

Editorial

“The woman is perfected” – Critical and Creative Reflections on Death and the Maiden

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The woman is perfected.

Her dead

Body wears the smile of accomplishment

Sylvia Plath, “Edge”

Eros and Thanatos have been bound together ever since the god of death and the underworld Hades kidnapped the young maiden Persephone. The fascination, and often infatuation, with death has become a cross-cultural trope of surrender, ecstasy and contemplation transcending human life and connecting it with the timeless fluidity of the ‘afterlife’, the ‘underworld’ or ‘the abyss’.

There is an incongruence between death and its artistic representation, between the concept in the mind and its corporeal and existential reality. Thus to call for papers on the broad theme of Death and the Maiden is to invite works that are trans-disciplinary and written from below, a multiplicity of modes, genres,



Figure 1. Unknown artist. 16th century
Death and the Maiden.
 Ivory
 Bode-Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin
 Public domain.

forms and styles, allegorical refractions of death, femininity and sexuality striving to express the unknowable, the ineffable. Death is a lack, an absence, and a phenomenon that can perhaps only really be represented as allegory of “the tragedy of the temporality and transience of human experience, the ultimate decay of all objects of cultural production” (Kerr-Koch 2013, 21). In *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* (The Origin of German Tragic Drama, 1925), Walter Benjamin writes of allegory as the transformation of things into signs, an act which highlights human finitude and the passing of time not as progress but as disintegration. Thus, in allegory, we are “confronted with the facies hippocratica of history as a petrified, primordial landscape. Everything about history that, from the very beginning, has been untimely, sorrowful, unsuccessful, is expressed in a face – or rather a death’s head” (Benjamin 1977, 175). When Hades abducts Persephone and drags her down into his dark and deadly kingdom, deep below the surface of the earth, the story of Death and the Maiden is born, binding eternally connotations of death, decay and sorrow to the female body, particularly as that body expresses desire and sexuality.

Death comes upon her. His sinewy, taut, yellowing frame grasps her from behind. He is a terrifying suitor, a creeping, malevolent presence, sunken skull and dead eyes. Tormenting and enticing, his hand reaches for her breast. She is paralysed. The Maiden is trapped in a moment between two deaths, between the arrival of Death and the instant of her death – the instant of her death henceforth always in abeyance. Like the young man described in Maurice Blanchot’s *L’Instant de ma mort* (*The Instant of My Death*, 1994), she both “prevented from dying by death itself” (Blanchot 1994, 3) and “bound to death by a surreptitious friendship” (5). Perhaps she experiences in this instant not the horror of death, but “[r]ather the feeling of compassion for suffering humanity, the happiness of not being immortal or eternal” (5), “the feeling of lightness that [she] would not know how to translate: freed from life? The infinite opening up? Neither happiness, nor unhappiness. Nor the absence of fear and perhaps already the step beyond” (7). He tries to kiss her. The kiss becomes a bite of passion that seals her fate. Her head half-turned, her face contorts into a grimace. The Maiden cries:

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Pass me by! Oh, pass me by!
Go, fierce man of bones!
I am still young! Go, rather,
And do not touch me.
And do not touch me.

(Schubert 1817)

Mockingly, the corpse of Death replies:

Give me your hand, you beautiful and tender form!
I am a friend, and come not to punish.
Be of good cheer! I am not fierce,
Softly shall you sleep in my arms!

(Schubert 1817)

His chilling skeletal figure holds the beautiful Maiden by the hair, pointing her towards her grave. Her garments slip open, revealing her naked white body. As Joseph Koerner writes of Hans Baldung Grien's *Death and the Maiden* (Figure 2):

The whiteness of her flesh, standing out against the dark background and the brown colour of the corpse, draws our eye toward her. We cannot tell whether she is revealing herself – for she holds the white cloth at either side of her body – or whether, in trying to resist the corpse's attack, she has accidentally let her garments fall. (Koerner 1985, 78).

Such representations of Death and his stalking of the Maiden are partly an attempt to tame death: rather than remaining ill-defined and threatening, death is given shape and made familiar. But the imagery of death and the maiden, often coming hand-in-hand with depictions of male domination over a fearful, fragile, naked femininity, also reveals a dark bond between sexuality and death: "Sexuality, expressed in the concealing/revealing of the flesh and in the gesture

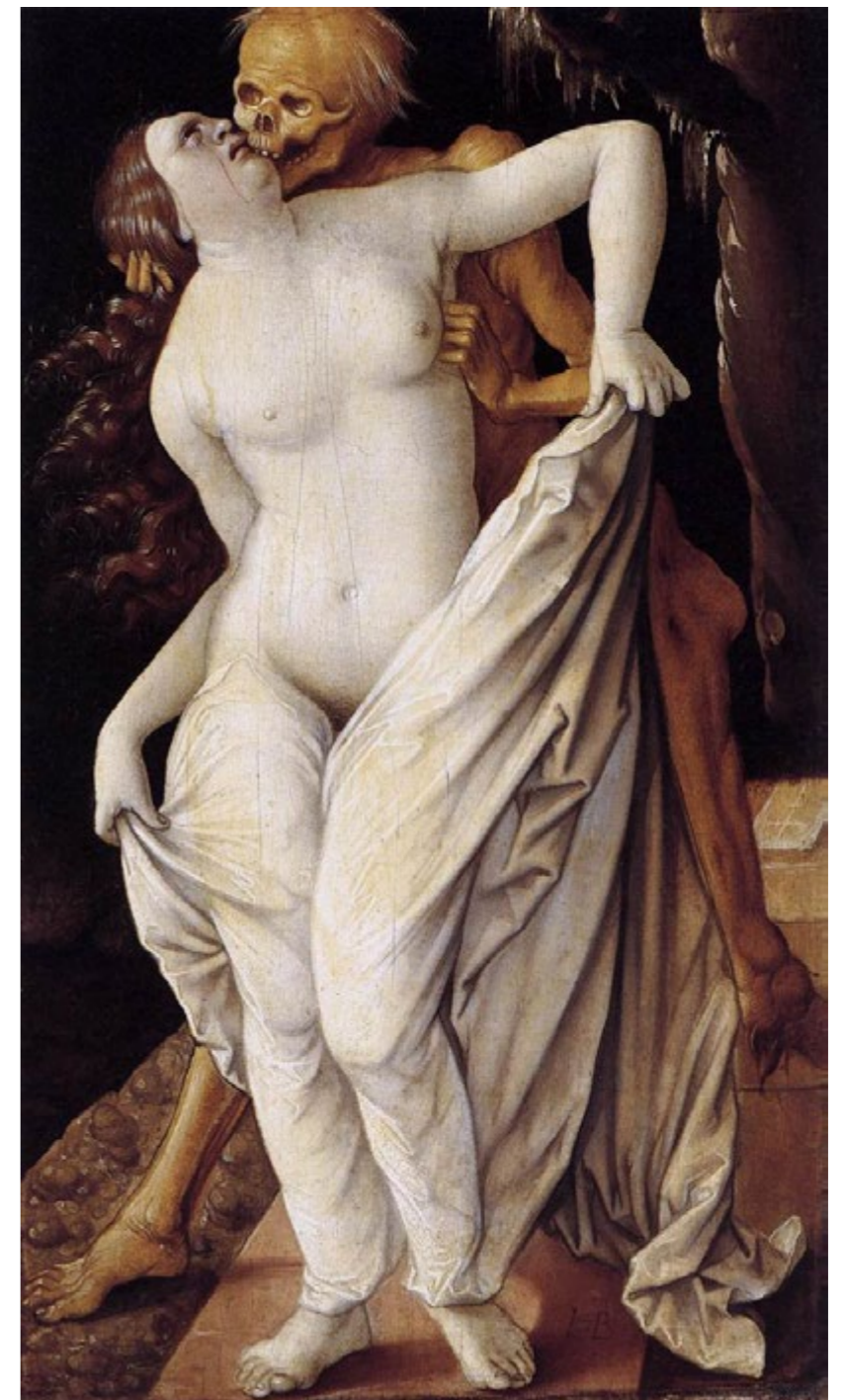


Figure 2. Hans Baldung Grien. 1518-20
Death and the Maiden.
Oil on panel.
Öffentliche Kunstsammlung, Basel
Public domain.

of the corpse (were its bite, a kiss), becomes identical with death, expressed in the meaning of the bite and in the suggestion of the garments as a funeral shroud.” (78-80) This unnerving illustration of love and death, love in death, in love with death, deadly love or death in love, is repeated over and over again, across artistic genres and time periods – almost always present, and always indicative of something ineffable, beyond what the human can fully grasp. The symbolic openness of the correlation between the beauty, innocence and naturalness of the female body on the one hand, and the demonic seduction, infinity and anonymity of death on the other, never fails to intrigue. It yearns to be filled, again and again, turning into a cycle of dialogical reinvention (and often reinforcement) of cultural stereotypes and erotic innuendo. Equally, the allegorical surface of this image creates a platform for discursive, deconstructive voices that expand the idea of this marriage into different directions, including the effeminisation of death itself.

This cultural and artistic manifestation of femininity as intrinsically related to death has taken many forms of expression. In traditional fairy tales such as “Bluebeard”, and its contemporary re-telling in “The Bloody Chamber” (1979) by Angela Carter or the film *Barbe Bleue* (*Bluebeard*; 2009), directed by Catherine Breillat, death comes as violent punishment for inquisitive young females. Gothic literature offers a dual take: the virtuous heroine who falls victim to monstrous Death, embodied for example by the undead vampire, or, conversely, death is embodied in the *femme fatale* as a sexual predator, epitomising a monstrous femininity. Both are carried on through their descendants in high and popular culture alike – say in the Hammer Horror series of *Dracula* films, or the sexy southern American gothic of *True Blood*. Drawing on the traditional ballad form, the infamous *Murder Ballads* album (1996) by Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds links death and female sexuality in a similar way with a southern gothic aesthetic, exemplified by the track “Where the Wild Roses Grow”. The Pre-Raphaelites of the nineteenth century are famous for picturing the female virgin in death while her beauty transcends the final moment of life into a rite-of-passage with clearly Christian undertones. The symbiosis of life in full bloom and life ending unfolds its entire significance in John Everett Millais’ interpretation of



Figure 3. John Everett Millais. 1851-2
Ophelia.
Oil on canvas
Tate Britain, London
Public domain.

Shakespeare's *Ophelia* (Figure 3), in which the beautiful dead maiden floats majestically in the water, amidst the fertility and potency of a blossoming landscape, a string of flowers still clasped in her right hand. The self-infliction of her state is only one example of the frequent connections proposed between women and suicide in history – a relation that further mystifies the overall trope between 'femme et la mort'. When, in one of her last poems, "Sheep in Fog", Sylvia Plath talks about a "heaven starless and fatherless, a dark water" (Plath 1963), she is already caught within the imaginary embrace of death that should soon give way to her suicide. We may ask, however, who is the agent of the embrace? Whose will defines the fatal spiel of lust between transience and eternity?

As allegory, the motif of the Death and the Maiden commonly reflects social mores. In medieval times, *La Danse Macabre*, the Dance of Death, including representations of Death and the Maiden, was painted on large murals in public places – the message was simple: Death comes to everyone no matter what your status in life. From the Renaissance onwards, representations of death became more personal, and more complex. Death stalks and seduces young women, and fairy tales tell of young girls being chased in the woods by wolves, or being murdered in castles by evil Dukes. In more recent times the deadly embrace between the woman and death has been re-worked in a multitude of ways. While fear and passivity had still been an overarching feature in the attitude of the maiden towards death in visual art before the twentieth century, the aspect of mutual agency, pleasure and desire has been increasingly highlighted as the central factor in their relationship since the late nineteenth century onwards, as vividly illustrated in, for example, Edward Munch's drawing *Death and the Maiden* (Figure 4), Egon Schiele's painting of the same name (Figure 5), or more recently in Marina Abramović's stunning performance and critical interrogation of this motif in *Self-portrait with skeleton* (Figure 6). Portrayals of the love-death relation as an alliance between the female and the male have been, and still are, striking, and frequently carry misogynist undertones that are difficult to ignore, engendering patriarchal ideals of female purity, divinity and innocence in the image of the dead virgin. Representations



Figure 4. Edvard Munch. 1893
Death and the Maiden.
Oil on canvas
Private collection.



Figure 5. Egon Schiele. 1915
Death and the Maiden.
Oil on canvas
Österreichische Galerie Belvedere, Vienna
Public domain.



Figure 6. Marina Abramović. 2002-5
Self-portrait with skeleton.

Photograph courtesy of Marina Abramović and Sean Kelly Gallery, New York
© Marina Abramović

in contemporary crime dramas, or media coverage of real-life crimes against women – such as the recent murders of Melbourne-based ABC worker Jill Meagher or sex worker Johanna ‘Jazzy O’ Martin – continue to perpetuate such tropes. Abramović, in contrast, wears “a smile of accomplishment” (Plath, 1963) as her body breathes life into the skeleton lying atop her. In her breath, she dissolves the gap between death and its representation. Death is not be feared, the skeleton is not there to pass judgement on the Maiden, and the even flow of her breath suggests a continuity between herself and this *momento mori*. Instead of viewing the ‘deadly embrace’ as an act of male domination over a seductive but innocent woman, it may instead be seen as a form of female intellectual empowerment that transcends pure embodiment and enters an allegorical, metaphorical, creative sphere of perfection and accomplishment beyond the confines of life.

But this storyline does not end with persisting cultural fantasies of Death and the Maiden. As Judith Bennett puts it, the motif itself “offers a rich cultural vein that speaks about patriarchy, but much more besides” (2012, 273). Taking a snapshot of the uses of death as allegory, and the reality of death at this current point in time, this special edition of *Writing from Below* looks at the marriage between Death and the Maiden from the position of these ‘besides’ and ‘belows’, diverting critical attention towards the silent voices that still exist in the discourse – voices that make new and innovative discoveries from a century-old, surviving stigma by turning it into stories that speak to each other.

As our starting point, in a stunning series of paintings critically and creatively remixing Joe Wright’s 2012 film *Anna Karenina*, and published here alongside a paratactic exegetical text titled “Anna Karenina Remix: Death, Desire, and the Space In-Between”, Natalie Pirotta evokes the metaphor of the film still to arrest the movement of the dance in one vital scene: as Anna and Vronsky perform a version of the allegorical *danse macabre*, Anna is suspended mid-twirl,

in a liminal state as if between life and death. In striking contrast, in “Coffin Calendar Girls” Christina Welch dissects the use of the Death and the Maiden trope in contemporary advertising for coffins in Italy and Poland, displaying the persistence of the motif in its most vicious form. In imagery that evokes Mikhail Bakhtin’s idea of ‘spectacle’, fecund young women pose provocatively with coffins, situating death as a lecherous male sexual predator, a macabre twist on the advertisers’ motto ‘sex sells’. Welch traces the links between these modern-day images with sixteenth-century allegorical representations from Northern Europe.

In the critical-creative essay “Death and Photographs: El Día del Muerto/Day of the Dead”, Suzanne Hermanoczki connects creative non-fiction reflections, documenting personal moments of her father’s death, with critical discourse on the cultural significance of death photography. Analysing the power and wounding effect of death images in regards to Roland Barthes’ idea of the *punctum*, Hermanoczki both argues and exemplifies how particular photographs or *memento mori* have the ability to not just trigger memories of trauma and grief for the viewer/reader but are able to provide a ‘site’ for meditation, remembrance and dialogue, which also enables narrative to emerge.

Hannah Ky McCann then shifts focus, and seeks to consider the connection between death and feminism by responding to claims of the death of feminism in her piece “The Dead Girl in Feminism: A Transformation in Five Acts”. McCann confronts the current trend in contemporary academia and popular media alike that a younger generation of “post-feminist” women are feminism’s killer, and emphasises the need for feminism to move away from the binary feminism/post-feminism and assert itself against a different paradigm. In the first of two arresting works of short fiction, Hayley Singer’s “Fragments from a Myth-Carriage” charts dis-figurements of ‘the flesh’ as it is objectified, denigrated and negated in the process of desiring-and consuming-mythic ideals of beauty and unity achieved through enforced corporeal docility, her fictional “world of repetitious dreams” structurally critiquing an endless roundelay of destruction and production as a necessary condition for consumerism’s obsessive, and



Figure 7. Edvard Munch. 1895
Vampyr.
Oil on canvas
Munch-museet, Oslo
Public domain.

seductive, drive towards happiness, wholeness, and hierarchical status. Evelyn Irina Tsitas' macabre representation of death is not the sweet passive femininity of Millais' Ophelia; instead, her sexually-charged contemporary re-visioning of classic horror fiction "My Lover's Eyes" brings the Egyptian myth of Osiris to Melbourne, Australia, as her protagonist, deeply mourning the death of her lover in a car accident, teams up with a necromancer of sorts to find her lover's soul and make a baby, which requires the sacrifice of a virginal young man. Only through violent sexual union is the protagonist able to find a way to the liminal space between life and death, drawing her dead lover's soul into her womb to be reborn in a new child.

Two works take on the historical and contemporary fascination with vampirism. In "If you were less pretty I think I should be very much afraid of you", Donna Mitchell explores the other side of the love-death dichotomy in Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla* (1872), in which death is personified as a vampiristic woman, synecdoche for the sexually liberated 'New Woman', who pursues her sexual desires in a strongly patriarchal Victorian society. Then, in the fantastically-titled "Vampiric Hymenoplasty", Jane Kubiesa uses Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *The Bride of Corinth* (1797) and Henry Liddell's *The Vampire Bride* (1833), both prominent early depictions of vampirism featuring female virgin vampires, to unfold her critical analysis of contemporary depictions of female vampirism in the fictional character of Jessica Hamby from the HBO television series *True Blood*, re-defining the idea of Death and the Maiden within one physical body.

While we play with death as a metaphor or allegory, Andrew Blythe, Sally Morris and Michelle Mars engage with the shocking reality of death and female sexuality. In "Raising Our Voice: Perspectives on Suicide in the LGBTI Community", blur the boundaries of academic genres, providing us with an experimental piece blending personal stories with cold, hard statistics. While the statistics present a bleak story, the discontinuous reflective memoir allows for the authors to explore the personal impact of suicide, the context in which it occurs – through the associated determinants of health, differing perspectives of community subgroups, and current methodologies of understanding – along

with possible solutions for containment. Though not mentioned explicitly in their paper, Blythe, Morris and Mars rail against society's prohibition against death, particularly the taboos of talking about suicide. Experimenting with a form of group memoir, they 'raise their voices' against the silence that accompanies suicide in the LGBTI community, and attempt to render real the bleak reality of suicide statistics within that community in Australia. The result is a moving piece pulsing with the anger and hurt felt by the writers, but also with a sense of hope, a call for the community to unite, to share their experiences in a safe space for discussion.

Finally, two short poems by Zoe Brigley Thompson complete this special issue. Both "Fallen" and "The Shave" unravel the motivations behind violent acts and deeds perpetrated against women, interrogating the male desire to conquer women's bodies, the desire to dominate or break open, the impulse to hurt or destroy others.

Held loosely together by the broader theme of Death and the Maiden, the new voices published in this special issue of *Writing from Below* add another contemporary layer to the discussion, transgressing prominent clichés and stereotypes by making them translucent and using them to show what else is visible behind them. Although death may be a lack, this issue's contributors have found new and inventive ways to represent and interrogate the theme. Diverse in subject matter, methodology, style, form and genre, they nevertheless create an intriguing dialogue between the present and the past, predicting a future in which the trope will continue to fascinate the public and the private imagination – a continuous connection between different stories... from below.

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