

Introducing Death: A 15th Century Croatian Glagolitic Literary Text

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We explored the notions of life and death as perceived and presented in a 15th century Croatian literary text, *Slovo Meštra Polikarpa*, in which master Polikarp, a well-learned man of medieval times, engages in a lengthy dialogue with Death itself. This contrast/debate is a rare piece of medieval literature, not only by its Old Croatian language, but also by the angular Glagolitic script in which it was written. As a part of Croatian cultural heritage, it is deeply rooted in and clearly belongs to the common context of Western European medieval views on life, health, ailing, and death. A medieval perspective on such issues might be interesting to broad readership and, in many aspects, to medical professionals, whose everyday practice necessarily involves not only practical and scientific, but also moral, philosophical, and religious deliberations about life and death.

Key words: attitude to death; Croatia; death; history of medicine, medieval; history of medicine, 15th century; humanities; literature, medieval; medicine in literature; religion and medicine

Modern age seemed to hail a contradiction between the analytical and synthetic approach to issues in medicine. The process that started with the biomedical revolution in the second half of the 19th century has led to the ever-greater fragmentation and specialization of medical knowledge and knowledge in general. However, today we are witnessing the trend of the incorporation of various types of specialized knowledge. Interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary approaches are being used to reach a more complete understanding of complex problems, among them, the problems of health, disease, and death (1).

A system of making decisions at the end of life has been highly debated, as well as physician's assistance in dying, death with dignity, euthanasia, and terminal care. Most authors argue in favor of a doctor-patient relationship based on compassion and mutual trust (2) since it ensures equality in the relationship. The physician has to deal not only with physiological and medical facts, but also with his own as well as his patient's beliefs, values, and hopes (3). In addition to administering a medication that will reduce the suffering of a patient, a physician should help the patient prepare for the end. However, a carefully balanced dialogue, which is the main and most important element in such a relationship, many physicians find very difficult. There are many reasons why this is so. One of them is that medical students are not trained nor educated on how to relate to a dying person, let alone to their own fears and doubts, which such a relation can provoke. This is the sphere where

clinical medicine closely encounters philosophy, religion, and ethics, and touches on deep vulnerabilities in all of us.

Therefore, the attempts to bring the values, concerns and knowledge from any field of the humanities into the medical practice in more than welcome and not surprising at all. For example, since the 1960's, a course on literature has been included in the U.S. medical schools curricula, due to belief that teaching students to reflect on literary sources can help them in their medical training (4). To deal with suffering and dying persons and the phenomenon of death itself is a delicate process that we should all prepare for, particularly those who have chosen, by studying medicine and by being physicians, to dedicate their professional life to the sick and dying. A physician cannot alleviate someone's pain of dying without having been taught how to put death into perspective (5).

One of the many ways of "getting to know" death is to approach the phenomenon as it is represented in literary works. Messages or ideas presented in literature are stronger and more poignant, provoking in readers a qualitatively different reaction from that that the "intellectual", scientific, or, indeed, philosophical and theological works do. Reading such literary works stimulates a creative, individual response, whereas knowledge about ideas on such phenomena throughout various historical periods and cultures enhances openness, tolerance and compassion. For physicians, literary texts are valuable help in dealing with complex and sensitive phenomenon of life and

death, because they broaden experience and open up new insights into those issues (6).

Views on death and dying vary across different cultures and different epochs. Literary works from the past shed light on the development of *cogitatio mortis* by conveying various attitudes and approaches to death and dying, and showing where concepts have changed or remained the same.

To contribute to the understanding of specifically medieval views on mortality and death, we decided to analyze a piece of Croatian literary work from 15th century, written in very specific Glagolitic script. The message it conveys is characteristic for the Western European Middle Ages in general.

The medieval period was imbued with a mixture of strong faith and fear. Sophisticated rituals of helping and assisting a dying person, for which everybody had to be prepared, went along with *the process of dying itself* (5). The phenomenon of *bene moriendi* was given great importance not only in theological but also in literary works (7-9). Many texts in European (Latin and vernacular) literature with this subject matter have been preserved, yet there is only one such text written in Croatian letters. The text we analyzed deals with the medieval views of dying, health, aging, and disease.

The Text

Slovo Meštra Polikarpa is a literary composition written in Old Croatian language, with typical Croat angular Glagolitic letters. St. Cyrill of Thessaloniki created Glagolitic alphabet in the 9th century, when by the Byzantine emperor sent him and his brother Methodius on a mission among the Slavs. In order to translate fundamental liturgical and canonical texts into the Old Church Slavonic language, the "Slav Apostles" created an alphabet that could represent the Slavic vowels and consonants. The Glagolitic alphabet was soon replaced in the Orthodox East by Cyrillic letters, while the Glagolitic script survived in some parts of Croatia, where it has been used in liturgy, education, law, and literature, even during the 19th century (10).

Slovo Meštra Polikarpa is preserved in two Croatian Glagolitic miscellany manuscripts: the so-called Petris Miscellany, folios 344v-347v, and the Ljubljana Miscellany, folios 1r-4v (11,12). Both manuscripts were compiled in the 15th century and contain a wide range of subjects and genres (Fig. 1). Although the matrix for this text has not been found, it has similarities with the Latin work *De Morte Prologus*, with compositions following in the example of *De Contemptu Mundi* by Pope Innocent III, and other medieval literary works of *memento mori* (13). For that reason, literary historians consider it a compilation of works from different sources. Structured as a dialogue between two characters, Master (in the sense of "magister", ie, a learned man) Polikarp and personified Death, it can be placed within the context of the popular medieval genre of contrasts (debates). Our aim was to analyze this particular dialog from the medical historian's point of view.

Dialogue

The text opens with Polikarp's prayer, in which he asks God to allow him to speak to Death. Indeed, Death, in a shape of the Grim Reaper, appears before Polikarp and, after Polikarp overcomes his initial shock and horror, starts a dialogue with him. The dialogue is a string of monologues by Death (ranging from boastful to warning), which are provoked by Polikarp's short, clipped questions on a number of issues, e.g., how does death "take" people, why is it sometimes sudden, why does it have such power over man, etc. Death answers the questions readily, albeit from a position of power that stems from possessing knowledge, and often quotes from the Scriptures and Aristotle, as if trying to teach Polikarp. In the end, Death reveals itself in a form so ghastly that Polikarp faints. When he regains consciousness, Death has already disappeared. Then Polikarp, following Death's instructions, mends his ways (a well known medieval *topos*) and is saved.

At the beginning, Death appears in the role of antagonist, adversary, and enemy. As the dialogue progresses, Death's role changes into that of a teacher through the trope of irony, where opposed meanings and characteristics do not exclude each other. Death calls upon Polikarp to lead a pious, virtuous life and thus escape damnation and faith of being thrown into the torments of Hell. Here we can see that Death helps Polikarp and, *pars pro toto*, a whole humankind.



Figure 1. *Slovo Meštra Polikarpa*. Ljubljana Miscellany, Croatian Glagolitic manuscript, 15th century (11).

Characters

Death

This 15th century literary text was obviously used to promote moral and ethical reasoning, of course, from the medieval Christian point of view. The content deals with life and its purpose and inescapable mighty death that annihilates it. Death teaches its pupil – master Polikarp, by vividly describing life and its deceptive charms, disease as an instrument in Death's hands, and Death itself as the only persistent phenomenon in human life, with all its intimidating reality that has remained unchanged for centuries. Death is the "real" master because it knows the topography of the human body much better than any anatomist, and can penetrate into its most remote structures (still to be discovered in the distant future or left beyond reach of the human mind). Death is also the master because it possesses the knowledge of Four Hidden Things, among them – the moment of physical death that humans fear so much. The pupil is clearly reminded of insignificance of life and of hopelessness of search for the solution. Doctors and pharmacists, medicine and medications, every human being, all are helpless puppets in the *danse macabre* (Fig. 2). In one of the opening passages, Death boasts of its omnipotence:

"I take the rulers of this world and put an end to their being, I take away all their worldly pleasures! For when I grab a per-



Figure 2. Danse Macabre (detail), fresco, 15th century, Beram (Croatia), Church of Saint Mary.

son's head, he stops thinking of earthly possessions, and when I press his heart, I suffocate all his joy! Thus I extinguish them like candles and make divisions: I give their body to worms, their possessions to their relatives, their good soul to God, and their evil soul to the Devil. And then I celebrate with dance and festivities!"

Death, as it appears in this work, is a personification of the physical end and the transition into the eschatological eternal spheres of Heaven or Hell.

Polikarp

Polikarp is a man who has knowledge of worldly subjects, temporal and insignificant in their essence. He is master, a learned man, but ironically reduced to a pupil in the course of the dialogue with Death. He is curious, surprised, frightened, terrified, and hopeless, but nevertheless desperately seeks knowledge about all emotions that every human experiences when envisaging death. Death leaves him with a horrible image in his mind, a strong and everlasting experience of death's omnipresent potency, and deep insight into his own mortality.

The contrast between those two literary characters is a metaphor of the essence of human nature.

"There is no medication against death"

Two monologues by personified Death deal with issues of medicine and its purpose, illustrating the contraposition of medicine as a natural science and religion/philosophy. The noun *death* in Old Croatian is of *feminine* gender. However, in the text, the Death is sometimes referred to in *masculine* gender, as if the writer(s) was not sure. For example, in one sentence Death refers to itself as follows: "I, lady Death, do not fear to enter the chambers of popes and prelates"; yet, elsewhere it says: "I am the lord of all beings". As a spiritual category, Death surpasses the distinction between genders. Perhaps these two short quotations also bear a distant echo of irony, ridiculing the style and content of worldly (notably chivalric) literary forms. In one of his or her boastful monologues Death claims:

"There is no medication against my powers. I say unto thee, in no country or school shalt thou find somebody who can prepare a medication against death! ... For no confection, balm, emplastrum, oil, root, satiety or hunger, richness or poverty, can help."

Such negative attitudes toward healing can also be found in works of other late medieval thinkers, namely, Bernard de Clairvaux (14).

There is no remedy against Death's power nor is there such therapeutic preparation that can help avoid its grasp. By going down the list of different therapeutic aids of the period (from crude roots to healing plants to various local therapies, mentioning the concepts of diseases and health regimes, as well), Death demonstrates proficiency in medicine, accentuating nevertheless its own exclusive power and supremacy against which no attempt is worth making.

Unnerved, Polikarp asks: "Then what are medications good for, if no one is to escape thee?" and Death replies sarcastically: "To fill the doctors' purses!" In this text, medicine is reduced to trade, business, selling and buying, a mere trap for the gullible. In the following passage, Death seems to qualify this totally negative perspective by saying: "People using medicaments must know that there are no medicaments against death; medicaments only help them to put up with it."

However, the criticism directed towards physicians and medicine in the Middle Ages was not as much a consequence of the limited effectiveness of medical practice, as a reflection of religious attitudes (14). In the medieval period, disease was viewed as a consequence of sin, it was a punishment sent by God and was therefore to be endured as a kind of severe test, purgation or purification. A negative attitude toward the body and everything physical, which emanates from *Slovo Meštra Polikarpa*, is in line with the text's moral-didactical purpose and its theological background: all humans are mortal (or, in Augustine's view, they are dying, *mortales*) and must eventually die the first, physical death. Of paramount importance was the desire to escape the claws of "the second death", ie, damnation to Hell (5,13).

Death's Devices

"I enter the head through disease"

Master Polikarp asks Death to describe how it leads a man to his grave, and Death answers:

"First I gently enter the head through a disease, which I spread further through entire body, carefully restricting the movements of the legs. Then I move right through a man's body, removing appetite and taste. Then I take sleep from his eyes. Because the body and the soul are tightly bound together, and that bond is difficult to break, I must obstruct all the veins in the body. Thus a man becomes very weak, and restless. I torment him so much that his nose becomes white, his eyes sunken, his forehead red, and his feet cold. Then I turn to the heart and kill it – that, which is first to live, is the last to die. And thus the soul is parted from the body through a disease!"

A patient (victim of the disease, which is the Death's tool) is motionless and restless, without desire for food or drink; evidently, it is the terminal stage described with signs that allude to *facies Hippocratica*. The heart, according to Aristotle, was the central part of the body and controlled the entire organism, so death – by the principle *primo movens, ultimo moriens* – kills it last (15). According to Biblical theology, the heart is the center not only of the body but also of emotions, and in Christian art it is also the attribute of many saints (16).

Disease and aging are "instruments" by which Death dominates the body from its youth onwards:

"I plant myself into every human being, I build my nest in young people, sit on old

peoples' shoulders (that is why they are stooping), and I peer through their eyes."

Progressing slowly through the body, Death finally wins. The idea that death plants its seed in humans when they are young is not typically medieval, and can be found in the Psalm 88, 15: "I am afflicted and ready to die from my youth up" (17).

Medieval authorities, physicians, natural philosophers, and theologians, have developed a model of life by which life evolves from embryo to physical death in "phases": when warmth and humidity are totally lost, death occurs (18). Through a disease or by a disease, the soul eventually departs the body, in a painful manner.

Slovo Meštra Polikarpa as a Medieval Study Model

Although there are only two characters in the *Slovo Meštra Polikarpa* narrative, a poignant dialogue they have with each other is obviously intended for a broader audience. Now, why is it so? Is it to frighten, to warn, to prepare, or to console people? The gradation in dialogue shows how carefully this text was built, depicting the characters' psychological reactions that the audience can identify with and reflecting the aim of the narrative. At first, Polikarp is frozen with fear – a primordial, basic reaction to the appearance of Death, but later he mobilizes his concentration and focuses on Death's teachings. In that phase, the warning to be prepared will remain deeply ingrained in his memory, and in the end, everything said will serve as a consolation: if one leads a pious life, one will be saved. It is a promise of next life (for the people in the Middle Ages – the *real* life in eternity). The text dealing with *this life* ends again with fear (Polikarp faints at Death's sudden, terrifying transfiguration) because humans in different ages and different cultural contexts fear physical death either as the end or as a transition.

Medieval thought as we see it, or rather interpret it, from our 15th century example, is quite different from modern views. However, medieval thinking was responsive in *communicating* basic parameters of life, such as health, death, and temporality. To a modern reader it may seem that the people in the Middle Ages were obsessed with death; so many works of art, literature, and music repeat the themes of *memento mori, quotidie morior, and ubi sunt* (19). On the other hand, as much as they seem obsessed with death, we seem obsessed with hiding it "under the carpet", pretending that it does not happen and avoiding even thinking about it.

The profile of this text is built not only on an antithesis as a basic feature of all contrasts, but also on irony. Death is transformed from a threatening executor to a comforting helper. So, although the emotion of fear is the most prominent in this text, it is *hope* that prevails. The promise of escaping the claws of "second death" (eternal punishment) presents the "didactical" and moral center of the work.

Although the author of the text is unknown, it can be concluded that a monk wrote this piece to ed-

ify his audience; in this sense, *Slovo Meštra Polikarpa* can be seen as an *exemplum*. As stated above, the very phenomenon of the “role-change” from enemy/adversary to helper/teacher that Death undergoes (20), offers hope to terrified Polikarp, and through him to the imagined “us”, ie, the audience. This kind of “intimacy” between author/scripter and the audience may strike us as the essential characteristic of medieval works.

The text *Slovo Meštra Polikarpa* sheds light on the development of *cogitatio mortis* as it was present in the Middle Ages and can indicate the differences between “them” and “us”. Our emphasis, though,



Figure 3. Queen Death. Tombstone, 15th century. Belgrad (Vinodol, Croatia).

was put on common details that have not changed much over time. Recent work in bioethics has stressed the necessity to examine various and often, specific cultural spheres throughout the past. The impact of this literary work, *Slovo Meštra Polikarpa*, on the recipient is more potent because it is not “talking about death” – it is death itself that talks (Fig. 3).

This Croatian Glagolitic text does not surmise all the medieval concepts concerning healing, disease, and death. It presents *one* view, one specific concept out of many, with its individual blend of theoretical ideas and values. *Slovo Meštra Polikarpa* may enhance our understanding of medieval ideas on physi-

cal and natural phenomena, which were fixed not only in learned scientific works, but also in the literature. However, references to the connection between literature and medicine can be traced back into Antiquity; Apollo was associated with medicine – he had powers to heal – and with art – he was the “leader of the Muses” (Mousagètes) (21).

Why is this original piece of medieval literature interesting to look at from the modern medical point of view? Not only because it reflects echoes of medieval medical knowledge and practice, but mostly because it communicates the essential questions on life and death to modern readers, as it did to medieval ones. As the Middle Ages seems to have been “all-embracing”, with little or no clear difference between “the artistic” and “the didactic”, it is not surprising to find medical subjects in a literary text. Some layers of religious experience and belief may be distant to the modern reader, but the essential message and content remains strong and poignant even today. No matter how odd or simple this dialogue may seem we feel uneasy reading it. Turbulent experience, which it provokes, floods our minds with desperation, fear, hopelessness, and a variety of defensive mechanisms. Even so, such agonizing experiences convince us eventually to put our lives in perspective, to turn back, look ahead, improve, prepare - *to live with cognition*. The fundamental message of *Slovo Meštra Polikarpa* bears real relevance to our times – the increasing interest in palliative care, which aims to combine medical, psychosocial, spiritual, and emotional support for the dying persons and their families.

Care for a dying person has been a common element of bedside medicine until today. In the modern world, a medic is neither prepared nor trained for such a profound and deeply personal confrontation. Such education is not included in the curricula of medical schools. Not all aspects of medical practice can be reached by logic alone. A good, humane doctor should be able to employ all the senses for the benefit and comfort of the patient, and should develop sensitivity and understanding of the individual, especially a dying patient. Thus, Medical Humanities should be introduced more widely to medical education. One of the most challenging tasks would be to give students practice in handling their own uncertainty (22). For example, by facing death in literature, students could be slowly introduced to and prepared for what daily practice would bring them in the future. This would complement their conventional medical education and extend their personal experience.

Note: All extracts from the text are translated by the authors, from microfilms kept at the library of the Old Church Slavonic Institute in Zagreb, shelfmarks F 25 and F 87.

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