

# Who Will Accompany the Dying? The Communality of the Late Medieval Death in the *Ars moriendi* – Guides

*Jyrki Nissi*

University of Tampere

## *Introduction*

The communal aspect of pre-modern death is probably one of the most repeated *topoi* in death studies. Death has been seen especially communal in the Middle Ages. Philippe Ariès, the pioneer of death studies, argued that death was always a communal situation up until modern times. According to Ariès, not only relatives of the dying but also total strangers could enter the sick room<sup>1</sup>. After Ariès, the argument about the communality of medieval death has been repeated for example by Norbert Ohler, David Cressy and Deborah Youngs<sup>2</sup>. According to my knowledge there exists no in-depth study focusing solely on the communality of medieval death. Of course, justified arguments have been made while researchers have studied other topics related to medieval death. Already Michel Vovelle found out that in the book of hours death is depicted as a communal situation<sup>3</sup>. Later for example Stina Fallberg Sundmark has pointed out that friends and family had an important role around the deathbed when a priest was delivering the last sacraments<sup>4</sup>. Also, Christian Krötzel has found out that in the Scandinavian hagiographic material death has been depicted usually as a communal situation<sup>5</sup>. Sari Katajala-Peltomaa has made the same observa-

<sup>1</sup> PH. ARIÈS, *The Hour of Our Death*, New York, Vintage Books, 1981, pp. 18-19.

<sup>2</sup> N. OHLER, *Sterben, Tod und Grablege nach ausgewählte mittelalterlichen Quellen*, in *Im Angesicht des Todes. Ein interdisziplinäres Kompendium I*, Erzabtei St. Ottilien, EOS Verlag, 1987, pp. 569-592. D. YOUNGS, *The Life Cycle in Western Europe, c. 1300-c. 1500*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2006, p. 195. D. CRESSY, *Birth, Marriage & Death. Ritual, Religion, and the Life-Cycle in Tudor and Stuart England*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1999, pp. 390-391.

<sup>3</sup> M. VOVELLE, *La morte e l'occidente. Dal 1300 ai giorni nostri*, Bari, Editori Laterza, 2009, p. 109.

<sup>4</sup> S. FALLBERG SUNDMARK, *Sjukbesök och dödsberedelse. Sockenbudet i svensk medeltida och reformatorisk tradition*. Skellefteå, Artos & Norma bokförlag, 2008, pp. 117, 131, 139-140, 173, 202.

<sup>5</sup> C. KRÖTZEL, *Pilger, Mirakel und Alltag. Formen des Verhaltens im skandinavischen Mittelalter*, Helsinki, Societas Historica Finlandiae (Studia Historica 46), 1994, p. 261.

tion in the canonization processes of Nicholas of Tolentino and Thomas of Cantilupe<sup>6</sup>. I am currently writing my PhD thesis on the communality of the deathbed scene in the late medieval Europe. One of my main sources are the Italian and Swedish canonization processes. Although the studies of Krötzl and Katajala-Peltomaa suggest that deathbed cases in the hagiographic material seem to be usually communal, it should also be noticed that I have found cases which can be identified as family-concentrated or even private cases<sup>7</sup>.

In this paper, however, I will examine the three most popular art of dying guides from the 15<sup>th</sup> century and explore these books' attitude on the communality of the deathbed scene. This will be done by studying the instructions that were given to the people surrounding the deathbed. The treatises, which I am concentrating on are Jean Gerson's *De arte moriendi*, anonymous *Tractatus de artis bene moriendi* and its shorter illustrated version called simply *Ars moriendi*. These art of dying guides are normative sources which do not tell us how people really acted, they only demonstrate the attitudes of the late medieval theologians. Thus I am not trying to revoke or deny the common agreement of the communal aspect of the medieval death. However, since these guidebooks give us the ideal model of medieval dying according to the Roman Church, it is essential to examine these books if one wants to reconstruct a comprehensive picture of the communality of late medieval death. Results of this paper could thus be seen as a starting point for wider research, but also in itself as relevant and important information.

### *Ars moriendi* – Late medieval “best sellers”

Although the origin of the art of dying guides dates back to the 13<sup>th</sup> century, it was not until the 15<sup>th</sup> century when these books spread across the continent and were translated in several vernacular languages. To say that these books were the best sellers of the 15<sup>th</sup> century is not exaggerated, since they were one of the most popular literature genre in late medieval Europe. The popularity of the art of dying should be seen as a part of the cultural and mental change in European society. The fascination on Macabre – themes began already before the Black Death but increased especially when the plague epidemics were devastating the European population. People saw death and dying everywhere they turned their heads.

<sup>6</sup> S. KATAJALA-PELTOMAA, *Gender, Miracles and Daily Life. The Evidence of Fourteenth-Century Canonisation Processes*, Turnhout, Brepols, 2009, p. 129.

<sup>7</sup> J. NISSI, *Yhteisön ympäröimänä vai uskotun ystävän saattamana? Kuolinbetken yhteisöllisyys 1400-luvulla*, in “Thanatos”, 1/2013. [http://thanatosjournal.files.wordpress.com/2012/12/nissi\\_kuolinbetken-yhteisc3b6llisyys-1400-luvulla1.pdf](http://thanatosjournal.files.wordpress.com/2012/12/nissi_kuolinbetken-yhteisc3b6llisyys-1400-luvulla1.pdf).

As *Dance macabre* pictures made it really clear, death and plague were equal to everyone regardless of one's rank in society. Thus, the clergy decreased in numbers. During the Black Death, about 35 percent of the clergy died<sup>8</sup>. The Church's reaction on this was the bull of Pope Benedict VI in 1349 in which he stated that if there was no priest available, the dying could also confess one's sins from a layman. Following the pope's instructions, the Bishop of Bath wrote in January 1349: "The contagious pestilence of the present day [...] has left many parish churches without parson or priest to take care for the parishioners. Since no priest can be found who are willing to take pastoral care [...] visit the sick or administer the sacrament of the church, we understand that many people are dying without the sacrament of penance [...] [Therefore] persuade all man [...] if they are on the point of death [...] [that] they should make confession to each other [...] or if no man is present, then even to a woman"<sup>9</sup>. Since the presence of a priest around the deathbed was no more self-evident, beforehand preparations for the death were necessary. Everybody had to know how to act at the moment of death. Thus the art of dying guides were church's pastoral answer to the plague epidemics<sup>10</sup>. Judging by the spreading of copies and numerous translations, these instructions were accepted and welcomed by general public<sup>11</sup>.

In addition to the plague, we can also observe another explanation for the popularity of the art of dying. That is the increasing theological importance of the moment of death. In the late Middle Ages, there was a continuous debate over man's afterlife destiny. The doctrine of Purgatory was already defined in the 13<sup>th</sup> century during the second council of Lyon<sup>12</sup>. There remained, however, an uncertainty about the beatific vision. The first half of the 14<sup>th</sup> century was filled

<sup>8</sup> J. CAMPBELL, *The Ars Moriendi: An Examination, Translation, and collation of the manuscripts of the Shorter Latin Version*, Doctoral Thesis, University of Ottawa, 1995, p. 8.

<sup>9</sup> C. BOECKL, *Images of Plague and Pestilence. Iconography and iconology*, Kirksville, Truman State University Press, 2000, pp. 72-73.

<sup>10</sup> H. ROLFES, *Ars Moriendi, eine Sterbekunst aus der Sorge um das ewige Heil*, in W. HARALD (a cura di), *Ars moriendi, Erwägung zur Kunst des Sterbens*, Freiburg/Basel/Wien, Questione Disputate 118, 1989, p. 24.

<sup>11</sup> R. RUDOLF, *Ars moriendi*, Köln/Graz, Böhlau Verlag, 1957, p. 62.

<sup>12</sup> C. WALKER BYNUM, *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1995, p. 280. The history of Purgatory is a highly debated question. In his classic work, Jacques le Goff dated the birth of Purgatory to the 12<sup>th</sup> or 13<sup>th</sup> century. However, Aron Gurevich saw the birth of Purgatory already in the Early Middle Ages and Michel Vovelle in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. David D'Avray combines these theories proposing that the idea of Purgatory was established already in Early Middle Ages, the official doctrine was regularized during the High Middle Ages and adopted to the

with the debate whether those who are saved will see God face to face directly after death or not until the Last Judgment. The essential question was whether the soul resurrected after death was sufficient for the beatific vision or whether the body's resurrection after the Last Judgment added something to the blessedness. The controversy began in the winter of 1331 after the sermons of Pope John XXII. In these sermons, the Pope argued that the saints will enjoy the perfect beatific vision after the Last Judgment with the resurrection of their bodies. Until then, they would not be able to see divine essence face to face because the separated souls were imperfect. Similarly the damnation of the wicked would take place at the Last Judgment. These sermons raised a wave of criticism and several chroniclers tell us that people were scandalized by them. When the debate calmed down, a consensus was made between two extremes. On his deathbed the Pope's opinion was that "the holy souls see God and divine essence face to face and as clearly as their conditions as souls separated from their bodies allows"<sup>13</sup>.

In 1336 the next pope, Benedict XII, issued a bull called *Benedictus Deus*, which declared that "pure souls see the divine essence *nude, clarte, et aperte* before the end of time; this vision is true beatitude and full repose". According to Benedict, the saved souls would thus enjoy the bliss of heaven immediately after death and the damned would descend to hell<sup>14</sup>. According to *Benedictus Deus*, the soul's resurrection immediately after death was perfect in itself. Now since the moment of death was the determining point, people had to know how to act on the deathbed in order to save their souls. The art of dying guides tried to give answer to this question<sup>15</sup>.

Jean Gerson's *Opusculum tripartitum*, written around 1404, was the starting point for the popularity of the art of dying guides. The third part of his *Opusculum tripartitum*, called *De arte moriendi*, was highly read and spread as an independent work. *De arte moriendi* consists of four parts: exhortations, questions, prayers and observations. In this paper I will use a copy of *Opusculum tripartitum* written in Paris in 1488/89. The manuscript is held in the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek<sup>16</sup>. In

art during the Late Middle Ages. M. D'AVRAY, *Death and the Prince: Memorial Preaching Before 1350*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1995, p. 179.

<sup>13</sup> C. WALKER BYNUM, *The Resurrection*, cit., pp. 279-285.

<sup>14</sup> *Ivi*, p. 285.

<sup>15</sup> On the uncertainty of salvation in the late medieval *ars moriendi*-literature see A. REINIS, *Reforming the Art of Dying. The ars moriendi in the German Reformation (1519-1528)*, Cornwall, MPG Books, 2007.

<sup>16</sup> J. GERSON, *Opusculum tripartitum de praeceptis decalogi, de confessione, de arte*

addition, I consulted a Swedish translation of the text<sup>17</sup>. The translation was made 1514 by Ericus Nicolai by the request of Archbishop Jakob Ulvsson.

Even more popular than Gerson's *De arte moriendi* was *Tractatus de artis bene moriendi*<sup>18</sup>. The author remains obscure, but an early manuscript from Vienna, probably written in 1418, suggests that it was written during the council of Konstanz. After the council, *Tractatus* would have spread all over Europe with the council delegates. It seems possible that the church council had ordered a guide book, which was made following the model of Gerson's *De arte moriendi*. Gerson himself was an important figure at the council of Konstanz<sup>19</sup>.

*Tractatus de artis bene moriendi* is written following the contents of *De arte moriendi*. The main difference is the temptations of the Devil, which forms the main corpus of *Tractatus*. With the help of *Tractatus*, one is able to win the Devil and escape from the perils of hell. For this paper, I consulted a manuscript kept in the Vatican library<sup>20</sup> and an English translation of *The Craft of dying* edited by Frances Comper<sup>21</sup>.

*moriendi*. Paris, 1488/9. Signatur: München, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek – 4 Inc. s.a. 889. I have consulted a digitalized version.

<sup>17</sup> I am using a modern edition edited by M. HAGBERG, Jean Gersons *Ars moriendi*, *Om konsten att dö*, Värnamo, Fälth & Hässler, 2009.

<sup>18</sup> At least three hundred manuscripts exist in latin and vernacular translations. The book is also known as *Speculum de artis bene moriendi*, *Tractatus de arte moriendi* or simply CP from it's initials: *Cum de presentis*. M.C. O'CONNOR, *The Art of Dying Well. The Development of the Ars moriendi*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1942, p. 1.

<sup>19</sup> Jeffrey Campbell has pointed out that maybe this dating is false since all the other manuscripts around Vienna are from 1339/40. Perhaps the right dating would be 1338. J. CAMPBELL, *The Ars Moriendi*, cit., p. 4. It seems strange indeed that in twenty years no other copies was made or at least they have not survived. However, Mary O'Connor's theory about the council of Konstanz seems convincing to me, because in this way the book would have spread widely and it had the authorization of the church. M.C. O'CONNOR, *The Art*, cit., pp. 53-54. Rainer Runolf has suggested that *Tractatus* was made by chancellor of university of Vienna, Nikolaus von Dinkelsbühl. According to Rudolf, a sort of school of the art of dying sprang up around Dinkelsbühl in Vienna. For me it seems however strange if such an influential scholar as Dinkelsbühl had written *Tractatus* and still the authorship remains uncertain. It would be logic that *Tractatus* would had spread and gained more respect with the authorization of Dinkelsbühl just like *De arte moriendi* was more powerful with the stamp of chancellor of Paris. R. RUDOLF, *Ars moriendi*, cit., pp. 75-78.

<sup>20</sup> ANONYMOUS, *Tractatus de artis bene moriendi*, Codices Vaticani Latini 10054.

<sup>21</sup> F. COMPER (a cura di), *The Book of the Craft of Dying and Other Early English Tracts Concerning Death*, London, Longmans, Green and Co., 1917.

The illuminated version of *Tractatus*, called *Ars moriendi*<sup>22</sup>, was probably written in the mid-15<sup>th</sup> century<sup>23</sup>. In this short treatise the temptations of the Devil became alive in eleven woodcuts depicting both temptations and good inspirations against them. Notable is that these inspirations against temptations are mentioned only in this shorter version. For this paper, I have consulted a critical edition of Jeffrey Campbell<sup>24</sup>.

Before we continue further, I want pause for a moment and reflect on whom these guidebooks were written for. One of the first books in this genre was *Le Somme le roi* written for the French king Philip III by a Dominican friar called Laurentius. Further important books were *Büchlein der ewige Weisheit* written by Henry Suso in 1328 and Dirk van Delft's *De Tafel den Kersten Ghelove* in the beginning of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. These books were written for young priests in order to assist them in visiting the sick. Depart from the early art of dying literature, Jean Gerson wrote his book not only for the clergy but also for the laity. Even the dying could read Gerson's guidebook in order to prepare themselves for death.

Yet, for example, Stina Fallberg Sundmark emphasizes *De arte moriendi*'s role as a liturgical manual for priests who visited the sick<sup>25</sup>. Fallberg Sundmark's arguments are, however, based on the Swedish translation of Ericus Nicolai, which includes several extra folios which are not included in the original. In those pages are given several instructions for the priests when they are visiting the sick<sup>26</sup>. Thus, Fallberg Sundmark's arguments are more than accurate on Swedish translation. It is, however, important to note that the Swedish translation is far from being a direct translation of Gerson's text. It includes parts from *Ars moriendi* and, as mentioned above, it has some unique parts written for Swedish priests. Therefore, the text is a combination of Gerson, *Ars moriendi* and something new. Hence, the Swedish translation is in some parts quite contradictory and difficult to interpret. In the beginning of the text, it is made clear that the laity could use this book as a guidebook. The last parts are however clearly intended for the clergy. In the original Latin text there are no direct instructions for

<sup>22</sup> Also known as QS from its initials: *Quamuis Secundum*.

<sup>23</sup> R. RUDOLF, *Ars moriendi*, cit., pp. 69-70.

<sup>24</sup> J. CAMPBELL, *The Ars moriendi. An examination, translation and collation of the manuscripts of the shorter latin version*, Doctoral Thesis, University of Ottawa, 1995.

<sup>25</sup> S. FALLBERG SUNDMARK, *Om konsten att dö på rätt sätt*, in M. HAGBERG (a cura di) *Jean Gersons Ars moriendi. Om Konsten att dö*, Värnamo, Fälth & Hässler, 2009, pp. 35-67.

<sup>26</sup> Other notable differences in Swedish translation and Latin original are that the Swedish introduction is longer and it presents more questions for the dying.



clergy, the short mentions of sacraments are the only points, which even indicate to the presence of a priest. In the beginning of his text Gerson explains that he has written for all Christians who are at the point of death and are willing to die in the art of dying<sup>27</sup>. Gerson leaves no uncertainty about this: the text is useful for everybody. It is an interesting curiosity that a vernacular Swedish translation is more clearly made for the clergy than the Latin original. Normally one would expect the opposite. This curiosity is explained by the fact that the Swedish text is a contaminated version of Gerson's text. In some parts it is almost an independent work.

The temptations of the Devil make *Tractatus* and *Ars moriendi* even more clearly targeted for the laity. These temptations were something which everybody had to take in consideration and to be prepared for. It was not sufficient if a priest was aware of these temptations and told about them when the dying was approaching their end. Although there has been some debate around *Tractatus* that it was written for religious houses<sup>28</sup>, the text itself does not leave much doubt: the art of dying is the most useful science both for religious and secular men and it should be studied every day continuously without intermission<sup>29</sup>.

Also, *Ars moriendi* makes it clear that these books were meant for everybody to read and see: "The book should be placed before the eyes of all so the words serve well for the educated as the pictures serve for both the lay and the illiterate"<sup>30</sup>. The fact that *Ars moriendi* instructs pictures to be placed before the illiterate is interesting if we consider that these illuminated books were precious items, which only a few could afford. Poor people could see these pictures only if someone showed them. In this sense it seems clear that in addition to private devotion they were used as didactic material. The ones who could afford these books were those belonging to mercantile or landholding classes. In addition to money, these classes also possessed knowledge to read. This made them a natu-

<sup>27</sup> "Quamobrem cura fuit presenti scriipto componere breuem quemdam exortationis modum habendum circa eos qui sunt in mortis articulo constituti ualentem etiam generaliter omnibus catholicis ad artem et noticiam bene moriendi conquirendam" (J. GERSON, *Opusculum tripartitum*, cit., p. 20v.).

<sup>28</sup> M.C. O'CONNOR, *The Art*, cit., p. 5.

<sup>29</sup> "Hec est scientia utilissima in quo scientia religiosi magis precipue que seculares siue intermissione cottidie atque continue sollicitus stude debent" (ANONYMOUS, *Tractatus*, cit., p. 174r.).

<sup>30</sup> "Sed ut omnibus ista materia sit fructuosa, et nullus ab ipsius speculatione secludatur sed inde mori salubriter discat, tam litteris tantum litterato deservientibus quam imaginibus laico et illitterato simul deservientibus cunctorum oculis obicitur" (J. CAMPBELL, *Ars moriendi*, cit., pp. 21, 23).

ral target group. Important is also the observation, which Jeffrey Campbell has made from the pictures: the dying is lying on a nice bed in a clean room, not on a pile of hay on the floor, like poor people would have done<sup>31</sup>.

### *The Communalism of death in the art of dying guides*

Throughout the following pages, I will examine what kind of attitude the authors of the art of dying guides had on the communalism of death and dying. I will explore how the instructions of these guides socialized the people attending the deathbed scene. I also search for information on what kind of behavior was acceptable for people accompanying the dying.

Gerson begins his *De arte moriendi* with an observation that friends of a dying man tend to do the best they can to heal the sick body. However, according to Gerson, it would be much more useful to be concerned about the spiritual health of the dying. At the moment of death it becomes clear who the real and trustful friends of the dying are<sup>32</sup>. With this, Gerson points out the unimportance of earthly life compared to afterlife. Friends who concentrate on bodily issues when someone is approaching to death are not real friends. True friendship is to take care of the soul, not of the body. This is also emphasized in *Tractatus* and *Ars moriendi*: Spiritual death of the soul is much more horrible than bodily death, since the soul is more worthy and precious than body. Therefore, there should not be too much hope for physical health felt for the sick<sup>33</sup>.

The second part of *De arte moriendi* consists of exhortations to the dying. These exhortations are directed straight to the dying, which don't give us much information about the present people. Thus it seems, that the exhortations should be read silently by the dying himself or aloud by one bystander. In this chapter the dying is reminded how each one of us, the poorest and the richest, have to die one day. People are just like pilgrims in this world, passing by. This is why people should die willingly and not complain about death. The dying should concentrate only on God. The only part where Gerson mentions friends

<sup>31</sup> *Ivi*, p. 10.

<sup>32</sup> "Si veraces fidelesque amici cuiuspiam aegroti curam diligentius agant pro ipsius vita corporali fragili et defectibile conseruanda exigunt a nobis multo fortius Deus et Charitas pro salute sua spirituali sollicitudinem gerere specialem. In hac enim extrema necessitate mortis fidelis probatur amicus" (J. GERSON, *Opusculum tripartitum*, cit., p. 20r.).

<sup>33</sup> "Mors tum anime tanto est terribilior horribilior atque detestabilior quanto anima corpore est nobilior atque preciosior" (ANONYMUS, *Tractatus*, cit., p. 172v.). "Et ergo nullatenus infirmo detur spes nimia corporalis sanitatis consequendae" (J. CAMPBELL, *Ars moriendi*, cit., p. 18).



or family is in the end of the chapter. The dying is advised to ask the present people to pray to God for his salvation<sup>34</sup>. Again, the role of the present people is to look after the soul of the dying. However, they are only bystanders with the dying being the focus.

Since *Tractatus* includes these and other exhortations in chapter five<sup>35</sup>, I move on forward. Gerson's next chapter deals with the Anselmian questions. The goal of these questions was to make sure that people were dying in true faith of the Catholic Church. A number of the questions vary in the books: Gerson mentions six questions, the Swedish translation eight and *Tractatus* seven. Gerson mentions community only as a means to ask questions of the dying. *Tractatus*, however, notes that if nobody is asking these questions from the dying, he should consider and answer them himself in his soul<sup>36</sup>. Both Gerson and *Tractatus* mention that if the dying has lost their ability to speak but they are still with their senses, they can respond to these questions with a sign or just within their heart<sup>37</sup>.

*Tractatus* puts more value on the presence of community since it instructs people to participate in some parts of the questions. The dying is recommended to say three times "In manus tuas Domine", and the people present should follow suit<sup>38</sup>. This way, not only the one who executes the questions is taking part, but also everybody else who is present.

The third part of Gerson's text contains prayers that are useful at the moment of death. These prayers should be directed to the Holy Trinity, Virgin Mary, and the angels and saints. Once again the actor is the dying themselves. The dying is the one who should read the prayers<sup>39</sup>. However, if they cannot speak anymore,

<sup>34</sup> "Omnen preterea cogitatum tuum in eum dirige astantes solummodo et superstites rogoans ut pro salute tua deum precibus exorent" (J. GERSON, *Opusculum tripartitum*, cit., p. 20v.).

<sup>35</sup> Chapter five of *Tractatus* is a combination of Gerson's chapters two and four.

<sup>36</sup> "Quisquis de premissis ab aliquo interrogatus non fuerit presertim tum sint sare pauci atque rari que huius arte habeant scientiam. Introrsus respondeat interrogans semet ipsum subtilius considerando an talitus sit dispositus ut prefertur eo quod absis tali dispositione nulli omnino parte esse salus" (ANONYMUS, *Tractatus*, cit., p. 184r.).

<sup>37</sup> J. GERSON, *Opusculum tripartitum*, cit., p. 22r. ANONYMUS, *Tractatus*, cit., p. 189v.

<sup>38</sup> "Deinde dicat ter In manus tuas domine commendo spiritum meum et id ipsum dicat coentus uel astantes In manus tuas domine commendam spiritum eius..." (*ibid.*, p. 181r.). By the word "conuentus" *Tractatus* refers to the religious houses, but takes in account also secular death cases adding "uel astantes".

<sup>39</sup> "Primo dicat infirmus ex toto corde deum orans" (J. GERSON, *Opusculum tripartitum*, cit., p. 21r.).

the orations are to be read aloud for them<sup>40</sup>. *Tractatus* includes the prayers in its sixth chapter, however, there are also some prayers in the fourth chapter. In the introduction of the sixth chapter *Tractatus* states clearly that the prayers are to be read aloud for the dying by one dear and faithful friend<sup>41</sup>. Nevertheless, in the English translation of *Tractatus* we find out that it was not excluded that the dying read these prayers by himself: “In these prayers, if thou say them thyself, turn the words that should be turned, as thou shouldest do to say them thyself; for I write them as another should say them for thee”<sup>42</sup>. Moreover in the fourth chapter of *Tractatus* there are several prayers which are instructed to be read by the dying: “Therefore as long as he that is in point of death may speak, and have the use of reason with him, let him say these prayers...”<sup>43</sup>. Furthermore: “And if he that is sick cannot all these prayers, or may not say them for grievousness or sickness, let some man that is about him say them before him. And he that is dying, as long as he hath use of reason, let him pray devoutly within himself...”<sup>44</sup>.

In Gerson’s *De arte moriendi*, the presumption seems to be that the alone is to read these prayers. In *Tractatus* however, it depends on the prayers: the ones in the fourth chapter are to be read by the dying, the ones in the sixth chapter by someone accompanying the dying. This was not, however, set in stone but could vary according to the mental and physical state of the dying.

The last chapter of *De arte moriendi* contains some observations on the three above mentioned chapters. Here, it is essential to concentrate on a few important points which deal with the communal aspect of death. Firstly, if the dying had not received the holy sacraments, the dying should be persuaded to do this. Also, if the dying had not answered the questions correctly, they should be taught to die in the correct faith of the church<sup>45</sup>. *Tractatus* adds that the dying should also be exhorted to do his testament, strengthen him against the temp-

<sup>40</sup> “Si patiens usum loquendi perdiderit habet tamen sanam et integram notitiam ad interrogationes sibi factas uel orationes coram eo recitatas, signo aliquo exteriori uel solo cordis consensu respondeat” (*ibid.*, p. 22v.).

<sup>41</sup> Sexta continet orationes dicendas super agonizans ab aliquo de assistentium amico caro et fideli” (ANONYMUS, *Tractatus*, cit., p. 172r.).

<sup>42</sup> F. COMPER (a cura di), *The Craft*, cit., p. 40.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28. “Quam diu agonizans loquem et usum rationem habere potum sequens dicat obsecrations” (ANONYMUS, *Tractatus*, cit., p. 185r.).

<sup>44</sup> F. COMPER (a cura di), *The Craft*, cit., p. 31. “Et autem infirmus perdictas obsecrationes non omnes sciat uel ex infirmitates in ualestante dicere non possit dicat eas aliquis de astantibus clare uoce coram illo mutatae que sunt mutanda. Ipse tum agonizans quam diu usum ratione haberepotuit, oret intra se corde cum desiderio...” (ANONYMUS, *Tractatus*, cit., p. 187r.).

<sup>45</sup> J. GERSON, *Opusculum tripartitum*, cit., pp. 21v.-22r.

tations of the Devil and let him be told of all the other dangers of death, since it is better to frighten the dying than flatter him and underestimate the perils of death. Moreover it is useful to sprinkle holy water on the dying and the people surrounding<sup>46</sup>. If death is not hasty and the dying person has time, then some devout histories or prayers should be read before them. These histories and prayers should be such that have pleased him when he still was healthy. Useful would also be to say the commandments of God aloud so that they can think if they have acted against them. In addition to hearing the words of God, it is also important to contemplate God by seeing the crucifix and the pictures of the saints, which the dying venerated<sup>47</sup>.

These are all instructions which give practical assignments for people who are accompanying the dying. Unlike in the first chapters of *De arte moriendi*, the helpers of the dying are not useful only in the exceptional cases, when the dying cannot speak for example, but they are seen fundamentally useful and necessary in all circumstances. By executing these given instructions, the present people were doing the best they could for saving the soul of the dying. Nevertheless, it is crucial to point out that all of these instructions could be executed solely by one person. Yet, in order to execute the instructions concerning the last sacraments and the holy water, the presence of a priest was essential. However, there is no evident urge for a large community. When we proceed further in *De arte moriendi*, this observation comes clear: Gerson instructs that friends, wife, children or other temporal things should not be reduced at all unto the mind of the dying, or at most as little as possible if the spiritual health of the dying requires it<sup>48</sup>. This way, Gerson's attitude on the presence of a community could be seen as negative or at least insignificant. The presence of relatives does not give any extra benefit for the salvation of the dying, more likely on the contrary. Gerson does not directly say that family should not be present, nonetheless, the dying should not be reminded of their presence.

<sup>46</sup> ANONYMUS, *Tractatus*, cit., pp. 189r.-190r.

<sup>47</sup> “Si moriturus prolixum temporis spacium ad suam recollectionem habeat, ut non morte festina preueniatur, legende forent coram eo ab astantibus historie et orationes deuote, in quibus sanus et uiuens amplius delectabatur uel recensenda essent diuina precepta, ut profundius meditetur si quid aduersus ea negligenter oblitum deliquerit, uel simil coram eo instructio recitetur... Presentetur infirmo ymago crucifixi uel alterius sancti quem sanus es incolumis specialiter uenerabatur” (J. GERSON, *Opusculum tripartitum*, cit., p. 22v.). These instructions are repeated also in *Tractatus* and *Ars moriendi*.

<sup>48</sup> “Nullatenus aut minime si fieri possit morienti amici carnales, uxor, liberi, uel diuitie ad memoriam reducantur nisi in quantum id exigit patientis spiritualis sanitas” (*ivi*, p. 22r.).

Ericus Nicolai's Swedish translation of *De arte moriendi* mentions in the beginning of the text that after the sacraments, the dying should be left alone with one trusted and faithful friend who executes the instructions<sup>49</sup>. This part is probably adopted from *Ars moriendi*, since it includes practically the same instruction in its epilogue<sup>50</sup>.

Compared to the other two texts, *Tractatus* doesn't indicate that the dying should be left alone with one person. The only indication of a trusted friend is the above mentioned introduction of the sixth chapter: the prayers are exhorted to be read by one "*amico caro et fideli*". *Tractatus* repeats, however, Gerson's instruction that family and friends should not be reduced unto the dying's mind<sup>51</sup>. The English translation is interesting: "*When man is in point of death, and hasteth fast to his end, then should no carnal friends, nor wife, nor children, nor riches nor no temporal goods, be reduced unto his mind, neither be communed of before him*"<sup>52</sup>. The part "*and hasteth fast to his end*" might be seen as a reference to sudden death cases. If interpreted thus, it means that The Craft of Dying would leave family out of a sick room only in sudden death cases. Obviously, this addition could also be seen just as eloquence. The Latin version namely omits it.

From the art of dying guidebooks, which I have consulted for this paper, *Tractatus* certainly emphasizes the importance of communality more than others. Unlike Gerson and *Ars moriendi*, *Tractatus* exhorts people to gather around the deathbed. According to *Tractatus*, no man should underestimate the perils of death. People are in such great peril in the moment of death that the entire city should gather around the dying as manner is in some religious houses<sup>53</sup>. *Trac-*

<sup>49</sup> "... när en människa blir så sjuk att man förstår att den sjukdomen leder till döden, då skall man strax kalla till henne biktfadern, som från henne mottar bikt och avslösning. Sedan skall man ge henne en god trogen och förständig människa, som ständigt skall vara hos den sjuke och ta väl hand om honom och det skall vara en sådan människa som den sjuke brukade ha andligt kärlek till i sin krafts dagar. Ty det är ganska ödesdigert att vara inför hans ögon eller påminna honom om hans rikedomar, hustru och barn eller något som hade ägnat sig åt med stor aktsamhet och i stor kärlek i sin välmakt" (M. HAGBERG (a cura di), *Om konsten att dö*, cit., p. 93).

<sup>50</sup> "Unde nota: ex quo tota salus hominis in fine consistat, sollicite curare debet unusquisque ut sibi de socio uel amico deuoto fideli et ydoneo prouideat qui ei in extremis fideliter assistat ad fidei constantiam, patientiam, deuotionem, confidentiam et perseuerentiam ipsum incitando, animando ac in agonia orationes deuotas pro eo fideliter dicendo" (J. CAMPBELL, *Ars moriendi*, cit., p. 71).

<sup>51</sup> ANONYMUS, *Tractatus*, cit., p. 190v.

<sup>52</sup> F. COMPER (a cura di), *The Craft*, cit., p. 37.

<sup>53</sup> "... si possibile est tota ciuitas ad morientem auenire deberet festinanter sicut in qui-

*tatus* refers to a manner which was used in monasteries and convents. When a brother or a nun was dying, a flat board (*tabula*) was struck against a door so that everybody was aware of the situation. This manner is known to be used by the Benedictines, Augustinians and Dominicans<sup>54</sup>. According to Donald Duclow, this part indicates that *Tractatus* sees communal death as an ideal way of dying<sup>55</sup>. This is not, however, as simple as Duclow states it. There is one clear instruction in *Tractatus*, which indicates the opposite to Duclow's opinion: the temptation of avarice. This temptation consists of the temporal things, such as wives, children, friends and worldly riches. In order to avoid this temptation one should put all these temporal things aside, concentrate wholly on God's mercy and die willfully. Thus, it would be dangerous to argue that *Tractatus* sees ideal death as a communal situation. In *Ars moriendi* Christ's words are used against the temptation of avarice. As Christ said, one could not be his disciple if one did not leave his richness and family<sup>56</sup>. In this way a good death without friends and family is compared to following Christ.

*Ars moriendi's* pictures depict clearly how relatives were not welcomed to the sickroom. In the temptation of avarice, friends and family are depicted surrounding the deathbed. Two demons are pointing these people and saying: "Prouideas amice" (*Consider your friends*) and another demon points his house and property saying: "Intende thesauro" (*Reach out for your treasure*)<sup>57</sup>. This way the temporal items are used by demons as an attraction to make a man fall into a sin. With the good inspiration of the Angel against avarice, we find an angel is holding a fabric between the dying and the friends. The angel says: "Ne intendas am-

busdam religionibus mode est ubi statuitur quam infirmus morti appropinquabit tunc oportet ut mox audita tabula quantumque hora omnes fratres ubiadque fuerint omnibus dimissis occupationibus..." (ANONYMUS, *Tractatus*, cit., p. 191v.).

<sup>54</sup> M.C. O'CONNOR, *The Art*, cit., p. 5.

<sup>55</sup> D. DUCLOW, *Dying Well: The Ars moriendi and the Dormition of the Virgin*, in E. DUBRUCK – B. GUSICK (a cura di), *Death and dying in the Middle Ages*, New York, Peter Lang Publishing, 1999, p. 385.

<sup>56</sup> "(Quinta) temptatione que magis seculares atque carnales infestat est nimia occupatio rerum temporalium atque exterior ita uxores, liberos et amicos carnales et diuitias atque alii que in uita sua dilexerunt. Nam que bene et secuer mori uolunt... temporalia et exteriora simpliter atque totaliter postponere..." (ANONYMUS, *Tractatus*, cit., 180r.). "Et omnia temporalia totaliter postpone quorum memoria utique nihil salutis conferre potest sed magnum impedimentum, memor uerborum Domini ad eos qui istis adherent: 'Nisi quis renuntiauerit omnibus quam possidet, non potest meus esse discipulus'; et iterum: 'Si quis uenit ad me et non odit patrem suum et matrem et uxorem et filios et fratres et sorores, adhuc non potest meus esse discipulus'" (J. CAMPBELL, *Ars moriendi*, cit., p. 65).

<sup>57</sup> *Ivi*, p. 82.

icis” (*Do not reach out for your friends*). Another angel says to the dying: “Non sis avarus” (*Do not be greedy*). A defeated demon on the floor is looking desperately to the dying and says: “Quid faciam” (*What should I do?*)<sup>58</sup>. The temptation of avarice is thus won if temporal things are not reduced unto the mind of the dying.

### Conclusion

The late medieval art of dying guides give us an interesting angle to the communality of dying in the Middle Ages. With these sources, we find out exceptionally well that the late medieval theologians saw the presence of friends and family harmful for the dying. Judging by the instructions, the theologians saw it better to concentrate on death with just one trusted friend. This is said clearly in *Ars moriendi* and the Swedish translation of Jean Gerson’s *De arte moriendi*. Gerson himself does not say this explicitly, but undoubtedly we find out that he puts no value on the presence of a community. There could be people surrounding the dying, but at the very least their role should be minimized, according to Gerson.

Most difficult to define is the opinion of *Tractatus de arte moriendi*. It repeats the same instruction, which we found from Gerson and *Ars moriendi*: friends and family should be on the dying’s mind as little as possible. Also, the temptation of avarice is overcome only by leaving family and friends out of the sickroom. However, its instructions include some parts, which give the people present a participatory role around the deathbed. Moreover, it exhorts all people to visit the dying and help them in their agony. This way, the opinion of *Tractatus* remains somewhat contradicted. It is not possible to conclude that *Tractatus* sees the communal death as an ideal model, as Donald Duclow has stated. However, it would be also an exaggeration to argue that *Tractatus* sees the friends and family as harmful as Gerson and *Ars moriendi*.

Although the art of dying-guides could have been used by priest who attended to the dying, I would emphasize more their importance for the laity. In Gerson’s model, his instructions could be executed after the priest had delivered the last sacraments. The family was probably present during the sacraments, as Stina Fallberg Sundmark has pointed out, but then the dying should be left with a trusted friend. Or if the family was still present, their social role was nonexistent. It is essential to note the procedural character of medieval death and dying. Since medieval death and dying consisted of several different stages (the sac-

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 83.



raments, anselmian questions, exhortations, the actual moment of death, wake and mourning by the deathbed, washing and wrapping the body, going to the church and the burial), the communality of dying could also vary in the different stages of death. According to the art of dying guidebooks, a large group of people were not welcomed during the time between the last sacraments and the actual moment of death. A trusted friend was all that was needed. With further research, it would be possible to concentrate on the communality during the other stages of death. Although we cannot say how people reacted to these instructions, their influence on people should not be underestimated. The written words and pictures of the guides, not to mention the sermons influenced by them, reached the eyes and ears of vast majority. It is therefore essential to take these guidebooks into consideration when studying the communal aspect of medieval death. It seems that the communality of medieval death was a versatile concept and therefore it cannot be taken for granted. On the contrary, it needs to be studied more widely in order to avoid the repetition of stereotypical arguments about the communal deathbed scene in the Middle Ages. It seems that the late medieval theologians have seen the ideal death rather as a private than a communal situation.



Fig. 1. The good inspiration of the Angel against avarice; woodcut from the *Ars moriendi*, by Konrad Kachelofen, Leipzig 1493; (M. Hagberg (ed.), *Jean Gersons Ars moriendi. Om konsten att dö*, Värnamo, Fälth & Hässler, 2009, p. 58).