Maria Maddalena of Clusone.⁴ This lay congregation once made use of the Oratorio of San Bernardino as their oratory or *scola*, a place of gathering and prayers where they regularly practiced voluntary and ritual self-flagellation as an act of penitence, aimed both to simulate the Passion of Christ and to expiate sins. The *disciplina*—or flogging—was accompanied by prayers and recitation of *laude*, which were vernacular songs in praise of the Virgin Mary, Christ, or the saints.⁵ Some, like the poem “Io son per nome chiamata morte” (I am called death by name), consisted of exhortations to a moral life. This *lauda*, structured as a dialogue between the personification of Death and a *disciplino*, was meant to elicit meditation on Death's ubiquitous and equalizing power that overcomes the vanities of earthly life.⁶ The *Bianchi* of Clusone likely performed this song during their devotional rituals, as they had some of its verses integrated into the outside wall painting of their *scola*. Ferdinando Neri is the scholar who has discovered this connection between the *lauda* “Io sono per

Special thanks to my advisor, Dr. Elina Gertsman, and to Dr. Arthur Russell for their insightful feedback and unconditional support. I am extremely grateful to Dr. Kyle Killian and the organizers of the 37th Annual Art History Graduate Student Symposium at Florida State University for inviting me to present my research. The content of this article is derived from my current dissertation project, tentatively entitled “*Mors Triumphans* in Medieval Italian Murals: From Allegory to Performance.” Lastly, I thank my parents for serving as zealous travel companions when visiting the site of Clusone. This article is dedicated to my family and to Alberto Buttò.

1 The Oratorio dei Disciplini di San Bernardino was founded in 1350. A church originally dedicated to Santa Maria Annunciata was annexed to the south end of the oratory in 1451. The following year, the whole architectural complex—church and oratory—was entitled to San Bernardino from Siena, hence the name Oratorio of San Bernardino. Bernardino was one of the most famous mendicant preachers of the late Middle Ages. In 1411, he visited Clusone and performed sermons centered on an exhortation to penitence and reverence to Christ and the Virgin, ideals embraced by the *disciplini Bianchi* of Clusone as well. Therefore, it does not come as a surprise that the *disciplini* honored San Bernardino by entitling their church and oratory to him. See Arsenio Frugoni, “I temi della morte nell'affresco della Chiesa dei Disciplini in Clusone,” *Bullettino dell'Istituto storico italiano per il Medio Evo e archivio muratoriano* 69 (1957): 178, note 1; Luigi Olmo, *Memorie storiche di Clusone e della Valle Seriana Superiore* (Tipografia S. Alessandro, 1906), 66; and Valerio Terraroli, “Il ciclo dei temi macabri a Clusone: problemi critici e iconografici,” *Arte Lombarda*, nuova serie 90/91 (1989): 15.

2 I will discuss the specific content of these scrolls in the following pages.

3 The lower part of the mural has been considerably damaged throughout the centuries as a result of architectural alterations to the Oratorio of San Bernardino. At first, the edifice's entrance on the bottom left was walled up and replaced by a new door sometime during the second half of the sixteenth century. Then, another access was created to the second story by means of an opening, which was connected to the ground by an external stairway; this was leaned against the wall painting in 1673 and later torn down in 1860. See Terraroli, “Il ciclo dei temi macabri a Clusone,” 16.

4 The bibliography on the Triumph of Death and Dance of Death fresco in Clusone is extensive. The most helpful resources on this subject are: Frugoni, “I temi della morte nell'affresco della Chiesa dei Disciplini in Clusone,” 175–212; Chiara Frugoni and Simone Facchinetti, *Senza misericordia: il Trionfo della Morte e la Danza macabra a Clusone* (Turin: Einaudi, 2016); Valentina Rapino, *Morte in Trionfo: gli affreschi dell'oratorio dei disciplini di Clusone* (Milan: Edizioni San Paolo, 2013); Giacomo Scandella, “Danza macabra di Clusone e danze macabre europee: i personaggi a confronto,” in *La signora del mondo: atti del convegno internazionale di studi sulla Danza macabra e il Trionfo della morte*, Clusone Auditorium comunale 30 luglio-1 agosto 1999, eds. Giosuè Bonetti and Matteo Rabaglio (Clusone, 2003), 163–178; Terraroli, “Il ciclo dei temi macabri a Clusone,” 15–41; Mauro Zanchi, *Il Theatrum Mortis nel nome della vita eterna: L'Oratorio dei Disciplini a Clusone* (Clusone: Ferrari, 2005).

5 Frugoni and Facchinetti, *Senza misericordia*, 180. The confraternity of the *disciplini* in Clusone—also called *Bianchi* or *Battuti*—was inspired by the mendicant movement of the *flagellanti* (flagellants), founded by the ascetic Raniero Fasani (d. 1281) in Perugia in 1260. In the area of Clusone and Bergamo, Venturino de Apibus (1304–1346) was the preacher who gave an institutional shape to the movement of the *disciplini*, whose *regola* or *statuto* was codified in Latin in 1336. This set of rules established the principal social missions to be carried out by the *confratelli* (lay brothers)—including assistance for the poor, the redistribution of goods, the visit and cure of the sick, and the attendance of funerals. The *disciplini* were internally divided into sects, distinguishable by the color of their robes. The *Bianchi*, such as those in Clusone, adopted a white tunic as a uniform, with hood and sleeves embellished by a red cross. This garment displayed a wide opening at the back, which was meant to facilitate self-flagellation. See Daniel Ethan Bornstein, *The Bianchi of 1399: Popular Devotion in Late Medieval Italy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993); Carlo Fornari, “I Disciplinati: una lunga storia di impegno religioso, artistico, sociale,” *Storia del mondo* 45 (2007): <http://www.storiadelmondo.com/45/fornari.disciplinati.pdf>; Frugoni and Facchinetti, *Senza misericordia*, 39; L. K. Little, *Libertà, carità, fraternità. Confraternite laiche a Bergamo nell'età del Comune* (Bergamo, 1988); Ellen Schiferl, “Corporate Identity and Equality: Confraternity Members in Italian Paintings, c. 1340–1510,” *Notes in the History of Art* 8, no. 2 (1989): 12; Zanchi, *Il Theatrum Mortis*, 11, note 12.

6 *Lauda* (plural *laude*) and *disciplino* (plural *disciplini*).

nome chiamata morte" and its painted verses in the fresco.⁷ Recently, Chiara Frugoni has reiterated this *lauda*-fresco relationship, also briefly mentioning that the *disciplini* might have gathered in front of the *Triumph of Death and Dance of Death* mural to read and recite "Io sono per nome chiamata morte."⁸ Building on these observations, my contribution in this article is to specifically explore the performative ways in which the *Bianchi* could have interacted with the images on the façade of their oratory while reciting the *lauda* "Io sono per nome chiamata morte" aloud. My in-depth analysis of several passages from this vernacular poem confirms that the narrative in the fresco was modeled on the content of this text.

I argue that, by incorporating and engaging with images that foreground the senses of sight and hearing, the iconography of the Clusone fresco becomes a multi-sensory meditation on "Io son per nome chiamata morte." In particular, I posit that the conversation between Death and the *disciplino*, as conveyed in this *lauda*, is primarily envisioned in the representation of *Mors triumphans* standing on the uncovered sarcophagus at the top of the fresco. Death in triumph not only defiantly faces its onlookers—the *Bianchi*—by establishing eye contact with them but it also opens its jaw in a sign of speech. The words pronounced by Death, reported on two of the four scrolls at the top of the Clusone painting, correspond to those voiced by the personification of Death in "Io son per nome chiamata morte." I thus suggest that these verses inscribed in the fresco would have functioned as a memory prompt for each *disciplino*, who, in turn, would have recalled and recited aloud the other lines from the same *lauda*, thus activating a dialogue with Death.⁹

By the time the *confratelli* (lay brothers) of Clusone commissioned their macabre mural, "Io son per nome chiamata morte" was already circulating with some regional dialect variations within Italy. It first spread orally and was later transcribed into collections of *laude* named *laudari*.¹⁰ Today, we can still read the full text of this vernacular song in MA66, a *laudario* dated to the early sixteenth century and preserved at the Biblioteca Civica Angelo Mai in Bergamo.¹¹ "Io son per nome chiamata morte" is a *lauda pro defunctis*. This means that it was conceived to be performed as a *contrasto*, a dialogue between two allegorical figures—Death and a living sinner—to be sung during gatherings and funerary rituals of

confraternities like the *Bianchi*.¹² Overall, the whole *contrasto* is organized into three major thematic sections: a verbal exchange between Death and the sinner, whose role is played by the *disciplino* (vv. 1–120); a long monologue spoken by Death (vv. 121–189); and a speech addressed by the *disciplino* to his other lay brothers (vv. 190–218). These 218 verses are also divided into forty-four groups of four lines, called *quarantine*, which stand out on the pages of MA66 by means of bolded capital letters. These visual markers were intended to instruct the reader about the shift to a new *quartina*, thus facilitating the process of memorization.¹³ Similarly, an earlier and shorter version of "Io son per nome chiamata morte" is contained in *Leggende agiografiche*, a fifteenth-century manuscript used to memorize poems for recitation. The dialogue is made up of 116 lines arranged in twenty-nine *quarantine*, each one flagged by a red rubric that instructs the reader on which verses are to be recited by *la morte* (Death) or by *lo peccatore* (the sinner).¹⁴

A striking connection between the text of "Io son per nome chiamata morte" in MA66 and the images of the Clusone fresco hints that this vernacular poem was part of the repertory of such *laude* recited by the *Bianchi* during burial rites. In fact, the lay brothers had the exact four opening verses and the twelfth *quartina* of "Io son per nome chiamata morte" depicted on the scroll held by Death in its right hand and on the one at its far left. In this order, they report:

E[lo] sonto p[er] nome chiamata morte ferisco a chi / tocharà la sorte. No[n] è homo chosì forte che da / mi no po schampare.

I am called Death by name I hurt those / whose fate has been chosen. There is no man so strong who / can escape from me.¹⁵

Chi è fundato in la iusti[tiae] / E lo alto Dio non discha[ro tiene] / La morte a lui non ne vi[en] con dolore / poyche in vita eterna [lo mena assai migliore].

Who is grounded in justice / And obeys God who is above / to him Death does not come as a pain / as he will be sent in a better place.

7 Ferdinando Neri, ed., *Fabril: ricerche di storia letteraria* (Torino: Chiantore, 1930), 52, note 2.

8 Frugoni, *Senza misericordia*, 113.

9 On flagellants, art, and performance, see the recent publication by Andrew H. Chen, *Flagellant Confraternities and Italian Art, 1260-1610: Ritual and Experience* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018).

10 Frugoni and Facchinetti, *Senza misericordia*, 91; and Claudio Ciociola, "Visibile parlare": *agenda* (Cassino: Università degli Studi di Cassino, 1992), 103.

11 Bergamo, Biblioteca Civica Angelo Mai, *Laudario*, sec. XVI, segn. MA66. The full text of "Io son per nome chiamata morte" has been transcribed in Matteo Rabaglio, *Di questa falce nessuno fugge. Parole, riti e immagini sulla morte* (Bergamo: Sistema bibliotecario urbano, 1995), 144–148. The text of the *lauda* is also accessible from Frugoni and Facchinetti, *Senza misericordia*, 133–138.

12 Frugoni and Facchinetti, *Senza misericordia*, 93; and Gaia Trotta, "Danze Macabre Italiane e teatro della memoria," *Teatro e Storia* 24 (2002-2003): 363.

13 *Quartina* (plural *quartine*). Frugoni and Facchinetti, *Senza misericordia*, 93.

14 Bergamo, Biblioteca Civica Angelo Mai, Antonio Suardi, *Leggende agiografiche*, 1492-1493, Cassaforte 3.03, ff.108r-111v.) <https://www.bdl.servizirl.it/vufind/Record/BDL-OGGETTO-2391>.

This short version of the *lauda* "Io sono per nome chiamata morte" is titled "Desputacione che fa la Morte contro lo peccatore." For more information on the Suardi manuscript and its content see Antonio Previtali, *Leggende agiografiche ovvero storie illustrate di santi, diavoli e cavalieri: note introduttive al Codice Suardi* (S. Omobono Terme: Centro Studi Valle Imagna, 2005).

15 Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.

The inclusion of these verses from “Io son per nome chiamata morte” in the fresco suggests that this text was well-known and possibly performed by the flagellants of Clusone. Indeed, the recitation of a *lauda* such as this one perfectly aligns with the context of funerary offices fulfilled by the *confratelli* within the outside space of their Oratorio of San Bernardino. As specified in the congregation’s *regola* (rule) or *statuto* (statute), not only was each devotional ritual accompanied by flogging and recitation of *laude*, but the *disciplini* as a group had to take charge of burials and celebrations of the mass in honor of their deceased brothers.¹⁶ The *scola* was built on the edges of the cemetery that once surrounded the church of Santa Maria Assunta.¹⁷ Thus, the macabre mural on the façade once looked out on the tombs of the confraternity members. In the liminal space of the courtyard, inhabited both by the living and the silent dead, the flagellants of Clusone saw and probably even talked to Death. While standing on top of the graves, they carried out their funerary practices, maybe simultaneously reciting that dialogue contained in “Io son per nome chiamata morte,” in front of the imposing figure of Death painted on the external façade of their oratory.¹⁸ When delivering this *contrasto* aloud, the *confratelli*’s sight would have been guided through the fresco—from the top down—where the major passages from the poem were both “readable” as images and verbally summarized in the full set of four scrolls depicted on Death’s sides (Figures 3, 4, and 5). From left to right, these read:

16 Zanchi, *Il Theatrum Mortis*, 10–11. On the *regola* of the *disciplini Bianchi* see also Carlo Agazzi, “Una gloriosa confraternita bergamasca, i Disciplini di Santa Maria Maddalena,” *Bergomum, Bollettino della civica biblioteca, studi di storia dell’arte* XXVIII (1934), no.1 and no. 3: 15–38 and 201–232. The *regola* of the congregation from 1336 is recorded on a parchment manuscript in Bergamo, Biblioteca Civica Angelo Mai, X14, BCAM, AB 37.

17 Antonio Previtali, “La scuola dei disciplini di Clusone nei secoli XV e XVI,” in *Il Trionfo della morte e le danze macabre*, ed. Clara Forte (Clusone, 1997), 319; and Nicola Morali and Giacomo Scandella, *Santa Maria Assunta di Clusone storia e arte* (Clusone: Ferrari editrice, 2005), 31.

18 On similar interactions between flagellants and images of *Triumph of Death* and *Dance of Death* see Chen, *Flagellant Confraternities*, 85; and Fiorella Cichi and Liliana De Venuto, *Il movimento dei Battuti e le Danze Macabre della Val Rendena* (Calliano: Manfrini, 1993). Mara Nerbano has written in length on the *lauda pro defunctis* and funerary rituals carried out by the *disciplini* in their devotional spaces. In particular, the scholar has interestingly pointed out that some confraternities of *disciplini* in Perugia (Umbria) articulated their funerary rituals in a very performative way, using costumes and objects appropriate to the theme conveyed in the *laude pro defunctis*. For instance, archival documents of the inventories of the confraternities of *disciplini* of San Domenico and San Agostino include skeletons, skulls, sickles, and black mantels of Death among those items owned by the *discipline*. We do not have any object or costume of Death that might have belonged to the *Bianchi* of Clusone. However, Nerbano’s research seems to strengthen the possibility that even in Clusone, the *lauda* “Io sono per nome chiamata morte,” a *contrasto* between Death and the living, might have been performed by the *disciplini*, who might have used some similar objects and costumes such as those owned by their *confratelli* in Perugia, or who might have simply looked at that majestic image of Death painted on the fresco as the other actor of the dialogue. See Mara Nerbano, “Confraternite disciplinate e spazi della devozione,” in *Brotherhood and Boundaries-Fraternità e barriere*, eds. Stefania Pastore, Adriano Prosperi, and Nicholas Terpstra (Pisa: Edizioni della Normale, 2011), 39.

Scroll I: *O[gn]ia omo more e questo m[ondo lass]a chi / ofende a Dio amaram[ent]e passa 1484*

Every man dies and leaves this world who / offends
God bitterly passes away 1484

Scroll II: *E[o] sonto p[er] nome chiama-
ta morte ferisco a chi / tocharà la sorte.
No[n] è homo chosi forte che da / mi no po
schampare.*

I am called Death by name I hurt those /
whose fate has been chosen. There is no
man so strong who / can escape from me.

Scroll III: *E[o] sonto la morte piena de equaleza sole
voi / ve volio e non vostra ricchezza. E digna sonto / da
portar corona p[er]ché signorezi ogn[i]a p[er]sona.*

I am Death, full of equality I want only you / and not
your wealth. And I am worthy / to wear a crown be-
cause I am the ruler of everyone.

Scroll IV: *Chi è fundato in la iusti[tiae] / E lo
alto Dio non discha[ro tiene] / La morte a
lui non ne vi[en] con dolore / poyché in vita
eterna [lo mena assai meliore].*

Who is grounded in justice / And obeys
God who is above / to him Death does not
come as a pain / as he will be sent in a bet-
ter place.

Overall, the message carried by these vernacular lines is straightforward. Death evenly assaults, subjugates, and triumphs over everyone who, after dying, is sent to Hell or Heaven in accordance with bad or good deeds. The four scrolls inscribed on the mural painting functioned as captions to the themes represented on the eastern wall of the Oratorio of San Bernardino, but also serve as visual references for each *disciplino*: they guided his gaze throughout the recitation of the *lauda* and helped him easily reconstruct his dialogue with Death. In the following pages, a selection and translation of relevant lines from the three sections of “Io son per nome chiamata morte” will show how painted images in the fresco correspond to the spoken words from this text, creating remarkable references to sight and sound conveyed both in the fresco and in the *lauda* itself.

The first part of the vernacular poem reports the lively conversation between Death and the *disciplino* (vv. 1–120). Death introduces itself and utters that nobody can escape from it (vv. 1–4: “Io son per nome chiamata morte / ferisco a chi tocha la sorte / non è homo sì forte / che da mi possa scampare”).¹⁹ Furthermore, it announces: “I am founded on

19 This is also the same text reported in scroll II in the fresco at Clusone.

justice / no gold no silver no gifts / will take me away from the path towards truth" (vv. 25–28: "In la iusticia ho facto mio fundamento / né oro né argento né nullo presento / non me porà far fare partimento / da la via de la veritate.") When starting to recite the first verses of the *lauda*, the attention of the *disciplini* would have been captured by the majestic image of *Mors triumphans* visualized at the top of the fresco along the central axis of the composition (Figure 6).²⁰ Death is attired in its finest regal outfit: it wears a sumptuous gold crown; the ossified shoulders are concealed by a luxurious damasked mantel, embellished with pearls and lined in green silk; and a precious brooch secures the edges of the cloak in proximity to the thorax. I believe that the choice of representing Death with its gaping mouth and facing the viewer advocates the intention of the *Bianchi* to imagine that those opening lines they were reciting actually came directly out from the mouth of Death, who was beginning the dialogue with them. Death's words are faithfully translated into the images of the fresco. Around the open tomb, a bishop, a pope, and a Venetian doge proffer cups and trays brimful of golden and silver coins in vain. A king and a Jew offer a crown and a ring, respectively. However, no bartering between Death and the men is allowed. Death cannot be bribed; rather, it scorns the jewels and money uselessly gifted by the wealthy people gathered at its feet. The deadly ruler is unconcerned with the imploring gazes and gestures of the multitude kneeling around it. Additionally, this victorious and regal skeleton has turned a deaf ear to its crowd's unsuccessful prayers and pleas; instead, it has cruelly reaped several victims, piled all around the coffin.

Likewise, there is no room for a dialogue between the triumphant Death and the three horsemen depicted on the upper left side of the mural painting (Figure 7). The representation of these three knights escaping from Death is an adaptation of the *Encounter of the Three Living and the Three Dead* imagery.²¹ This morbid meeting, inspired by a late medieval tale, narrates the story of three young men—sometimes cast as kings and sometimes as aristocrats—who, during a hunt, bump into three corpses affected by different stages of decay. These dead bodies—conceived as former noblemen themselves—start a conversation with the three living to inform them that life is fleeting, that the human body will be affect-

ed by decomposition, and that wealth is ultimately useless.²² Sometimes this moral message is reported on a scroll held by a hermit who stands between the two groups, as in the fourteenth-century fresco from the Abbey of Santa Maria of Vezzolano near Asti (Figure 8).²³ This mural painting shows the three noble horsemen in a moment of panic: one turns his back to the viewer and looks up to the falcon that has escaped from his arm; the second knight pulls back and acts as he is about to move his fingers towards his nose to plug it; the third man hides his face in his hands. Their distraught gestures are dictated by the scary vision of three emaciated cadavers; two of them stand inside an open grave, whilst one is moving out of it to walk towards the three living. In fact, these cadavers reveal themselves not to punish, physically touch, or attack the living; rather, to advise them. Indeed, their encounter aims at a didactic outcome; the manifestation of the three decayed corpses is designed to prompt the living to think about the caducity of life and vanity of luxuries and richness. This gruesome meeting specifically creates a space for meditation on death, its effects, and its victory over time. The hermit, who holds a scroll and points towards the three putrefying bodies, is the mediator to this appointment, the only actor of the scene that speaks while the living and the dead are supposed to listen. In the Clusone scene, though, the hermit is replaced by an empty area, a space filled with silence, a void which denotes the absence of any fruitful talk between the three horsemen and the three skeletons—here replacing the three cadavers.²⁴ In fact, Death—the triplicated skeleton at the top of the sarcophagus—only "speaks" with the Three Living through a physical attack, by firing fatal bolts. From the right, an arrow is plunged in the chest of the blond horseman, whose body is dumped on the back of his steed. The second knight looks up at another bolt that is about to hit his dead companion's falcon. The third man, horrified, flees on his horse, which rears in terror.

In front of these visions of carnage and deadly danger, the *disciplino* replies: "Your appearance makes me tremble... You are so cruel as you kill everyone in the world / you drag down powerless and powerful ones / there is no man so happy / that you will ever forgive" (vv. 7–8: "Riguardo il tuo aspetto

20 The *Triumph of Death* in late medieval Italian wall painting is a woefully understudied topic. The most helpful resources on this subject are Liliane Brion-Guerry, *Le thème du "Triomphe de la mort" dans la peinture italienne* (Paris: Librairie Orientale et Américaine, 1950); and Pierroberto Scaramella, "The Italy of Triumphs and of Contrasts," in *Humana Fragilitas: The Themes of Death in Europe from the 13th Century to the 18th Century*, eds. Pierroberto Scaramella and Alberto Tenenti (Clusone, 2002), 25–98.

21 Frugoni, "I temi della morte," 201, and Terraroli, "Il ciclo dei temi macabri a Clusone," 18.

22 For further information of the *Legend of the Three Living and the Three Dead* in late medieval art see Christian Kiening, "Le double décomposé: rencontre avec des vivants et des morts à la fin du Moyen Age," *Annales* 50, no. 5 (1995): 1157–90; Marco Piccat, "Mixed Encounters: The Three Living and the Three Dead in Italian Art," in *Mixed Metaphors: The Danse Macabre in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, eds. Sophie Oosterwijk and Stefanie Knoll (Cambridge, 2011), 155–168; Chiara Settis Frugoni, "Il tema dell'Incontro dei tre vivi e dei tre morti nella tradizione medievale italiana," *Atti dell'Accademia dei Lincei. Memorie. Classe di scienze morali, storiche e filologiche* CCCLXVI (1967): 145–251; and *Viis nous sommes, morts nous serons: la rencontre des trois morts et des trois vifs dans la peinture murale en France*, compiled by the Groupe de recherches sur les peintures murales (Vendôme: Éditions du Cherche-Lune, 2001).

23 On the role of the hermit see Piccat, "Mixed Encounters," 159; and Settis Frugoni, "Il tema dell'Incontro," 168.

24 On violence in the encounter of the *Three Living and the Three Dead* see Elina Gertsman, "The Gap of Death: Passive Violence in the Encounter of Between the Three Dead and the Three Living," in *Beholding Violence in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, eds. Allie Terry-Fritsch and Erin Felicia Labbie (Routledge, 2012), 85–104.

/Tuto me fai tremare"; vv. 21–24: "Tu sei crudele che spogli il mondo / picholi e grandi tu meni al fundo / non è homo sí iocundo / a chi tu vogli perdonare.") Death is brutal as it entrusts the massacre to the scrawny emissaries set on its sides (Figure 9). One is a skeletal archer who has already reaped two preys—a man in red with an arrow stuck in his throat and the horseman of the Three Living and the Three Dead encounter, mortally wounded in his chest. This dreadful executioner is insatiable; three further bolts are ready to be shot from the bow. Its companion is the skinny sniper who bears on its shoulder a kind of musket—a weapon popular in Clusone at the time the fresco was painted.²⁵ It is ready to fire towards a populous group of cardinals, archbishops, and monks. The sorrowful lay brother also confesses to Death that "the world is just a swindle/ a smelling carrion that smells as nothing else can smell ..." (vv. 113–114: "Ora cognosco che'l mondo è una truffa / charogna puzolente che passa ogni puza.") These lines are echoed in the figures of a pope and an emperor, trampled by Death. Their faces are pale and gaunt, and their bodies only deceptively intact. Snakes slither out from within these two corpses, to join the toads and scorpions that colonize the edges of the tomb.

After witnessing these hideous demises, the *disciplino*, puzzled, asks the ruthless sovereign: "I beg you to tell me the truth / how a man can escape from you / I see everything dying / and you do not spare anything" (vv. 37–40: "Io ti prego che tu me dichi il vero / como poria mai l'omo da ti fuzire. / Tute le cosse io vezo morire / e nulla lassi perseverare.") Death responds to its listener that even though nobody can get away from death, men can live in different places after life: heaven or hell. Death replies using the same message reported in scroll IV, stating that those that are grounded in justice and obey God will be sent to heaven (vv. 45–48: "Chi è fundato in la iusticia / e a l'alto Dio obedischa / la morte a lui si è vita / poi che in vita eterna va habitare.") Conversely, Death proclaims that hell is the destination of those men that enjoy life by dedicating themselves to earthly vanities—such as the three horsemen enjoying hunting (vv. 91–96: "Quando se crede di stare in festa / allora lo vedi cadere in terra morto. / Io son quella che l'ha ferito / ma si instesso s'ha occiso.")²⁶ The *disciplino*'s uncertainty of what will happen to him is emphasized by the fact that he does not see himself among the mass of decimated people, nor protected under the mantle of Death. As convincingly suggested by Chiara Frugoni, when looking up at this triumphant ruler, the lay brother would have recalled in his memory the image of the *Madonna della Misericordia* (Virgin of Mercy) painted inside the Oratorio of San Bernardino (Figure 10).²⁷ This fresco shows two angels crowning Mary, who gently stretches her arms to unfold her cloak and shield

several supplicant *Bianchi*. Like this benevolent Madonna, *Mors triumphans* is crowned, extends its arms, and wears a similar green mantel (Figure 9). Nonetheless, Death's cape is not outspread, but rather flows down flat along its back. This visual clue conveys an unambiguous message: the negation of protection and shelter on the part of Death, an uncompassionate harbinger who is unwilling to dispense mercy in the same manner as the Virgin.

In order to not fear Death and to aim for salvation in the afterlife, the *confratelli* addressed prayers and pleas to Mary. They also lived their life as morally correct as possible, dedicating themselves to charity and expiations of their sins—and those of others—through the act of flagellation.²⁸ This explains the choice to have themselves depicted on the opposite side of the scene with hell and capital sins, in the bottom right of the fresco (Figure 11). Here, the *Bianchi* appear wearing their customary white tunics marked by red crosses on the hoods and forearms. The flagellants kneel in gestures of prayer and are shielded under what looks like a purple frame. The group of *disciplini* is led by a *confratello*, whose head is uncovered and surrounded with a bright halo. This saintly figure turns back to his lay brothers to invite them to point their gazes towards the right. Here, Valerio Terraroli has identified the detail of the bottom part of a throne on which the Virgin might have been sitting.²⁹ The damage to this portion of the mural makes it impossible to establish the original setting of this narrative. However, by taking a close look, we can still identify a fragment of a green and purple drapery which recalls the outfit of the *Mary of Mercy* crowned by the angels, discussed above.³⁰ In this portion of the fresco, we might imagine the pious *confratelli* reciting prayers and singing hymns in praise of the Queen of Heaven. We do not see the *disciplini*'s mouths open, as their heads are capped by the hoods, but these hoods certainly let the eyes and ears be uncovered to see and to hear. Interestingly, in the *lauda* "Io son per nome chiamata morte," throughout the conversation with the *disciplino*, Death often mentions heaven as the destination for the righteous and describes it as the realm in which the just will "hear an angelic chant" (v. 55: "odendo lo angelico canto.") A depiction of heaven as a place where one can "hear an angelic chant" might have been translated into this scene of the *Bianchi* and the Virgin, thus creating a visual contrast with images of sounds represented on the opposite pictorial segment of hell (Figure 12). There, the celestial hymns are replaced by curses and shouts from the naked and chained female allegories of three of the capital sins. From left to right, *Superbia* (Pride) is likely swearing against the demon who is pushing her inside the Hellmouth with a sharpened pitchfork. *Avaritia* (Avarice) covers her eyes and yells desperately into the flames with her companion *Ira* (Anger), who looks up to the sky to address her vain prayers

25 Frugoni and Facchinetti, *Senza misericordia*, 75.

26 When he thinks about being in celebration / then you see him falling down dead/ I am the one who wounded him/ but indeed he has killed himself on his own/ Because of his sins/ you see him go to Hell.

27 Frugoni and Facchinetti, *Senza misericordia*, 84. This painting of *Mary of Mercy* has been dated to around 1470 and has been attributed to Giacomo Busca, the same artist of the *Triumph of Death and Dance of Death* of the Clusone fresco, also responsible for the Passion cycle depicted inside the Church of Santa Maria annexed to the Oratorio of San Bernardino.

28 Frugoni and Facchinetti, *Senza misericordia*, 40.

29 Terraroli, "Il ciclo dei temi macabri a Clusone," 36.

30 Even though the drapery of the *Mary of Mercy* depicted inside the Oratorio of San Bernardino features a much brighter red, it could be possible that the fragment of drapery in the lower right portion of the fresco might have underwent alteration and discoloring, turning the original bright red into a darker purple tone. See Terraroli, "Il ciclo dei temi macabri a Clusone," 16.

aloud.

So far, throughout the recitation of the dialogue between the *disciplino* and Death, the images and the painted texts, in conjunction with the words spoken, intend to guide the *disciplino*'s gaze all around the fresco. It is worth noting that the second part of the *lauda* stresses how Death further invites the lay brother to carefully look at what is represented on the painting. In the long monologue spoken by Death (vv. 121–189), each *quartina* begins with the word “Vedi” which can be literally translated as “You, look [at this].” For instance, Death cries: “You, look at many popes and emperors / dukes, marquis, and great lords...you, look at that one who has placed hope only in earthly things and who relies only on his power... you, look at that one who lives in fortress / castles, gold and beauty: / death comes for him and shoots arrows towards him / God knows where that one will be sent to live after life” (vv. 125–140: “Vedi molti papi e imperadori / duchi, marchesi e grandi signori...Vedi colui che nel mondo ha posto speranza / e che se confida nella sua possanza...Vedi colui che se confida in forteza / in chastelli, in oro et in bellezza / vene la morte e sí lo sagitta / Dio sa dove va quella anima ad habitare.”) Through this monologue, Death wants its beholder to see its slaughter and potent attack once again. The *disciplino*'s eyes are thus redirected one more time to the details of *Mors triumphans*' numerous reaped victims at the top of the composition. By using the second singular person of the imperative mode, Death demands that each single lay brother listens to its words and carefully looks at these words made into images. Death, by insistently calling out its listener, wants to make sure that he can firmly memorize and retain these images in his memory.³¹

While looking at the middle section of the fresco, the *disciplino* also notices himself participating in a long and grim parade of smiling skeletons, who grab their upset living counterparts by arms and hands (Figure 13). This is a dance of death, a gruesome scene based on the idea that death is universal and unites everyone, no matter their social status and age. This intimate physical encounter between the living and the dead is the meeting of the individual with his own double.³² Images like these were popular in fifteenth-century Europe and were known in the Italian peninsula, especially

through prints.³³ A few painted examples of this macabre iconography are attested in northern Italy and some are connected to the movement of the *disciplini*.³⁴ Usually, this morbid dance involves the major exponents of both ecclesiastical and secular ranks. Yet, the *danse macabre* in Clusone is unique not only because it unfolds a laymen-only procession, but also because it is the only extant instance of this imagery which includes a *disciplino*.³⁵ Beginning from the left, we glimpse a group of women squeezed tightly together inside a space defined by an arched door. Right before this entrance is a beautiful young lady, carried arm in arm by two skeletons. She wears an elegant damask dress and holds a portable mirror to admire her reflection. What she stares at is not her pretty face, rather it is a skeletal appearance, a prefiguration of what her face will look like when she is dead. This woman is actually an allegorical representation of *Vanitas*. Placed at the beginning of the dance of death and nearby the *disciplino*, *Vanitas* reminds the *Bianchi* of that same message announced in the *lauda* “Io son per nome chiamata morte”: earthly life, physical appearance, and richness are useless, ephemeral, and vain before Death. Furthermore, this warning seems to be reiterated by the skeleton standing behind the *disciplino* (Figure 14). This skeleton—another replication of the completely stripped of flesh skeletal *Mors triumphans* at the top of the fresco—is looming over the hooded *flagellante*, as it is about to whisper into his uncovered ear that Death is inevitable and comes for everyone, for the *Bianchi* too.

This depiction of a flagellant in the Dance register functions as a *memento mori* for the lay congregation of San Bernardino and it ultimately creates a connection to the third and last part of the *lauda* “Io son per nome chiamata morte” (vv. 190–218), in which a *confratello* gives a passionate piece of advice to his other brothers: “You, who are reading and listening ... / read and listen [to this], as what you are reading and listening can be good for you / ... this lauda is sacred / and is sung to God. / However, I beg you, as you are sinners as me / that you will always pray God / in order to be forgiven

33 On late medieval Italian Dance of Death mural paintings see Giosuè Bonetti and Matteo Rabaglio, eds., “Vedi molti papi e imperadori...”. La danza macabra di Cassiglio,” in *Lo scheletro e il professore. Senso e addomesticamento della morte nella tradizione culturale europea*, *Atti delle giornate di studio*, Archivio di Stato di Bergamo, 15-16 novembre 1997 (Clusone, 1999), 97–112; Antonio Previtali, *Ognia Omo More. Immagini macabre della cultura bergamasca dal XV al XX secolo* (Clusone: Circolo culturale Baradello, 1998); Fulvio Sina, “L’impiego delle pubblicazioni a tema macabro d’oltralpe quale fonte di ispirazione nell’arte italiana del XV e XVI secolo: la ‘Danza Macabra’ in San Silvestro ad Iseo,” in “Noi spregieremo adunque li denari...”: danze macabre, trionfi e dogma della morte,” ed. Mino Scandella (Pisogne, 2002), 57–66; and Pietro Vigo, *Le danze macabre in Italia* (Bergamo: Arnaldo Forni, 1901).

34 Fifteenth-century frescos of the *Dance of Death* from northern Italy include those at San Lazzaro in Como (early fifteenth century, destroyed), San Bartolomeo in Cassiglio, San Silvestro in Iseo, San Martino in Saluzzo, San Peyre in Macra, Oratorio dei Bianchi, Monegheria (Teglio). Later examples from the first half of the sixteenth century include Santa Maria in Binda in Nosate, Santo Stefano in Carisolo, and San Vigilio in Pinzolo.

35 Giacomo Scandella, “Danza Macabra di Clusone,” 170. A detailed description of each couple of the *Dance of Death* goes beyond the purpose of this research. For a comprehensive analysis of this dance see Frugoni and Facchinetti, *Senza misericordia*, 103–132.

31 On late medieval memory, images, and words see Lina Bolzoni, *The Web of Images: Vernacular Preaching from Its Origins to St. Bernardino da Siena* (Ashgate, 2004); Mary J. Carruthers, *The Craft of Thought: Meditation, Rhetoric, and the Making of Images, 400-1200* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998); and Mary J. Carruthers and Jan M. Ziolkowski, eds., *The Medieval Craft of Memory. An Anthology of Texts and Pictures* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002).

32 For a comprehensive study on late medieval *Dance of Death* mural paintings see Elina Gertsman, *The Dance of Death in the Middle Ages: Image, Text, Performance* (Turnhout, 2010).

by Him for any bad deeds committed in His respect / [pray to God] in order to be saved for good deeds / [do this] as we have the opportunity to meditate on Death" (vv. 206–218: "Tu che lezi e chi ascolti... / leze e ascolta che 'l te poria zovare / ...Questa laude è tuta sancta / la qual è a Dio e gloria si canta. / Però vi prego per mi peccatore / che vogliate sempre Dio pregare / che me perdoni ogni offesa a lui facta / che'l mi conceda gratia de ben fare / a ciò che possiamo la morte contemplare.") These last verses of the *lauda* strengthen the relationship of images to the senses of sight and sound, which are encapsulated in both the fresco and the poem "Io son per nome chiamata morte." This vernacular song, translated and manifested into images within the fresco, was clearly meant to be read in the painted texts reported on the mural, to be listened to and sung, but also to be contemplated. This latter verb originates from the Latin term *contemplare* and it means "looking carefully, gazing hard at." The Clusone fresco, thus, functioned as a painted *lauda*, a multi-sensory meditation of the *lauda*, a place of memory where the flagellants could have recalled multiple times the message encompassed in the *lauda*, imprinted in their mind through the observation of those verses depicted and recited too.

Today, the courtyard of the Oratorio of San Bernardino, once enlivened by the sound of voices, prayers, chants, and scourges of the *disciplini Bianchi*, is now a silent space. The macabre fresco, despite being touched by various and care-less damages throughout the centuries, remains visible on the outer façade of the oratory and still retains its function. It invites the onlookers to get close, to scrutinize the images of the fresco, to read the text of those scrolls ruffling in the air next to Death, to visualize and to reenact that encounter the flagellants of Clusone frequently had with Death.



Figure 1. (above) Oratorio dei Disciplini di San Bernardino, view from the courtyard, 1350, Clusone, Italy. Photo credit: Angelica Verduci.

Figure 3. (below) Giacomo Borlone de Buschis, *Scroll I* (detail of *Triumph of Death and Dance of Death*), 1484-1485, fresco, Oratorio dei Disciplini di San Bernardino, eastern outer façade, Clusone, Italy. Photo credit: Domenico Verduci.



Figure 2. Giacomo Borlone de Buschis, *Triumph of Death and Dance of Death*, 1484-1485, fresco, Oratorio dei Disciplini di San Bernardino, eastern outer façade, Clusone, Italy. Photo credit: Domenico Verduci.



Figure 4. (above) Giacomo Borlone de Buschis, *Scroll II* (detail of *Triumph of Death and Dance of Death*), 1484-1485, fresco, Oratorio dei Disciplini di San Bernardino, eastern outer façade, Clusone, Italy. Photo credit: Domenico Verduci.

Figure 5. (below) Giacomo Borlone de Buschis, *Scrolls III and IV* (detail of *Triumph of Death and Dance of Death*), 1484-1485, fresco, Oratorio dei Disciplini di San Bernardino, eastern outer façade, Clusone, Italy. Photo credit: Domenico Verduci.



Figure 6. (above) Giacomo Borlone de Buschis, *Death in Triumph* (detail of *Triumph of Death and Dance of Death*), 1484-1485, fresco, Oratorio dei Disciplini di San Bernardino, eastern outer façade, Clusone, Italy. Photo credit: Angelica Verduci.

Figure 7. (below) Giacomo Borlone de Buschis, *The Encounter of the Three Living and the Three Dead* (detail of *Triumph of Death and Dance of Death*), 1484-1485, fresco, Oratorio dei Disciplini di San Bernardino, eastern outer façade, Clusone, Italy. Photo credit: Angelica Verduci.



Figure 8. (above) *The Encounter of the Three Living and the Three Dead*, second half of the XIV century, fresco, Cloister of the Abbey of Santa Maria of Vezzolano near Asti, Italy. Photo credit: <https://commons.wikimedia.org>

Figure 9. (below) Giacomo Borlone de Buschis, *Death in Triumph with its Skeletal Emissaries* (detail of *Triumph of Death and Dance of Death*), 1484-1485, fresco, Oratorio dei Disciplini di San Bernardino, eastern outer façade, Clusone, Italy. Photo credit: Angelica Verduci.



Figure 10. Giacomo Borlone de Buschis, *Mary of Mercy*, ca. 1470-1471, fresco, Oratorio dei Disciplini di San Bernardino, interior, now Museo della basilica, Clusone, Italy. Photo credit: Angelica Verduci.



Figure 11. (above) Giacomo Borlone de Buschis, *Group of Disciplini* (detail of *Triumph of Death and Dance of Death*), 1484-1485, fresco, Oratorio dei Disciplini di San Bernardino, eastern outer façade, Clusone, Italy. Photo credit: Angelica Verducci.

Figure 13. (below) Giacomo Borlone de Buschis, *The Dance of Death* (detail of *Triumph of Death and Dance of Death*), 1484-1485, fresco, Oratorio dei Disciplini di San Bernardino, eastern outer façade, Clusone, Italy. Photo credit: Domenico Verducci.



Figure 12. (left) Giacomo Borlone de Buschis, *The Hellmouth, Superbia, Avaritia, and Ira* (detail of *Triumph of Death and Dance of Death*), 1484-1485, fresco, Oratorio dei Disciplini di San Bernardino, eastern outer façade, Clusone, Italy. Photo credit: Angelica Verduci.



Figure 14. (right) Giacomo Borlone de Buschis, *Vanitas and a disciplino* (detail of *Triumph of Death and Dance of Death*), 1484-1485, fresco, Oratorio dei Disciplini di San Bernardino, eastern outer façade, Clusone, Italy. Photo credit: Angelica Verduci.