

EXCHANGE VALUES
(DEATH IS 12.954 METERS LONG)

Stacy Boldrick

We know that mourning, however painful it may be, comes to an end of its own accord. Once it has renounced everything that is lost, it has also consumed itself, and then our libido becomes free once again, so that, [...] it is able to replace the lost objects with objects that are, where possible, equally precious, or with still more precious new ones.

Sigmund Freud, *On Transience*, 1916

What form does value take? What value is form given? Is the value of an object lost, changed or increased when its form changes? Does it make a difference if the form changes suddenly and radically, or gradually over time? What happens when the form remains the same and the value changes? Do concepts of use value and exchange value become more—or less—relevant when the object sets into motion immaterial rather than monetary exchanges? And if the exchange is infinite, is it possible to quantify immeasurable things? How can an individual's death be made tangible, meaningful, productive of form and value?

The objects of medieval death ritual contain within them all of these questions because their forms and meanings operated in the earthly and spiritual realms, necessitating an intermingling of material and immaterial currencies and economies. Death in the middle ages was not the end of life, something that happened in an instant, but a phase and a process,

involving more ritual and material objects than other transitional moments in life. *Memento mori* imagery and literature such as the poems of 'The Three Living and the Three Dead' (*De Tribus Regibus Mortuis*) and the *Danse Macabre* were popular; death manuals such as *Ars moriendi* (*The Art of Dying*) helped the living to plan a good death and to prepare for the afterlife. Death culture (encompassing a vast range of objects and beliefs) shaped life in the middle ages.

Freud thought that a society's belief in an afterlife signified a denial of death, and is one way of analysing it. In the medieval West, belief in an afterlife offered strategies and systems for facing death as a material and immaterial transition. Prayers and other forms of ritual had value and like currency were quantified. In the afterlife, the soul needed to move through Purgatory first, an ordeal which depended on the prayers of others. The material components of memorials used to elicit prayers and to accelerate the soul's time in Purgatory took many forms and ranged in value. Before death, individuals could commission material objects and ritual actions (such as prayers and masses) which they then consumed in the afterlife. Wealthy high-status individuals (or their friends and relatives) paid for ostentatious funerary chapels, dramatic tomb sculptures and celebrations of private masses and prayers regularly repeated in perpetuity. Outside of timetabled and funded ritual celebrations, most tomb inscriptions asked visitors to pray for the dead person's soul. Cheaper alternatives were more ephemeral, finite: a single candle placed on a side altar would be illuminated for as long as its wick lasted, until it burned itself out.

Death culture worked for both the dead and the living: prayers helped the souls of the dead move more quickly through purgatory, and ensured that the living would have less time to spend in purgatory once they got there. One of the more obscure (or less well known) objects made for a member of the religious elite (a Bishop, Abbot or Abbess) was the mortuary roll, a long scroll-like object made out of several pieces of vellum stitched together from end to end and rolled up around a wooden dowel. A completed mortuary roll was opened by unrolling it to find first a full-page image, sometimes representing the deceased on a death-bed, sometimes accompanied by a patron saint or a company of saints, followed by an illuminated folio called an encyclical that announced the person's death like a headline on a newspaper's front page.

Carried from one religious community to another by a roll bearer who collected signatures of promised prayers, a mortuary roll was signed by members of the religious community with the promise ‘we’ll pray for your dead if you pray for ours’. (Such signatures were referred to as *tituli*.) The rollbearer left the community with a record of his visit and the promised prayer exchange, a sort of receipt, in the form of a mortuary brief, a small note the size and shape of a bookmark recording the home community’s promised prayers. As many signatures as possible were collected. As the collection of signatures grew, so did the length of the roll, as it became longer and longer over the course of the year, in preparation for the death date’s anniversary celebration, the day that would bring together from throughout the region hundreds of simultaneous prayers for the dead person.

A mortuary roll is perhaps less familiar to us as an object of death ritual than memorials such as tombs. For scholars, mortuary rolls provide information about relationships between religious communities and variations in handwriting styles and illuminated images. Scholars value this object more for its material characteristics and textual information—for its secure data, than for its intriguing form, meaning and function through immaterial exchange.

The mortuary roll made for Elisabeth ‘sConincs (d. 1458), Abbess of the Abbey of Fôret, near Brussels, has been assessed in various ways. The roll (known as Latin 114 at the John Rylands Library in Manchester) was made from 19 pieces of vellum, which included the frontispiece, the elaborate encyclical, and 17 pages of signatures. The wooden roll holder was carbon dated to around the same period. The roll’s entire length is 12.954 meters, or 42 ½ feet. It was carried by a rollbearer named Johannes Leonis who made four trips (probably on horseback) out from the abbey within a year and collected 390 signatures of promised prayers from religious communities ranging from abbeys and monasteries to hermitages. Leonis travelled first from Brussels to Ghent to Maastricht to Liege and back to Brussels, then on his longest journey, he visited Utrecht, Cologne, Bonn, Aachen and Namur before returning to Brussels. He then travelled to Lille, Bruges, St-Omer, Ghent and back to Brussels, and finally his last outing encompassed Nivelles, Braine and Brussels. The roll tells us where Leonis spent Christmas and other festive periods. As a complete roll, it is full of material information, but it doesn’t tell

us if the object was made for perpetual public display, perhaps as part of anniversary masses for the Abbess; it doesn't divulge anything about its potential social life after its social year. The object's only tangible, real value was in its establishment of promised prayers with hundreds of communities, an immaterial exchange of immaterial currencies.

As the Reformation deprived rolls of their original purpose in the sixteenth century, the value of mortuary rolls outside of their religious communities diminished. Pieces of vellum were cut up and put to other uses, so that many rolls did not survive, and those that do are usually incomplete, only consisting of an illumination or an encyclical, or a partial series of signatures. (Later, by the nineteenth century, collectors competed at auctions to outbid each other in the hopes of purchasing a mortuary roll.) The fragmentary states of these objects have led scholars to subject them to forensic examinations, consuming them as intellectual food, rather than thinking harder about their significance as repositories of promised prayers, as a kind of impossible soul insurance document which brings together material and spiritual worlds, the earthly, the emotional and the heavenly imaginary.

Over time, the form of the mortuary roll has remained the same, but its original complex value has been restricted to a material, economic one, as an object in a library collection. The loss of its original purpose makes it strange, full of perpetual secrets, and in many ways, almost entirely lost to us.

In a short essay, Freud wrote about his attempt to console a poet friend mourning the transience of beauty in the midst of the First World War with the following words: 'If there should come a time when the paintings and statues that we admire today have fallen into ruin, or a race of human beings should appear who no longer understand the works of our poets and philosophers, [...] the value of all these beautiful and perfect things is defined only by its significance for our own emotional lives, it need not live beyond them, and is for that reason independent of absolute duration.' Sadly, his attempt at consolation was unsuccessful.