

Urban Mentalité in Image of the Death and the Other World
in the Late Middle Ages

Hee-soo Lew

Kyungnam University

The history of medieval death may be an inappropriate subject to consider under the general theme of the present symposium, "Freedom and Serfdom in Town and Country of Medieval Europe". Indeed this paper has not much to say as far as medieval freedom and serfdom is concerned. Yet, as is indicated in its title, this paper attempts at least to relate the question of medieval death to the history of medieval town. Of course, the relationship can't be taken for granted in view of the recent scholarly disputation on the matter. Is it possible, and if so how, to articulate the two different categories of medieval history? As a matter of fact, this is the very question to which this paper purports to suggest an answer. But a brief examination of varying opinions on the matter is in order, to begin with.

Firstly, let's suppose two simplified approaches. One of these is that the collective representation of death, having complicated relations with material foundations, is a sort of "ideology" mechanically inapplicable to them at the same time. This approach is a way of "from the cellar to the attic" in M. Vovelle's terms (1978, 319-20), i.e., a way that while we go up from infrastructure to suprastructure and accept complex relations between them, we recognize the autonomy of the mental as well. This is the case of Vovelle himself. He says that rather than material factor, a kind of "ideology" through the medium of religion is exercised heavily on the history of medieval death, concretely speaking, the late Middle Ages is the period of transition from "magic death" to "religious death" and of coexistence of these two forms of death at the same time (1983, 11-12). Urban factor seems to him trivial at least in the history of medieval death.

Another approach is that the collective representations of death are located on the autonomic level or stratification exclusively independent from a socio-economic reality—let's call this approach "the prison of the attic", or "the prison of *longue durée*". This is the case of Ariès, who insists that "the death of myself" (*la mort de soi*), i.e., the individuality of death began to be exalted from the 12th century, while "the tamed death" (*la mort apprivoisée*)

remains a collective representation of death continuously throughout so many centuries down to the 19th century (1975, 21-50). However, his discourse on death is neither placed in "the urban grammars" (Olivieri, 1979) or the socio-economic context, nor makes reference to any religious system (Vovelle, 1976). It seems that separately from and over the level of all these factors does he locate the level of the collective unconscious of death. In this viewpoint, town will be no more than an episode.

On the other hand, there are some historians of death who lay their arguments on the foundations different from those of afore-said historians. J. Chiffolleau and J. Le Goff are supposed to basically fix their two eyes on "the prison of the attic", but sometimes turn their one eye "from the attic to the cellar". Within this purview, Chiffolleau does perceive and lay stress on the fact that the change of *mentalité* of death in the late Middle Ages took place in the space of town (1980). Le Goff also argues that although the vitality of town and commerce of the late Middle Ages is not the determinant, it creates atmospheres and climates favourable to the genesis of purgatory (1981). By maintaining the quick accommodators of this change are the urban cultivated elites, both of these two historians suggest, expressly or not, that popular culture is still confined in "the prison of *longue durée*".

Medieval attitude toward death is a religious gesture and a social act at once. This paper, relying on the secondary works of death, will try to measure the part and position which town holds in the changing image, as a social act, of the death and the other world in the late Middle Ages.

Image of the Death and the Urban Sociology

The late Middle Ages is a period witnessing new attitude toward death while it sustains constantly the very ancient attitudes. Ph. Ariès regards it as the period of transition from "the tamed death" to "the death of myself", and M. Vovelle, from "magic death" to "Christian death". As Ph. Ariès points out, the constituent elements of the traditional attitudes can be characterized by the following (Ariès, 1975, 22-36). First is the simplicity with which the rites of death are accepted and accomplished. Of course, there is no dramatic character and excessive explosion of sentiment. The second, the death is a public, organized ceremony. The third is the coexistence of the living and the death. For example, the cemetery is not an isolated place of fear, but a space of

meetings, commerces, festivals and plays (Chiffoleau, 1980, 158-162). The living of that time were familiar with the dead as much as with their own death. In a world subject to change, the traditional attitude appeared as a mass of inertia and continuity. But Ariès' model makes no distinction between the Christian death and the non-Christian. According to M. Vovelle, the non-Christian ancient folklore dominated the mode of medieval men's dying until the late 13th century (1983, 11).

In spite of such duration, however, from the 12th century there begin to appear subtle modifications, of which the effect is not a complete and rapid replacement of the existing attitudes by the new ones, but only a gradual addition of personal and dramatic tincture to the traditional familiarity with the death. It is a transformation into "the death of myself".

Then, what are the factors causing the change in the 12th century? Ph. Ariès fails to tackle with the question. As A. Olivieri criticizes, Ariès' discourse on death, though it examines an ethnology of death corresponding with the structural modifications of *mentalités* of European towns, does not go further to identify the historical thickness of urban space, namely to see the town as a total structure (Olivieri, 1979; 278, 282-3). Agreeing with A. Olivieri for the time being, I'd like to suggest that the individuality of death began to rise in the urban context.

The revival of testaments is one of the signs of such modifications. As in Avignon, the testaments, reviving in the 12th century and getting diffused broadly throughout the whole gamut of social classes by the late 13th century, play an important role in the evolution of images of the death and the other world. The democratization of testamentary customs in town proceeds with far more rapidity than in rural community. Take for instance Avignon of the 15th century. The testators among the merchants and artisans residing in the town amount to about 30% which is a percentage twice as high as that (about 15%) among the peasants (Chiffoleau, 1980, 60-61). The testamentary practice, demanding the order of pious donations and the particular obsequies and tombs, contributes to the awakening of testators' individuality, though they are eliminated by the rigid institutions of legal frame and notarial customs.

It is on iconography that there appears the description of individual last judgement. Before the 12th century there was no image that showed any judgement or any condemnation. On that representation there is no place for an individual

responsibility and for an evaluation of good and bad acts. But in the 12th century, the scene changes. The Christ, sitting down on the throne, passes judgement on the good and bad actions of each man according to "the account of his life" (*liber vitae*). It also shows that individual biography is accomplished at the end of time, but not on the time of death (Ariès, 1975, 38-40).

The reappearance of tombstones equally reveals the individualization of death. The erection of tombstone, largely a part of funeral practice in the ancient Rome or in the early Christian society, disappeared by the 5th century. But, gradually from the 12th century, more extensively in the 14th-15th centuries, the erection of tombstone was demanded by the urban rich. Surrounded with anonymous graves, the tombstone, magnificent or not, marks the will of the deceased to individualize himself and to perpetuate his memory there (*ibid.*, 46-49).

It is perhaps in a funeral pomp that one of the greatest changes in rites of death is given. While in countries and villages, with some exceptions, continuously prevail the traditions and customs, the urban testators begin to take an interest in funeral pomp from the 1360s. In the 15th century, in Avignon the testators demanding a funeral pomp amount to about 60%-80% out of the rich urbanites such as merchants and artisans, to about 30%-40% out of the peasants (Chiffolleau, 1980, 126-9). In villages it was possible that the cries and the lamentations accompanied the march toward the cemetery. But from the end of the 13th century the communal statutes of Valreas prohibited, with a fine, people "following the corps of death on the streets, or much more in the church or in the cemetery" from crying and making lamentations (*ibid.*, 139). The local authorities repress the ritual and socialized forms of expression of grief and, making the funerals "decent", contribute to create a restraint and an introversion of lament provoked by the separation. It is "the death of myself" that is exalted here. This tells us the increase in "the threshold of shame" which represses an instinctive emotion among the more civilized of the urbanites (Elias, 1978).

In this connection, a pathological phenomenon of a mourning appears in the 14th-15th centuries. The purpose of the funeral poms demanded by the testators is not to ritualize the separation of the living and the deceased, but to confirm their individuality and to protest against "the death of myself." In this protest can be found out a feeling of new solitude, i.e., melancholy. As to

this, J. Huizinga explains it is "a reaction against an excessive sensuality" (1955, 144). J. Le Goff regards it as an expression of fear, not of death, but of high damnability in the last judgement (1967, 397). Commenting on this suggestion of Le Goff, Ariès objects that, though those images of death and decomposition were used to awaken that fear, they were originally foreign to the melancholy. It appeared as "a conscience of the frustration of life" in the world dominated by the individualism of death, and the sense of failure was expressed as an obsession in the world greedy of richness and honour from the 14th to the 15th century, he maintains (1975, 116-9).

J. Chiffolleau explains the grand melancholy of the 14th-15th centuries in terms of the urban sociology. The mournings as expressed in funeral pomps of that time are ascribable to the discovery of a new solitude, i.e., the discovery of deracination and orphanage without ancestors, rather than to the immediate experience of epidemics and demographic crisis. In the *castra* and villages the solidarities between the families of the death and those of the living aren't ruptured so violently as in towns. In spite of the crisis, works and days are resumed, and the rites rehabilitated. The melancholy falls on especially the urbanites. Even if it was expressed more clearly in the learned culture and among the dominant classes, it seemed to be shared by most of the urban population. They reach lonely the Kingdom of Dark. They are constrained to abandon the old solidarities and the traditional rites. Taste for the pomp of weepers and torch-bearers, and desire to have splendid tombs constructed are the most evident manifestations of trouble and lament they are under. The socializing old regulations of mourning can be no more practised. They protest melancholically against the loss of their parents, against the impossibility to rejoin and resemble their ancestors and to be identified with them (Chiffolleau, 1980, 205).

The demographic crisis of the 14th century does not cause the change in the image of death in the late Middle Ages. The system of representation evolves in the "*longue durée*", and the *mentalité* of death gradually has begun to be modified already since the 12th century. This is well demonstrated by the funeral customs, for the revival of testament has exalted the individuality of death already since the late 12th century.

In the Middle Ages, town is particularly the place of such mutation. It is a center of modernity where the division of labour develops, the merchandise takes

an essential value, and a new ethics of intention elaborates. The life of family, especially among the artisans, develops according to a short cycle. The feudal old solidarities, consanguineous or territorial, are called in question and are loosened in town. Town, place of "liberty" for the rural elements who break off their ancestral roots, is at the same time a walled cultural space in isolation from the rural community and the nature. While rural community is a space of myth and savagery, town is a place of history, countability and accumulation. It is the very urbanization which loosens the traditional bond uniting the dead and the living, and gives more grand role to the individual gradually, that expresses the genesis of a new image of death. The urban cultivated elites reflect such transformation of *mentalité*. But the rural villages remain isolated from that evolution (*ibid.*, 430).

Genesis of the Purgatory and the Urban Mentalité

As new images of medieval death rose in the urban context, so a mutation in image of the other world was connected with the urban *mentalité* or at least the urban facts. This is referred to as "Countability of the Other World" by J. Chiffolleau. As J. Le Goff points out, the genesis of purgatory at the turn of century from the 12th to the 13th is related chiefly with the structural mutation of the Christian feudal society, and partially with the urban facts.

The purgatory is an intermediate after-world where the trial the deceased are to suffer can be abridged by the suffrages, i.e., the interventions of the living. The constituting elements of the purgatory are the suffrages of the living for the sake of the dead, the existence of space and time, and the transformation from the bipartite to the tripartite system with a medium (Le Goff, 1985 b, 84-5).

The belief in the efficacy of the suffrages of the living for the dead originates in the early Christian era. By the age of St. Augustine, it is combined with the belief in the postmortem purgation. St. Augustine, Gregory the Great, Bede as well as the commemorative cult of the deaths celebrated on the 2nd of November every year in Cluny confirm the belief in the existence and utility of the suffrages (Le Goff, 1981: 70, 96, 126, 141 and *passim*).

The purgatory is also a spatial intermediate which slides and enlarges itself between the paradise and the hell. But, down to the 12th century obscure remained the spatial concept of purgatory, which referred to merely a "state"

(*état*) just like a receptacle of the soul or a residence of the sinner. Until the end of the 12th century, the word *purgatorium* does not exist as a substantive, and the purgatory does not exist. It is the appearance of the word *purgatorium* that expresses the perception of the purgatory as a space (*ibid.*, 12). The clergymen of the Middle Ages, whether they are realists or nominalists, know well that between words and things exists as close a union as between body and soul. The existence of a word is construed as tantamount to that of a thing, which means in turn the spatialization of thought. Therefore, the appearance of the substantive *purgatorium* means the belief in and the spatialization of the purgatory, and that is an important moment in the history of ideas and *mentalités* (*ibid.*, 12-13). As Edward T. Hall argues, the territory is a prolongation of the animal and human organism, the perception of space depends greatly on culture, and the territory is an interiorization of space, organized by the thought (Hall, 1971). To organize the space of the other world is a grand operation for the Christian society. The purgatory is no more a little receptacle, but is associated with the new geography of the other world. The time has come when the Christianity, in the course of the excursions of crusaders, missionaries and merchants, explores the world, and the travelers return with a good supply of informations, which will transform the medieval maps. The terrestrial cartography, reduced till then to a sort of topographical ideogram, attempts to effectuate the realism of topographical representation (Le Goff, 1981, 310-11). In the belief in the purgatory, the time is also an element explicitly susceptible to measurement. The time of the other world, though it is a psychological, subjective and non-linear mythological continuum (Gurevic, 1982, 296), can be the object of measurement and comparison (Le Goff, 1985 b). The *exempla* introduce, through the sermons, the segments of historical, datable, and measurable unit in the eschatological time (Le Goff, 1985 c).

The judgement in the purgatory makes reference to the terrestrial system of judgement. In legal theory, from the 12th century appears an intentionalistic tendency paying regard to an internal motive instead of a moral realism (Radding, 1978, 690-91). The 4th council of Lateran in 1215, rendering obligatory at least every once a year the auricular confession for all the Christians, compels them to examine their conscience and to practise the ethics of introspection. From this springs and evolves the ethics and psychology of

intention. This is closely related with the application of the intention of act to the criterion of a venial sin in the purgatory. The evolution of intentionalistic ethics is supposedly concurrent with that of the calculating spirits which take account of the other's intention, fostered by the prosperity of town and commerce. In addition, *contemptus mundi* being enfeebled, the theme of *carpe diem* was revived (Le Goff, 1985 d).

One of the important elements in the genesis of purgatory is the appearance of the tripartite scheme. Medieval society is basically a society of black and white without any medium color in between. Medieval men, being in an infant stage of the civilizing process, were attracted by the dualism of Manicheism rather than the Christian orthodox (Le Goff, 1967, 205-7). To them the world is simplified: God/Satan in the power of world; clergy/laic, the powerful/the weak in society; virtue/vice in moral life; paradise/hell in the other world (*ibid.*). However, from the 12th century a pluralistic system commences to proceed in advance of the bipartite system. There appear the three orders of *oratores/bellatores/laboratores* in society (Duby, 1978), and the tripartite categories of paradise/purgatory/hell in the other world. By the way, the purgatory is not a geometrical, constant intermediate zone, but an "eccentric" (*décentré*) medium (Le Goff, 1981, 17) and a coalition of two against one in the triad (Caplow, 1971), for it is not so everlasting as the paradise or the hell, and moreover in a false equidistance between the paradise and the hell.

The purgatory is one of the foremost expressions of the increased importance given to the individual judgement during the last centuries of the Middle Ages. The time of the purgatory that God defines for each person in the article of his death is eminently an individual time. If it is individual, it is because, as the terrestrial life, it varies for each person and also depends partially on the responsibility of each (Le Goff, 1985 b, 97).

So far we have examined the rise of individual death and the genesis of purgatory in the images of death and the other world, in connection with urban *mentalité*. In the image of death, the revival and popular diffusion of testaments, the increasing construction of individual tombstones, the rise of individual last judgement, the protest against solitude or the melancholy; in the image of the other world, the measurability of imaginary *tempo-spatium*—the discovery of individuality as revealed in all of these was made in the urban

context where the division of labour developed, the merchandise was relatively valued, the traditional solidarity was loosened, more aggravated by the demographic crisis and immigration, the theme of *carpe diem* grew, the calculating spirit evolved, and the new ethics of introspection and intention was considered. Particularly susceptible to these mutations were the urban dominant elites such as the rich bourgeois and the nobility, while the majority of urban populations and the peasants remained still in the traditional representations of death.

However, it is with some reservations that town could be accepted as a space of such mutations. The role played by the town in the mutations cannot be in a uniform degree applied to every town. It varies according to the geographical situations, demographic conditions, family structures and economic conjunctures of the various towns. The modified image of death is not always transferred in the direction from the town to the village and from the upper class to the lower one, but in some regions on the contrary, as is illustrated by the inheritance practice of Lyons (Lorcin, 1977) and the diffusion of purgatory in the region of Toulouse (Bastard-Fournier, 1980). Against Le Goff's argument that the genesis of purgatory is placed in the urban context of the 12th-13th centuries, Bredero objects that it rises in the monastic tradition of the 9th-12th centuries (Bredero, 1983).

Besides, the mutations in the images of medieval death are subject to "overdetermination" in S. Freud's terms (Vovelle, 1983, 23). Medieval society is not so determinately dominated by the material factor as modern capitalistic society, for feudal social formation is not exclusively determined by the mode of production, but rather is the superimposition of the relations of production on the suprastructure such as the personal relationships of dependence and the religion—Christianity—as an ideology which supports and reinforces them. In this point, it is worth noting that M. Vovelle regards the mutation in the medieval image of death as an ideological reflection of religion, i.e., as a transition from "magic discourse" to "religious discourse" (1983). As is now taken for granted, medieval towns grew, not isolated from feudal society, but in symbiotic relation with it. Therefore, the mutation in the image of death is immediately a reflection of the crisis of knightly society, and on a profounder level a phenomenon contemporary with the mutation of social structure and *mentalité* in the second period of Christian feudal society.

We must attempt to measure the role that the epidemics and the ensuing demographic crisis play in the changing image of death in the 14th-15th centuries. But on the image of death they did not exercise so immediate and profound effect as socio-economic historians think they did on the crisis of the 14th century (Chiffolleau, 1980: 151, 429). Images of the death and the other world began to undergo certain modifications from the late 12th century, long before the catastrophic fury of the pests. The role played by the pests in such mutation is limited to accelerating and aggravating it, and that in very complicated and detouring ways.

It would be unreasonable that the individualistic elements in the image of death should be regarded as an emphatically "modern" character. No doubt, the time of death and purgatory is an individual time depending on the joint responsibility of the individual and the community he belongs to. Accordingly, this tells us a mutation of the sensibility of death, which may be said to be characteristic of the Renaissance at the risk of exaggeration. If the Renaissance, it is the individual, as far as the attitude toward death is concerned, it commences at the turn of century from the 12th to the 13th. If the Middle Ages, it is the community, the Renaissance remains profoundly medieval. For the attitude toward death and purgatory as for the whole of the western history, the Renaissance is but a period of "long Middle Ages" (Le Goff, 1985 a; 1985 b, 97-8).

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