

DYING TO LEARN, LEARNING TO DIE  
THE CRAFT OF DYING IN EARLY MODERN ENGLISH DRAMA  
AND THE CULTIVATION OF DYING-VOICE LITERACY

by

SIMON G. FORTIN

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

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## Abstract

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Adviser: Professor Mario DiGangi

This dissertation contends that, through their relentless dramatization of agonies, the early modern English dramatists taught their audiences how to die. Attending a play where characters devised, discussed, prepared for, plotted, inflicted, endured and witnessed death, constituted an apprenticeship I demonstrate, akin to going to school, though informal it may have been, where audiences learned about mortality, death as an event, and dying as a process. Thus, this study points to the early modern English stage as a locus of human achievement that acculturates the experience of dying during the long Reformation, this complex historical unfolding that recalibrates many doctrines relating to death, dying, funereal rites and the afterlife.

The dramatists accomplish this acculturation by positing “literacies of the liminal” that are alternatives to the pervading religious protocols of preparation for death known as *the ars moriendi* (*the craft or the art of dying*), a continental literary tradition born in the late medieval period. Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatists I show, aim at more than merely representing the agonal process; living in a moment of religious fluidity, these stage artists interrogate mortality; they embody and encode ‘the living death’ by resorting to their two-fold agency: the creation of an imaginative/literary stage-bound idiom and the immediacy of performance required for its expression. Like any living language, this

stage-bound idiom is an assemblage of influences and social energies and as such, the *dying-voice literacy* I suggest this canon of drama fosters is not *sui generis*. This dissertation examines this novel theatrical idiom against the background of its inspirations and influences. This study posits the *craft of dying* literary tradition as one of many catalysts for the advent of the theatre as a school for dying. Thus the didactic potencies of this process of acculturation are what I examine.

*Dying to Learn, Learning to Die*, as my title suggests, aims at animating an eternal paradox: the eagerness to learn what happens as one dies can only be sated by personal experience, and that experience, repellent to most, entails the irreversibility of self-dissolution. Theatregoers vicariously apprentice the praxis of dying by witnessing fictions that obliquely teach them how to die, and more probably how not to die. Though the literature of the *ars moriendi* tradition has of late benefited from a welcome scrutiny by scholars across disciplines, the study of its poetic impact upon playwriting has been little explored and has yet much to yield.

Though my dissertation resolutely borrows a cultural historicist approach, it hosts a frank Presentist agenda. At the current time, the field of Death Studies is experiencing an explosion of interest, possibly explained by the ever-increasing human lifespan; both secular and religious individuals have more time to ponder the process of dying. Although Death Studies are not new, the concept of *dying-voice literacy* is; I coin the term in what is an inaugural gesture at using the grand theatrical deaths of the Elizabethan and Jacobean theatrical canon as heuristic occasions, where these profound meditations through drama are used as keys for unlocking perhaps the most difficult of conversations: what will my death, and the deaths of those I love, be? A *dying-voice*

*literate* person is one who is willing to engage in the exploration, preparation and design of her own death, and the deaths of others, by engaging with, interpreting, absorbing and acting on the literary representations of death and dying across time and cultures. My advocacy for a *dying-voice literacy* is already at work: *Dying to Learn, Learning to Die*, is the basis of a performance, a recital of death scenes that I have developed and already performed several times.

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My students at John Jay College of Criminal Justice who keep asking the right questions and provoke more.

And I would like to dedicate this work to my late father, actor Louis Fortin, who knew all too well how to make an exit, if with unnecessary haste.

## CHAPTER I

No Grutching Allowed:  
*Or, How the Craft of Dying Tradition Becomes an Objet d'Art.*

Grutching: (*obsolete*).

The action of the verb grutch, murmuring, complaining; murmur, complaint, reluctance.

Oxford English Dictionary.

“The theatre is certainly a place for learning about the brevity of human glory.”

Iris Murdoch.

“On your deathbed ... On what definitive sentence will you sum / And end your being?”

Cecil Day-Lewis, *Last Words*.

CLOV            Then how can it end?  
 HAMM         You want it to end?  
 CLOV            I want to sing.

Samuel Beckett, *Endgame*.

This introductory chapter aims at exposing the vestigial radiance of the religious *ars moriendi* tradition (*the craft, or art of dying*) upon the play-making practice of the English early modern stage; I demonstrate how specific elements of both its iconography and rhetorical strategies nurture the imagination of death scenes found in a canon of plays invested in dramatizing the experience of agony to create in turn a variegated and polemical dying-voice literacy. By using the terms “vestigial radiance” I do not mean to confine the *ars moriendi* tradition to its late medieval inception, to suggest that the dramatists drew their representation of dying moments solely from a static or closed source. The literary production of how-to-manuals on “dying well” was a vibrant and prolific practice, whose well-documented publishing history testifies to its enduring popularity well into the late seventeenth century. The long Reformation in fact did wonders for this devotional literature, particularly in light of Jeremy Taylor’s remarkable *Holy Dying* (1651), universally recognized as a masterpiece of creative prose and the

doings of a divine as well as a poet.<sup>1</sup> Yet the motifs of the earliest iteration of the *ars moriendi* tradition (the 1490 Caxton version examined in this chapter, *The Book of the Craft of Dying*) as *materia poetica* for the dramatists are mainly what I aim to probe, as they persist, to use Gillian Woods' coinage, as "unreformed" presences in the writing of fictions for the stage.<sup>2</sup>

I establish the modalities of this intellectual and tonal radiance by patiently building a repertory of poetic tropes attending the *craft* that I argue, migrate in either frank or oblique fashion by a process of appropriation into the verbal fabric and the death discourse of the plays. Though the *ars moriendi* tradition has of late benefited from a welcome scrutiny by scholars across disciplines, the study of its poetic impact upon playwriting has yet much to yield.<sup>3</sup> The main contention of this study points to the theatre as a locus of human achievement that acculturates the experience of dying. The theatre, I argue, aims at more than merely representing the agonal process; it embodies "the living death," resorting to both an imaginative stage-bound idiom it partly invents and the immediacy of performance it requires for its expression. Like any living language, this

<sup>1</sup> There is an exquisite passage in W.J. Bates' no less exquisite biography of John Keats, where the poet lying on his deathbed, having lost faith in the teachings of the Bible, but recognizing he "had always trusted books" demands that the witness of his agony, Severn, read him passages of Taylor's *Holy Dying* during his last few nights (691). This detail, which may strike as digressive, is in fact a telling exemplum of my argument: poetry helps and instructs at the last hour.

<sup>2</sup> Gillian Woods' *Shakespeare's Unreformed Fictions* (2013) is put to use later in this study.

<sup>3</sup> The tradition has been explored most recently in Amy Appleford's *Learning to Die in London, 1380-1540* (2015). David William Atkinson has produced an important anthology whose introduction is instructive enough in his *The English ars moriendi*, (1992). Carlos Eire has written on the tradition in *Ars Moriendi*, in *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Spirituality* (1983). Histories of this devotional genre with a more literary bend have also turned up, most significantly in Nancy Lee Beaty's *The Craft of Dying, A Study in the Literary Tradition of the Ars Moriendi in England* (1970) and in Betty Ann Doeblen's *Rooted Sorrow, Dying in Early Modern England* (1994); yet the more compendious study of the rich and complex publishing history of the genre remains the doing of Sister Mary O'Connor; in fact, O'Connor's work is invariably cited in all the studies mentioned above, and its authority is never challenged though its conclusions have obviously been superseded by later studies. My reader will take notice that there is no consensus as to whether one should capitalize the appellation *ars moriendi*. I choose not to, to gesture at the form it aims to describe, rather than a specific work.

stage-bound idiom is an assemblage of influences and social energies and as such, the dying-voice literacy I suggest the theatre generates is not *sui generis*; it has many roots, some found in earlier theatrical models re-emerging and celebrated by the humanist educational project. But the *ars moriendi* tradition is an important agent of the advent of this stage-bound language. The theatre acculturates the experience of agony by positing alternative “literacies of the liminal” to those prescribed by the protocols of dying of the tradition. The theatre also advocates by praxis the pertinence of emotions rather than their suppression. The didactic potencies of this process of acculturation are what I argue we need to examine. Good theatrical deaths abound in this canon of plays and these deaths are good because they enlarge the emotive register of a universal experience; theatrical “good deaths,” i.e., as prescribed in the “how-to-manuals,” are a rarity. As the title of this chapter suggests, I am writing a story of esthetic and ethical disobediences, and I am documenting an attempt at showing the theatre as a powerful participant in what Alec Ryrie describes, in *Being Protestant in Reformation England* (2013), as a crucial aspect of this historical moment: “the cultivation of a sense of crisis” (417).

Starting with the obvious, I aim to stress that a significant achievement of the playwrights in their polymorphous spectacularizations of agony was to emulate the *craft of dying* tradition’s most prominent feature: positing death as a task to accomplish, a performance, a labor both attentive and preparative to an unfolding event that not only terminates life (dying as a commonly shared biological destiny), but also confers individuated meaning (death as a personally experienced event and cultural signifier). In the *ars* tradition, as we will see, these protocols of preparation for death have clear salvific intents that can only be realized if the conditions of its rigorous theology are met.

The art of dying on stage, i.e., its theatrical representation, or, more accurately stated, its art-mediated misrepresentation, raises many other concerns, though the issue of salvation often remains a significant part of its elaboration. Dying is a biological determinant while one's death, and the manner of one's death, as the plays' relentless leitmotiv signals, has some argument to raise, some demonstration to make, something to show; dying becomes an edifying event that human agency mediates and that theatricality formalizes. In these plays, death signifies, informs, encapsulates, crowns or sentences the entirety of life of those about to meet their end. In other words, the events of these fictitious beings' deaths, the conditions of their dramatic unfolding, the rhetorical investments of their dying speeches, more than accessorize their characterizations, they build – some might say, monumentalize - character. Arguably, there would be no Cleopatra worth speaking of in Shakespeare's play without the death scene the playwright caters for her; her death scene, her self-annihilation in fact, is paradoxically constitutive of her aliveness, and generative of an inexhaustible nest of meanings.

Because the discussion of death in Elizabethan and Jacobean dramas is a much-trodden path, I need to situate my position in relation to earlier critics, and speculate early in this chapter on what may have nurtured this efflorescence of plays in the period that strive to penetrate (to better expose) the forbidding interiority of the dying voice, to make it sing, so to speak, in what appears to be the dramatists' metaphor of choice: the swan song. Though historians, theologians, sociologists, and psychologists might through their respective theoretical apparatus locate other legitimate agents of this death-sounding dramaturgy, as a student of literature who has acted professionally for thirty years, I point with caution to two possible explanations, a pragmatic one and a poetic one.

From the late 1570s until the closing of the theatres by the Puritans' ordinance of 1642, we witness in England an unprecedented professionalization of the theatre that effects a sophistication of the dramatists' handling of theatrical mimesis; this is accompanied by a commodification of plays in performance as economic forces and social events; the new-found legitimacy of their profitable craft, materialized by the building of theatres and the novel urbanity it provokes into being, fosters a competitiveness amongst playmakers eager to fill these vast and newly-built theatres with audiences thrilled enough to return and make a habit of theatergoing. The prologues and epilogues that frequently bookend the performance of a play, though often couched as apologies or mercenary appeals for applause, often cater to audience loyalty. Thus playwrights devise elaborate and sensationalist plots where death looms large, refining the affective charge of dying moments for theatrical efficacy, exploiting goriness to enhance their shock value. But this is only half the story: their striving for financial reward does not impeach the creation of ambitious poetic and linguistic experiments aimed at articulating mortality, making meaning of it, and thus, through the ephemeral substance of their product and the nature of its consumption ("a two-hour stage traffic") reify for their audience the ephemerality of life itself.

Considering the intellectual majesty of some of these texts intended for popular consumption, one must recognize that the economic imperatives of the trade were not antithetical to the creations of works of profundity. Yet, for thrill-seekers who have paid their fee, *The Most Lamentable Romaine Tragedie of Titus Andronicus* (1594) must deliver the promise of the lamentable spectacle announced in its title. In Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* (1587) the King of Spain possibly explains it best; upon



discovering the all-too-real bloodbath that Hieronimo's play-within-the-play has caused, the king speaks lines that might well serve as motto for the playwrights in the period: "We will devise th'extremest kind of death / that ever was invented for a wretch" (4.4.197-198). The diction of these lines touches on all aspects of writing and constructing death: the playwrights devise, invent all kinds of death, reaching for the extremity of their imaginative powers, to dramatize suffering, and stage "wretches" whose fate must nonetheless resonate with their audiences. And so we must acknowledge a competitive surge, an "up-the-ante" joust between the playwrights who discover that death sells. It is no small irony that "to a significant degree, the Reformation arose directly from a recognition that the fear of death was being manipulated by churchmen for material advantage" (Watson, 5). There exists a scholarly consensus that the degeneration of the issues of indulgences into the venal commerce it became was a significant catalyst for the stirrings of the Reformation. Eamon Duffy, who explains the question with immense delicacy, nonetheless concedes the eventual devolvement of the practice of selling indulgences, its increasing peddling of "extravagant promises" and its corrupting effect on the part of the clergy.<sup>4</sup> But Duffy points to indulgences as yet another manifestation of the centrality of death and mortality in the late medieval mindset as he explains that

If it is true that much of the religious activity of the period had death and the other world in mind, it is also true that the thought of mortality was endlessly harnessed by preachers and dramatists, not to call people away from social involvement but to promote virtue and sociability in this world (303).

In Duffy's scheme, the trading of indulgences (that devolves into the brandishing of the terrors of death for profit) aimed at eliciting civic virtues; in the theatre, the practice of

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<sup>4</sup> See Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars* (2005) (pp.288-298).

staging exemplary or cautionary death scenes, if by other means, and through different hands, may also have been designed, alongside a recognizable quest for sensationalism, with moral or didactic intent.

With this in mind, I suggest with even more prudence that a second factor, more elusive, resisting elucidation, may explain the centrality of the dying experience as *materia poetica* for the dramatists. The imaginative powers of Shakespeare, Marlowe, Kyd, Jonson, Middleton and many others concretize, by creating characters assailed by it, the aporia that death conjures: as such, their practice of dramatizing agony points to further epistemological, metaphysical, and ethical aporias that disrupt and mold early modernity in the unfurling of the long Reformation.

As stated, without the acumen of a theologian, I must nonetheless address the diction of death scenes, which resort to religious terminology that must have resonated with their original audiences with an immediacy that might be foreign to a modern reader. Despite a severe censorship that made the playwrights prudent in their handling of religious topics, some scenes allude to specific religious doctrines, exposing contentious issues of the period often in subtle and ironic ways. So with my modest wares, I examine how a religious tradition that is antithetical to emotionalism, whose protocols expressly aim at repressing emotions they inherently interpret as assaults upon the faith of the dying, transacts itself into the poetic stance of writers of passions. I intuit that this transaction is not without its costs and losses, that the frankly didactic must settle for the merely suggestive (no one likes a preachy play), but that the transaction involves the very nature of the poetic experience as in Wallace Stevens' claim that, "after one has abandoned a belief in god, poetry is that essence which takes its place as life's

redemption” (185). I am not suggesting that the playwrights were covert or declared atheists, (we know they were not, or dare not be; we also know that many of their characters may hold atheistic views in the safety of stage fictions) but instead I posit that we might want to acknowledge that a religiosity attaches itself to the act of poeticizing one’s world that, at Wallace’s suggestion, may have propitiated the discomforting evacuation of certainties that the long Reformation may have unwillingly engendered. Another way to say that if the theatre does not in any way or shape aim at replacing the pulpit, it may still partake in doctrinal acculturation, but where the latter is prodigal with answers, the former, to claim theatrical value (in my eyes at least), willfully leaves its attending audience with more questions and newly animated fields of inquiry. The promise of doctrinal discourse is that of the comfort of obdurate surety; the tongue of the theatre contentedly speaks the drama of uncertainty, eager “to leave the audience stunned, drained, and finally ready to ask the correct [or the disturbing] questions” (Spinrad, 85).

A commonplace of drama criticism, and a rather persistent one, would have us believe that the dramatists were melancholy-prone (the Elizabethan malady that Robert Burton anatomizes in his work that first appears in 1621), as obsessed with death as their late medieval forefathers, an obsession diffusely inherited from the near apocalypse of the Great Plague and its shaping and enduring effects on mentalities in its aftermath and rekindled by its many recurrences. In as recent a work as *Mortality’s Muse: The Fine Art of Dying* by D. T. Siebert (2013) we find the sentence: “The culture of the Early Modern Period seems to have been obsessed with Death. Death lurked everywhere, around every corner, and people were instructed to think every day might be their last” (86). The specter of pathology (obsession) endures. The work of historians Johan Huizinga and

Philippe Aries may be pointed at as calcifying agents of that ossified belief. Ernest Becker calls this “the Morbidly-minded Argument” and in his brilliant and enduring *The Denial of Death* (1973), Becker builds a “network of arguments based on the universality of the fear of death, or ‘terror’ as [he] prefer[s] to call it” (15). For Becker, all culture, and particularly religious cultures, are mere consolatory devices, laudable efforts at numbing the inherent and transhistorical terror of death. To live with the constant fear of death would be untenable, and so Becker demonstrates with formidable intellect how we avert death’s unforgiving gaze by sheepishly and heroically looking elsewhere. When religion, one of these imperial cultural constructs, can no longer sustain our need for consolation, we turn to the erotic or the artistic, Becker suggests, to evade the splendid terrors of mortality. I use “splendid” because if terror is indeed partly susceptible to inspire the writing of, say, *Antony and Cleopatra* (1607), then the denial of death terror induces must also be seen as a splendid affair.

Robert N. Watson, who wholeheartedly acknowledges his indebtedness to Becker’s work in writing his important study *The Rest is Silence* (1994), makes the rather blunt but convincing thesis that “despite its ferocious displays of Christian conviction, Jacobean culture struggled with the suspicion that death was a complete and permanent annihilation of the self, not mere latency of the body awaiting Last Judgment”(3). He is particularly eloquent at exposing how theological quarrels turned religious matters into ideological crises, and thus bred an endemic skepticism over the whole religious question. But quite early in his study Watson makes a compassionate comment that testifies to the delicate sophistication he intends to bring to his readings; he writes “as religious schism and scientific discovery put Medieval beliefs increasingly at risk,

literature begins *testing the wound in the culture*, trying to patch it up with new consolations, sometimes to articulate its pain and fear” (17, emphasis mine).

What we have before us, Watson contends, are plays that are wounded texts; I find this insightful and useful for my inquiry but more importantly I find this intensely moving. In a rather fascinating and coincidental twist, Amy Appleford in the most exhaustive study ever published on the *ars moriendi* tradition, *Learning to Die in London, 1380-1540* (2015), also calls Caxton’s *The Craft of Dying Well*, a “wounded text.” The wound of mortal consciousness clearly may never heal, nor should it. This double recognition affords me a stepping-stone to argue further that the plays are also “wounding texts,” invested in wounding anew, each time they are performed. Watson, in a surprising turn, ends his study with a partial dismantlement of his own thesis, a risky move for a work that willed initially to “assert annihilationism as a transhistorical truth differently evaded in different periods” (322). He momentarily allows himself to question if the denial of our finitude may in fact cause more harm than braving the total annihilation he still believes is the only thing that awaits us. He ends with a respectful nod to the work of Donald Winnicott who, against Freud’s contentions that “religious beliefs are little more than vain wish-fulfillments, [believes] they are essential illusions answering to fundamental and ineradicable human needs” (393). “Essential illusions” are what I believe the theatre provides and labors to create in repeated gestures of inexhaustible imagination. But those illusions also have in their DNA, to make a conscious anachronistic simile, a wounding agenda.<sup>5</sup> Kirby Farrell, also a Becker

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<sup>5</sup> I have deliberately made the decision to avoid by all possible means the use of the verb “subvert” in my text; to me, the issue of subversion has become a sort of “pariah issue”. The verb is a perennial favorite of New Historicist discourse but I want to distance myself from this theoretical approach that I readily admire, whose relevance I recognize wholeheartedly and that I concede, has produced some of the most readable

enthusiast, considering plays that host deaths on stage, recognizes the value of their illusory fabric, as he proposes that

In constructing an illusion of death in the theatre people were collaborating, as they did in other areas of their lives, to convert the threat of pollution, instability, and nothingness into a source of fertility or productiveness: to make death yield heroic meaning that could sustain society (10).

The operative word here, the kinetic one, is “instability”; Jonathan Dollimore inspiringly picks up on this threat of instability, or fear of change in the period; in *Death, Desire and Loss in Western Culture* (2001), his study of the “mutability” inherent to the discussion of death and desire, he writes:

What recurs in early modern writing is the sense of death not simply as the end of desire, nor simply its punishment; shockingly, perversely, death is itself the impossible dynamic of desire. And not just desire, life more generally is animated by the dynamic of death (76).

The morbidity of the plays is thus both a manifestation and a conflation of a desire to be wounded. Death sells because we want to see, to feel death’s sting represented in the spectacular deaths of others. Its theatrical representation eroticizes death. I will obviously return to this important element since the wounding motif I recognize in these plays has much to do with the desire, the willingness of theatre audiences to be wounded (here, read simply as “moved”) by them. But if morbidity can no doubt provide its own pleasures, it cannot solely explain the vitality of a dramaturgy that through its incessant sounding of death is so celebratory of life itself. Michael Neill is far more prudent and contends in his seminal *Issues of Death* (1997) that death, like gender, is a social construct, inextricably entrenched in culture, and as such, English early modernity

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and engrossing criticism on early modern drama. But for reasons that will become clear in the chapter I devote to the analysis of the deaths of women, New Historicism has also plunged me into a kind of intellectual despair. The subversion/containment tandem, inaugurated in the works of Michel Foucault and celebrated in New Historicist criticism sits uneasily with an apprentice scholar who is also a professional actor and playwright who stills hold the theatrical practice as an agent of change. Here ends the confession.

constructs mortality for cultural reasons that Neill engagingly disentangles, to mainly expose an effort to assuage individual anxieties raised by the seismic changes in religious practices that the long Reformation brought upon the land; his is assuredly a safer ground from which to examine how the didactic potencies of the *ars moriendi* tradition migrate into theatrical representation. “All animals die, but only human beings suffer death – and their sense of what they suffer is, to a very large degree, imposed by the culture to which they belong” (2). Neill has, I believe, his finger right on the pulse of this complex cultural moment. In a period scarred by a near century of religious unrest, of doctrinal reinventions, of unsettling religious “settlements,” the plays in their manipulation of mortality for theatrical ends, in their efforts at exteriorizing interiority (through the soliloquy) unavoidably breach into the private worlds of their audiences, who attending the play, must in turn reflect on their own mortality.

Few metaphors have more endurance than that of *Theatrum Mundi*, and as she comes to see the play at the Globe, the spectator will have taken note of the motto placed above its entrance, a crest stating "Totus Mundus Agit Histrionem" (the whole world is a playhouse). She has come to see a play whose plot and title announce that some characters will die “lamentably” as she knows, or has been told, or has witnessed, she herself must too one day. She rather fancied the way this Egyptian queen took to it. She resonated with this “immortal longings in me” business. She even surprised herself blotting a few tears with her sleeve. Yet, at the end of the play, as if rehearsing the promise of her Christian faith, the dead resuscitated in front of her and they came together and jigged to the glory of applause. After her artful death, look there, look there, Cleopatra is jigging.

So, what was this “craft of dying” tradition that I argue the theatre appropriates for its own ends? In *Disce Mori: Learne to Die* (1600), a popular “how-to-manual” of the period, Christopher Sutton asks the very same question; it is in fact the rhetorical strategy of his opening chapter and he clearly situates his answer in the realm of language, and of apprenticeship; let us consider how he evaluates the value of knowledge in his approach:

Now therefore this...learning to die, what more weighty? What more divine? Where is the scribe? Where is the disputer? What is it to have the force of Demosthenes? The perswasive arte of Tully, so great an orator? What is it by arithmetically accompte to devide the least fractions, and, with the man of God, never to think of nombring the time we have yet to live? What is it by geometrie to take the longitude of the most spatious prospectes, and not to measure that which the prophete calleth onely a span long? ... In a woord, what is for the deepest worldlings to be able by reaching pollicy to compasse plots of high enterprise, as doctors in that faculty, and die, God knowes, like simple men? (In Atkinson, 184)

If Sutton’s lines seem to ring with the same inquisitive tone that Doctor Faustus displays in the opening soliloquy of Marlowe’s play, this is no coincidence. What was the point of learning to die? What were the didactic intent and the historical necessity behind the elaboration of an art for dying? Those are important questions for which I want to make ample room, but I must first formulate simpler questions, questions that for now must remain un-historicized. We will come to what the expression *the art of dying* meant at its inception and we will sound what “dying well” meant for the early moderns. For now, a little informality is required.

What is a “good death”? To our modern ears, is there such a thing? Is there substance to the so-called craft of dying or is this yet another metaphor of comfort to euphemize the horrid reality of our finitude? The expression alone, *the craft of dying*, may sound at least perplexing, or even oxymoronic to some. A craft is after all honed through practice, and we die only once. What athlete prepares for these impossible



*Olympics*? Can there really be an art to dying? May this art or craft, like music or drawing, be taught when the basest of logic ordains that those who would have mastered the form have inevitably moved on to their irreversible dissolution? Where is it taught? After all, we go to school to learn to count and read, to learn to ride horses and cars, to shoot guns or cook Thai. But there is, so to speak, no school for learning how to die. Some would rightly think such schools superfluous, since we are all bound to prove its reluctant graduates.

To wit, to be well versed in this art belies the very concept of agony, from the Greek *Agon* (contest and challenge). Every day we encounter in obituaries, the language of resistance, the expression of this conflict, as we read “She died after a courageous fight with cancer” or “He lost his battle with addiction.” The bellicose metaphors abound in such obituaries that sing “Death, be not proud,” as John Donne will have it. But nonetheless, the obituaries all concede to failure, the learning is lost, the practice hardly served. “Courage’s no good,” writes Philip Larkin in *Aubade* (1977), “It means not scaring others. Being brave / Lets no one off the grave. / Death is no different whined at than withstood.” Death may even be seen, certainly today considering the medical secrecy and the privacy attending our death in hospital rooms, whose machines’ hum deafens the human voice, as the ultimate social failure, the very one that makes Thomas Browne write in *Religio Medici* (1642): “I am not so much afraid of death, as ashamed thereof; ’tis the very disgrace and ignominy of our natures, that in a moment can so disfigure us that our nearest friends, wives and Children stand afraid and start at us” (45). Browne, a medical professional who had witnessed first hand the disfiguring devastations of the dying process, writes here of the estrangement, the alienation that those about to

die are bound to experience; they are no longer part of the social realm. These contemplations alone (the failure in battle, the uselessness of courage, the shame of estrangement and disfigurement by the dying progress) give the concept of the Art of Dying a rather repellent irony; what advantages may be gathered from mastering that craft at failure? Rather remain a dunce, one may propose. This is where historicity needs to intervene as the theatre at once makes profit of these repellent ironies.

In his essay “On Physiognomy,” Michel de Montaigne exhorts his reader to refrain from any Faustus-like attempt at meddling at the hour of one’s death and deters his reader from even preparing for its inevitability:

If you do not know how to die, never mind. Nature will tell you how to do it on the spot, plainly and adequately. She will do this job for you most punctiliously: do not worry about it:

Incertam frustra, mortals, funeris horam  
Quaeritis, et qua sit mors aditura via.<sup>6</sup>

Uncharacteristically for this essayist keen on the arcane citation, Montaigne mitigates here the value of erudition in the face of death, ultimately stating: “would I have died any the less happily before reading [Cicero’s] *Tusculan Disputations*? I judge that I would not” (1176).<sup>7</sup> These are the words of a man who, by his own admission, had walked behind too many friends’ coffins and who knew he might go next. If I hazard the locution *Faustus-like*, it is because Christopher Marlowe – who possibly but improbably read Montaigne – seems to embrace the essayist’s recognition of the futility of erudite dying in his play *Doctor Faustus*, a position that Sutton’s *Disce Mori* readily borrows.<sup>8</sup> At least

<sup>6</sup> “In Vain, Mortals, do you strive to know the uncertain hour of your death and by which road it will come.” (Propertius, II, xxvii, 1-2 (adapted): then Pseudo-Gallus, *Elegeia*, I, 227-8)

<sup>7</sup> Cicero wrote a series of five essays under that title, most famously “On the Contempt of Death.”

<sup>8</sup> Though the essays translated by John Florio were available in English as early as 1603 (10 years after Marlowe’s death), they were partially published in French from 1580 on. If Marlowe, as many scholars believe, spent time on the continent and had as good a knowledge of French as he is thought to have had, then, the possibility he was exposed to Montaigne’s growing reputation should not be entirely discarded.

his eponymous protagonist signals as much in the vibrant soliloquies that both open and end the play. In Marlowe's 1589 play, we first discover Faustus in his study, moored by the limits of human knowledge.<sup>9</sup> What use is philosophy he asks, if it only serves to argue? Why care for the arts of Galen, if the scholar can neither erase mortality nor raise the dead? Law shows little more appeal as it only "fits a mercenary drudge, who aims at nothing but external trash" (1.1.64-5). The study of biblical texts in the religious context of Marlowe's play offers but the harsh Calvinism of Predestination, the tautological "Che serà, serà" doctrine and its inherent despair, quite imprudently stated by the playwright for whom prudence was not an obvious virtue.

Calvinism [whose theological grasp upon English reformers is generally recognized] insisted that souls were predestined to salvation or damnation from the moment of birth, and Calvinist ministers frequently claimed to know which was which. Catholic belief was that such things were the preserve of God alone, and humankind could not know – but they might guess, and guess very plausibly, not least from whether the dying person made a 'good' or a 'bad' end, in repentance or in blasphemy" (Cooper, 119).

The humanist project has lost all powers of seduction for Faustus and he turns to forbidden knowledge, to witchcraft; he famously signs his soul to the devil for 24 years so his "brains [may] gain a deity" (1.1.93). When the hour of his death inevitably comes, it does in the worst-case scenario of the *ars moriendi* tradition, as triumphant devils drive Faustus offstage. The play becomes (as the German book that inspired it) a Christian lesson in what not to do, in how not to die, a counter-intuitive *De Imitatio Christi*.

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<sup>9</sup> The controversies over *Doctor Faustus*' first possible performance endure but 1589 meets the approval of many specialists; scholarly debates over the reliability of the A-text (1604) and the B-text (1616) as representative of Marlowe's authorial intent, know no end. For the sake of this argument, I will side with David Wootton, and use the A-Text that "is certainly the text to use if we want to know what Marlowe expected to see and hear on the stage, [even if] it is not the text that left the hands of Marlowe and his collaborators" (xxxii).

Before Faustus' death scene, Marlowe even gives the specific stage direction in the A-text "Exeunt Scholars. The Clock Strikes Eleven" (scene 14.62). I read this "Exeunt Scholars" as a symbolic gesture. Indeed if in the B-Text (1616) of *Doctor Faustus*, the scholars have the very last word (and scene) of the play, the A-Text version dispenses entirely with them; scholarly knowledge will not help explain his death, or death itself; not that their presence in the B-text contributes much to our understanding of the issue; the scholars find the loose limbs of their colleague and proceed to funereal arrangements. However, it makes an important point: death is for the living. Marlowe ousts the scholars for good before Faustus' vibrant final soliloquy where in a telling act of scholarly disavowing he promises, "he will burn his books" (5.2.188).<sup>10</sup> In a play that points to the corrupting effects of knowledge, the learned Marlowe who never shied from splashing his erudition over his works, stages an erudite scholar dissatisfied with academic learning, and one whose scholarship has next to nothing to offer in the face of death; all prior study on the topic proves superfluous or inadequate. But Montaigne, who in his essays makes a celebratory virtue of the contradictions of his beliefs and mores, remains fascinated by the topic of death. In his introduction to *Shakespeare's Montaigne* (2014), Stephen Greenblatt writes:

"The Premeditation of death," Montaigne wrote in his 1580 essay "That to Philosophize Is to Learn How to Die," "is a fore-thinking of liberty. He who hath learned to die, hath unlearned to serve." This was not only the teaching of pagans; it was, Montaigne recognized, also linked to one of the central strains of his own religion: "Our religion hath had no surer human foundation than the contempt of life." Therefore, he acknowledged, he fully shared in his culture's widespread

<sup>10</sup> "The B-Text's considerable augmentations of the staging need to be regarded as early stage history, not a record of what Marlowe, his collaborator, and his original acting company had in mind" (Bevington, 45). Granted, the text suggests here that the books in question are witchcraft books; but the burning of books, any books, is a violent act that always heralds further atrocities. For an enlightened discussion of this topic, I invite my reader to turn to James Simpson's indispensable *Burning to Read, English Fundamentalism and Its Reformation Opponents* (2007).

fascination with accounts of the ways people met their ends and with what was called the *ars moriendi*, the “art of dying.” “There is nothing I desire more to be informed of than of the death of men: that is to say, what words, what countenance, and what face they show at their death.” (xx-xxi)

Can we imagine what an extraordinary, if not ideal, spectator Montaigne would have made for the plays of Shakespeare and other English early modern dramatists? And to the question posed earlier, where does one learn to die, can we not imagine that Montaigne himself might have suggested: the theatre? The theatre is certainly a good place to start an emotive and intellectual intercourse with the issue of dying. Fortified by this belief, I propose that the Early modern English dramatists, forsaking a classical decorum that forbade (at least in much of the extant canon of Greek tragedies) the representation of dying on stage, strived to show their audiences exactly what fascinates Montaigne: how men and women did, could, should die, warts and all, furnishing their dramatizations of agonies with sublime and puzzling swan songs; and I add that they created a corpus of agony-saturated works that while indisputably aimed at performance, had an inherent didactic purpose.

Postulating that the theatre ‘taught’ anything, that its audiences learned and assimilated practices, albeit obliquely, obviously raises the vexing question of audience receptivity, whose history is as spotty as its documentation scarce. Charles Whitney has recently made progress on the issue by formulating a more inclusive definition of what constitutes dramatic reception, to “argue that players deliberately offered materials for moral and practical benefits and use, accommodating and facilitating the diverse creative applications audiences looked for” (2).<sup>11</sup> This said, there remains arguably scant evidence that audiences learnt anything measurable by going to the playhouse. The

<sup>11</sup> Charles Whitney. *Early Responses to Renaissance Drama*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2006.

evidence we do have, often richly allusive, hardly facilitates the gauging of what playwright James Shirley has called in 1647 “the subtle tracks of [an audience’s] engagement.” In turn, there exists unimpeachable proof that those who opposed the art form (the anti-theatricalists), those who attempted to control it (the state censors) and its active creators (the collaborating theatre artists) had the intent or embraced the belief that theatre houses stood as surrogate classrooms. One thing to remember is that the attacks on the theatre, the attempts to curb its scope by the censors, and the plays themselves were all directed at the same crowd: those who went to the theatre. And with Andrew Gurr’s conservative estimate that from the opening of the Red Lion, the first playhouse built in London in 1567, to the closing of the theatres by Cromwell 75 years later, the theatres “probably entertained their customers with close to fifty million visits,” that makes for a lot of pupils attending the school of death (1996, 60).

The anti-theatricalist discourse expressed in pamphlet warfare in fact never ceases to point to the theatres as “schools of Satan.” The Puritan Philip Stubbs in his *Anatomie of Abuses* waxes hysterical when he affirms that “to commit all kinds of sin and mischief, you need to go to no other schoole, for all these good examples may you see painted before your eyes ... in plays.” John Northbrooke, who “expressly defends the use of plays in school,” viewed the theatre as a “spectacle and school for all wickedness and vice to be learned” (Barish, 82). Such attacks hardly make any impressive dialectical contribution. As Jonas A. Barish tells us, “they disintegrate into free-associative rambles” (88). Nor are the defenders of the artform particularly articulate in their response; expectedly they play upon the same rhetorical tropes to argue what good schools the

theatres can be.<sup>12</sup> But the defenders of the theatre are also its artisans; their didactic intent can at least be weighed by turning to their plays. To sum up: so far in constructing a compendium of tropes, I have established two important ones. The plays make of dying a dramatic action, an import of the tradition; the plays as “wounded texts and wounding instruments” may prove loci of instruction, another such import. As to the legitimate objection to my argument that erects a theatre that moonlights as school for dying in the face of the immeasurability of what the plays may or not have taught, I take methodological solace from David Scott Kastan’s eminent commentary:

If the goal is to discover if something was *thought*, a single reference might be well considered inadequate, too easily explained as idiosyncratic and aberrant; if, however, the goal is to discover what was *thinkable* at a certain moment, then one example demonstrates the case quite nicely (1999, 49-50, *his emphases*)

Looking at specific plays as a template for the educating virtues of play-going in matters of learning how to die will help expose how the didacticism of the *ars moriendi* insinuates itself into these specific “scores for actors;” and the careful examination of the plays will propel a wider anatomizing why this dramatic efflorescence should host theatrical objects that relentlessly rehearse, prepare, showcase and exemplify for audiences the dying experience in a more secular idiom, that the *ars moriendi* manuals by vocation kept fettering in religious terms. But to better identify the *ars moriendi* strains of this stage-bound idiom, I turn to the foundational text of the tradition.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> See Thomas Heywood’s comments mentioned in chapter 4.

<sup>13</sup> “Foundational” is a term of expediency for my purpose. As this is not a study of the *ars moriendi* tradition, but rather of its impact upon playwriting, I must make deliberate shortcuts. Christianity in its long history provided countless devotional models for death preparation and cannot claim to having defined ‘the art of dying’. Eastern religions have made important and enduring contributions to this prescriptive popular writing form. I take the *Speculum* or *Tractatus artis bene moriendi* that gives the tradition its name, but that in no way can claim being its inaugurating iteration, as the referred basic text where I contend, we find the essential tropes about to migrate into the dramaturgical land. I turn to the later works of Perkins, More, Erasmus, and others to make certain points.

The well-acknowledged source-text of the tradition of the craft of dying, the anonymous *Tractatus artis bene moriendi* (circa 1450), was published in England by William Caxton under the name *The Book of the Craft of Dying* (1490). As mentioned, we must register the full implication of the word *craft* in the title; its use lays bare the author[s]’ desire to impress upon the reader the necessity to approach the events of one’s death as an individualized labor, possibly intricate, elaborated through specific gestures that certain acquired skills may facilitate; *craft* also conjures aesthetic concerns, certainly as to how well such task may be accomplished: some crafts are crafty as some will be artful. The distinction *craft of dying* versus *art of dying*, both adequate translations of the locution *ars moriendi* and often used interchangeably during its long publishing history, becomes more pressing in a discussion veered at demonstrating the vestigial radiance of the *ars moriendi*’s iconography and narratives of death as an impetus for artful representation in dramas engaged in the depiction of agony.

Suffice it to say that “the challenge of grappling with the pain and uncertainty of dying is, of course, nothing new to humanity in general, nor to Christians in particular” (Kaveny, 141). Yet, this challenge scarcely manifests more practical and material iterations than those found in the *ars moriendi* tradition. The long acculturation of the genre reminds us that

Few subjects [have] so preoccup[ied] Renaissance writers and thinkers as death. This should come as no surprise, for death was an ever-present reality to those living during the Renaissance, as the ravages of plague and the brutality of war confirmed the tenuous hold one had over life. It is against this backdrop that the tradition of the *ars moriendi* took shape and flourished (Atkinson, xi).

In his monumental study *The Hour of Our Death* (1977), Philippe Aries most concisely characterizes the tradition at its inception as



a new iconography ... popularized by the printing press in the form of books containing woodcuts, individual images that each person contemplated in his own home. These books were the treatises on the technique of dying well, the *artes moriendi*. Each page of text was illustrated with a picture so that not only the *literati* but also the *laici*, that is, those who could not read, could catch the meaning (107).

Religious writing about death and dying has obviously a pedigree that predates the advent of the *ars moriendi* tradition, but the events of the disastrous 14<sup>th</sup> century precipitated this peculiar incarnation, how-to manuals that because of their popular vocation and the incidental needs they fulfilled, reached a vast audience grappling then with an anxiety-riddled new phenomenon: that of the unassisted, premature death lately become the norm rather than the exception; premature deaths, I might add, often endured in unimaginable suffering. What the playwrights did was to give a voice to that pain, defying what Ernest B. Gilman has called the “rhetoric of indescribability” prompted by the incommensurable misery brought by recurrent epidemics of plague (51).<sup>14</sup> James Shapiro informs us in his review of Gilman’s book that Stratford, Shakespeare’s birthplace, was particularly affected by the plague, and that Shakespeare may even have developed immunity to it as he subsequently survived two virulent outbreaks in London, the 1592-93 recurrence that killed more than 10,000 people and the 1603 bout that led to more than 25,000 fatalities.<sup>15</sup> Why is this relevant? Because Shakespeare’s contribution to what I recognize as a “dying-voice literacy” is seminal and Ernest B. Gilman insists on the linguistic effect of the plague, its impact upon language, making his commentary pertinent to my quasi-philological approach to defining a tale of origins for this stage-bound idiom:

<sup>14</sup> *Plague Writing in Early Modern England*, (2009).

<sup>15</sup> *London Review of Books*, 31 March 2011, p. 22-24.

In the English Reformation, the infliction of the plague is to be understood fundamentally as a language event, foreshadowed by, and issuing from the Word – an event, therefore, fundamentally discursive even before it becomes the subject of plague writing, an event that presents itself as a text to be read (73).

Though Gilman focuses on writings provoked-into-creation by bouts of plague prior to the rise of the *ars moriendi* tradition, these godly books' emanation in the aftermath of the Bubonic Plague is no less a significant rehearsal of that discourse as it is itself born from the ashes of the most catastrophic health crisis in European history. In times when sudden death, the most fearful instance for the unprepared Christian, becomes normative, the need for such manuals proves pressing and the manuals insist even under conditions of emergency on the notion of *dying well*, at best, a strenuous concept, limitlessly vulnerable to misinterpretation. The modalities of that 'good death' would be further adumbrated – and in some cases, contested or literally suppressed - by reformed theologies aimed at recalibrating the spiritual landscape of the afterlife, tampering with the spiritual path to achieve it, or redefining entirely what such 'good deaths' may entail, or how, or even if, a desired place in eternity might in the first place be secured through human agency.

The *Tractatus artis bene moriendi* that becomes in Caxton's translation its inaugural English text has been regarded in relatively recent scholarship as "an intellectually mediocre work" (Atkinson, xii). Nancy Lee Beaty in what was for a long time the only extensive literary study of the tradition speaks of the text as "barren of literary value."<sup>16</sup> I think both critics are dead wrong. The work is in fact rich in poetic offerings at various levels, and its most important chapter (the chapter on the five temptations) exposes in fact a fascinating rhetorical project. That neither Atkinson nor

<sup>16</sup> *The Craft of Dying: A Study in the Literary Tradition of the Ars Moriendi in England* (1970).

Beaty would even pause to consider the order of temptations (why they are susceptible to arise in this particular fashion, and as such, what is the devil's strategy as conceived by the anonymous authors of the text) is beyond befuddling. As if one would read *Othello* (1606), without sounding the rhetorical strategies of Iago's psychological warfare upon his victim's psyche. But the most important lacuna, which both these critics expose by merely evading it, as if it were an ideological pothole in their paths of scrutiny, has immense bearing on my inquiry. For one must ask at least one question: simply put, in the *ars moriendi* tradition, one must conform to a prescribed way of dying, and bend one's individuality into a universalist discursive mold; as such, these protocols inevitably raise the question: who is actually dying if the last words of an individual are those written on a script devised by people who obviously have not yet experienced dying? Or as Dennis Kezar better posits:

How does one assess a verbal performance in which the constitution and revelation of the selfhood consists of conventions, in which claims of theological insights are phrased in the conned quotations of an actor preparing institutionally for the "great act" of death? (311)

Kezar presents the dying person as an actor preparing for a role, that of a Christian who has perfected the moment of his/her death. This important trope of the tradition turns the Christian "good death" into a performance and that, the theatre is not about to ignore. It is in my compendium *the third poetic trope* that migrates into theatrical practice. And *The Book of the Craft of Dying* makes ample room for the role of the witnesses to this performance. But beyond its questionable intellectual merit, or its literary worth, we must consider the text of *The Book of the Craft of Dying* in light of the full vigor of its usage, and the highly performative nature of its quasi-sacramental agency for those who did consult it. Once these specific pronouncements had been uttered, be they annulling of

individuated personalities, they had effected the *good death* in the mind of both the moriens and his/her attendants. This sounds a bit absurd in the case of the moriens, who is, well, dead, by the time the protocols have been accomplished, but that was nonetheless the understanding underlying the scheme. That a sum of liturgical prose and images could accomplish so much may seem naïve to a more secular culture. But we have to bear in mind that the protocols may have constituted the last conceivable occasion on earth to secure an enviable position in eternity. Thus the stakes raised by the events of death were exceptionally high. This is hardly news but it sheds light on the agents inflicting the wound in wounded and wounding texts.

The changing culture of early modern death has been the subject of much new writing in the last twenty years, whether in terms of the controversy over the medieval cult of the saints; or changing practices in Christian rituals and burial; or doctrines of salvation in terms of either sanctification or predestination; or the imagination or treatment of the physical remains at death; or the revival of Lucretius and the theory of mortalism (the death of the individual incorporated in the death of the body) (Cummings, 17).<sup>17</sup>

Cummings here makes an appropriate list of usual suspects. David Cressy has written at length on the suppression of Catholic rituals brought by the Reformation as agents of severance in the ongoing dialogue between the living and the dead, a dialogue generated and crystallized by the accouterments of medieval piety; he has also exposed the residual vibrancy of such suppressed Catholic rites in reformed England's culture.<sup>18</sup> Eamon Duffy

<sup>17</sup> For a detailed account of these inquiries, see Brian Cummings, *Mortal Thoughts, Religion, Secularity & Identity in Shakespeare and Early Modern Culture*, (2013).

<sup>18</sup> For a complete discussion of these discontinuities, see David Cressy *Birth, Marriage, and Death: Ritual, Religion, and the Life Cycle in Tudor and Stuart England* (1999), pp. 379- 449. Among many topics, Cressy explains how the mutations that befell at the Reformation the well-established Catholic *art of dying*, juxtaposed to the abandonment of the Requiem mass, the repudiation of various modicum of intercession for the dead, that of the doctrine of Purgatory in particular, and the refashioning of funeral rituals all manifest this great dialogical interruption between the living and the dead. In his efforts to demonstrate the agents of the "wound," Cressy stands in accord with Sarah Tarlow who explicitly maintains "for a start, archeological evidence, along with historical evidence, does not witness beliefs, but practices. The

in *The Stripping of the Altars* (1992), while aiming to temper as “too highly coloured” Johan Huizinga’s claim that “no other epoch has laid so much stress as the expiring Middle Ages on the thought of death,” nonetheless characterizes as “irrefutable” A. N. Galpern’s argument that posits “Catholicism at the end of the Middle Ages ... [as] a cult of the living in the service of the dead” (301). In the theological tug of war that the Reformations foster over “issues of death” the theatre often emerges in critical analyses as a cultural institution that simultaneously denounces, re-activates, re-members Catholic manifestations of this bond between the living and the dead.<sup>19</sup> With this in mind, it makes good sense to consider the plays themselves as cultural petri dishes where the manipulation of theological substances, both residual and reformist (often iconoclastic in effect), become experimentations aimed at dramatizing the competing expressions of approaches to death and dying.

At their simplest expression, the manuals of *the craft of dying*, whose focus was both pastoral and practical, were little moral plays in their own right; some iterations even look like plays (Thomas Becon’s *The Sicke Mans Salve* (1561) reads like a playlet); they have a *dramatis personae*, they specify lines to be uttered by the various participants at the deathbed site, mainly the dying subject and his/her attending witnesses. The manuals were again thematically concerted towards issues of salvation and aspired to comfort the protagonist, the *moriens* [the dying subject], and let him “go [as] gentle into that good night” as was conceivable.<sup>20</sup> Yet, “the *ars moriendi*, while urging *Moriens* to

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relationship between belief and practice is complex” (15) in *Ritual, Belief and the Dead in Early Modern Britain and Ireland*, (2011).

<sup>19</sup> Among many others, Stephen Greenblatt’s *Hamlet in Purgatory* (2002), or Gillian Woods’ recent *Shakespeare’s Unreformed Fictions* (2013) are fine examples of such criticism aimed at situating the theatre as a locus of residual Catholicism.

<sup>20</sup> Treating of his father’s death, Dylan Thomas famously coins the expression in his elegy *Do not Go Gentle into That Good Night* (1937).

‘deye gladly’ treats the moment of death as fraught with real dangers, dangers that require strong remedies” (Spinrad, 36). The manuals rehearsed such dangers, i.e. all that could imperil the dying praxis, by evoking temptations susceptible to arise at the threshold of death. Five possible temptations could foreseeably interfere with a peaceful, hopeful and reconciled journey towards the last four things (Death, Judgment, Heaven and Hell), and corrupt the ascesis towards the *good* death; these five temptations were those of loss of faith, spiritual pride, despair, impatience, and financial irresponsibility. These dangers, or temptations, would arise through repeated attacks upon the moriens by a cohort of devils, in an intensely violent theatre visible only to the dying subject but made explicit in the woodcuts to all that could page the manual. This notion of the invisible made visible becomes an important theatrical device imported from the basic *Tractatus*: we may spontaneously think of Hamlet seeing his father in the closet scene while his mother does not, or of Macbeth’s banquet scene where the ghosts of his victims are seen only by the Thane of Cawdor now become king. “The invisible made visible” is thus *the fourth poetic trope* I want to enlist for my poetic arsenal.

A word about the strategy of the temptations expounded in chapter II of *The Craft*, about in other words, the devil’s agenda: the first temptation is a test of faith as devils surround the bed to inquire on the necessity of further deployment. As described in the woodcuts, the devils assemble holding banners bearing Latin inscriptions: *Infernatus fractus est* or “hell is a fable”, *fac sicut Pagani fecerunt* or “do as the pagans do, worship idols”, and a third banner inviting the moriens to kill himself.<sup>21</sup> The woodcuts

<sup>21</sup> There are obviously various editions of the woodcuts, each exposing variant textual issues, and the Latin on the devils’ banners is often erroneous or nonsensical; this might be an ironic gesture on the part of the authors who want bad-spellers or poor grammarians as devils, or it might be inadvertently present. I rather fancy the former explanation.

explicitly show this invisible theatre and in the first image, the one that relays what I just described, we see around the bed, devils not only holding banners but pointing to a couple kneeling before an idol, to a man about to cut his throat, and to a naked man self-flagellating. Each of these woodcuts has a responding image that presents a salvific solution, an alternative scenario; in this case, an angel appears speaking on his banner *sis firmus fide* or “remain firm in your faith;” he is accompanied by an assembly of saints (all halo-wearing) in which we recognize the four authors of the Gospel, and a woman, that is either identified as Mary, mother of God, or Mary Magdalena. My reader may rest assured that I am not about to describe each of these images in what would be a tedious exercise. But I want to stress the cleverness of the device: after testing faith, the devils try to induce despair; when this fails, they try the patience of the dying, and when this proves insufficient the evil creatures change tactics. They congratulate the dying on his resolve, admitting how impressed they are by his resistance. “If you can do that, imagine what else you can do,” they then propose, testing his vainglory. This is a particularly clever approach. The rhetorical strategies of this psychological warfare imprint themselves in countless scenes covered in this study. Finally, in a gesture that can only point to the economic reality of death (what the dying leaves behind in goods, debts, and bonds) the devils attack the dying individual in what he may remain attached to in terrestrial matters. The final temptation obviously literalizes the importance of leaving this world with financial matters in order, and it is hard not to recognize a mercantile aspect to the devotional discourse. The devil is a liar, the devil is an actor, and thus the deathbed can often become a theatre of lies forever putting in jeopardy the authenticity of deathbed

repentance. That too, the playwrights will not forget. It is *the fifth trope* of my poetic arsenal.

One thing seems likely: these manuals allegedly aimed at curbing the terrors of death, frank in their “practical stoicism,” may have elicited even more trepidation through their nightmarish depictions of evil attacks as illustrated in the woodcuts that accompany the textual content of the manual.<sup>22</sup> The induction of terror may in fact even have been a function of their theological design. Eamon Duffy in his discussion of the tradition makes the following all-encompassing observation:

Horror and fear are the emotions most commonly associated with the late medieval perceptions of death and life everlasting, and preachers, dramatists, and moralists did not hesitate to employ terror – of death, of judgment, of pains of hell, or Purgatory – to stir their audience to penitence and good works (313-314).

This polyglot terror of dying finds in the theatre of Shakespeare and his contemporaries a formidable locus of expression where the curbing of emotions is, to proof, rarely its pursuit. And this is *the sixth trope* borrowed from the tradition: the manipulation of terror for tonal ends. I would argue that on the contrary, because of the dialectical and contingent nature of performance, expressed in no small measure by a desire for financial gain, as I have already stressed, the dramatists willed to create sensationalist plays that would nurture a habit of theatergoing and foster a sustaining audienceship. The horrors of death fill these plays and in turn filled the theatre where they were performed. In this light the imperatives of affecting and affective drama flatter such terrorist expressions and favor scenes where death can sing its terrifying motifs in all registers, save one (arguably) where resignation, acceptance would prime. Thus the appropriation of the *ars moriendi* tropes by the dramatists fosters additional complexities. A *good* Christian death,

<sup>22</sup> Katherine Koller uses the philosophical label “practical stoicism” in her analysis of the *ars* tradition (p.131).



evacuated of conflicts and curbed of its possible terrors by a discourse whose homiletic tenor aims at diffusing, at placating death's terrorizing aspects, does not spontaneously appear conducive to engaging drama. In fact, the theatre death scenes examined in parallel with the theatre of image of the *ars moriendi* manuals show that the "good death," as exposed in such late medieval and Renaissance death protocols, is rarely, per se, theatrical, and this may explain why scenes that host the good Christian death virtually never make it to the stage; in turn, if good theatrical deaths are rarely 'good' by Christian standards, they often, to make the mark of a good death scene, must host the failures of the prescriptions of the *ars moriendi* protocols. Disobeying the Christian decorum of the *Craft of Dying*, and gorgeously, insistently, dramatically furnishing its failures, seems to have been a *modus operandi* of this theatre then in full expansion. It is *the seventh trope* I wish to acknowledge: the theatre disavows the tenability of the *ars moriendi*'s contentions; it thrives for dramatic efficiency on deracinating the hopes the tradition cultivates.

*The Book of the Craft of Dying* is, we must remember, the translation of a popular Latin text that had wide currency on the continent; its adoption by English culture marks therefore what Amy Appleford calls "the internationalization of London lay piety that accompanied its turn toward the perfectionist and of the prominent place of death discourse in this important process" (Kindle loc. 3137). The theatre is of course a way of traveling, a virtual exposition to other national mores, particularly those of the continent by virtue of the locales (however imagined, truly representative, caricatured, idealized or reductive they may be) chosen by the playwrights to situate the action of their plays. *The Craft of Dying* is a continental import, and the theatre by its choice of locales and stories

brings the whole of Europe on the early modern English stage; this cosmopolitanism constitutes *the eighth trope*. Yet the claim most relevant to my inquiry Appleford makes when she describes, in what may sound a contradiction in principle, *The Craft* [from now on, I refer to Caxton's text as such] as a work

Full of spiritual anxiety; [*The Craft*] witnesses a crisis of confidence in the belief that the *ars moriendi* can create a saving habitus in practitioners. Placing extraordinary emphasis on the shaping of a correct interior disposition through lifelong death preparation, and downplaying the role of external elements such as the sacraments and priestly absolution, the work invests its hope in readers' salvation in its ability to teach them how to form a sufficient and saving attitude of repentance (Kindle loc. 3235).

Appleford treats the text as one making “aggressive spiritual demands” that may induce rather than mollify anxieties. *The Craft* is divided in six chapters, each having a specific function in the elaboration of the death rehearsal, a rehearsal that obviously may not have been permitted to take place, when death must unfold as an unrehearsed performance. The morbidity of its opening statement alone heralds such a terrifying experience that it is hard to believe anyone would have kept reading:

For as much as the passage of death out of the wretchednesse of the exile of this world for unknowynge of dyngge [ignorance of how to die], not oonly to lewde [uneducated] men but also to religious and devoute persones, semeth wonderly hard and right perylous, and also right ferful and horrible; therefore in this present matere and tretys, that is of the Crafte of Dyenge, is drawe and conteyned a short manere of exhortacyon for techynge & confortynge of hem that ben in poynt of death. This manere of exhortacyon ought sotelly to be consydred, noted, and understonde in the insyght of mannes sowle. For douteles it is and may be profitable generally to alle trewe Cristen men to lerne and have the crafte & knoulache to deye wel.<sup>23</sup>

*Here is a modernized text in the 1917 version of the 1490 Caxton text:*

Forasmuch as the passage of death, of the wretchedness of the exile of this world, for uncunning of dying – not only to lewd men but also to religious and devout persons – seemeth wonderfully hard and perilous, and also right fearful and

<sup>23</sup> Appleford, Amy. *Learning to Die in London, 1380-1540*, (Kindle Locations 3268-3273).

horrible; therefore in this present matter and treatise, that is of the Craft of Dying, is drawn and contained a short manner of exhortation, for teaching and comforting of that be in point of death. This manner of exhortation ought subtly to be considered, noted, and understood in the sight of man's soul; for doubtless it is and may be profitable generally, to all true Christian men, to learn and have craft and knowledge to die well (3).

What is initially arresting here is this idea of “the passage to ... an exile of this world,” a narrative motif that will recur endlessly in the dramatic poetry of the Elizabethan and Jacobean period. This ‘traveling’ trope, prescribed by a Catholic eschatology that presents death as a beginning rather than an end, as the gateway to an eternal life of deserved celestial bliss or no-less-deserved eternal damnation/purgatorial punishment, borrows from the literature and beliefs of Antiquity. One must prepare for the journey to “the undiscover'd country from whose bourn no traveller returns” (*Hamlet*, 3.1, 80-81). No one is travelling light in this scheme. The baggage piling up at the threshold of the journey will fill the scenes of death scenes of this theatre that dramatizes the grand departures.

The use of the word ‘exile’ brings an inherently punitive charge to the theodicy of death; in the legal parlance of the period, exile or banishment were, save for the death penalty, the most severe of sentences. The taxonomy of individuals about to die (three kinds: the lewd, the devout, and the religious) is obviously rather reductive. Then, the use in the opening paragraph of “seemeth” obliquely addresses a point I alluded to earlier: the humility or tentative guesswork of its author(s) before the dying praxis, an admission of uncertainty; one cannot know how “wonderfully hard” this passage will prove without having experienced it; one is therefore forced to imagine its difficulty, in other words, to do the work of the dramatist and the poet. The word *perilous* to a twenty-first century ear rings absurdly ironic – death is perilous, well, yes, one dies! – but again, the peril must

be understood as purely theological: as the danger to “mess up” a last opportunity at restoring the sanctity of the soul about to depart. Part of the luggage is a verbal arsenal inherited from *the Craft* but greatly enhanced, sounded, exploded by the dramatists. These metaphors of travel, of displacement, of exile, constitute *the ninth and final trope* I wish to identify.

Reading *The Craft* (in both earliest iterations, the long textual version and the later shorter version accompanied by woodcuts), one is initially struck by a few of its puzzling features: first, its abundant reliance on Latin quotes from an eclectic set of sources (*the Bible*, the writings of Early Church Patriarchs, pagan writers from ancient Greece and ancient Rome). On these pages, Aristotle dines with Saint Augustine. This reliance on citations embedded in the text seems to compromise its palatability for laypersons, certainly for dying individuals whose Latin may be non-existent, or rusty. Though the quotes (always capitalized) are immediately translated in English they may have registered initially as disconcerting. Might they also have brought a familiar comfort, if read to the dying individual, as an aural reminiscence of attended masses prior to the great vernacular shift?

Did the author(s) – monks, most scholars agree - feel the need to legitimize the treatise by weighing it with authoritative aphorisms to counter what occurs, to this reader at least, as a likelihood of dying: the narrowing of imaginative perspective and obedience to doctrinal guidelines? Maybe. Even in their immediate translation, those numerous citations lacked proper glosses and often appear “dead” to the text. In short, the insistent reliance on Latin quotes creates in *The Craft* an estrangement effect that may isolate

further the dying. But as *The Craft* insists, the dying individual must not be alone; she is surrounded by devils perhaps, but also by a community of believers.

Here, ... pious laymen and their books appear in a different guise, as early adopters of a new way of dying outlined in the Craft of Dying that partly works against this isolationism, since it requires a specialist death community to be properly performed. Indeed, although death rehearsal remains an individual practice, death performance demands the reconstitution of a renewed version of the communitarian religiosity long practiced by the generality of Londoners.<sup>24</sup>

Appleford thus insists on “death as a community event,” a social ritual that must be not only witnessed but assessed by a community of attendants; only through the mediation of community can the “good death” be ascertained.

Allow me now to recapitulate and reiterate the nine tropes I recognize by listing them in a more official manner; we are left with the following inheritance from *The Craft* and this is how I suggest they migrate into theatrical representation:

1. In *the Craft*, death is an action; in the theatre, it remains an action, yet one that will be played in various registers.
2. Death is a lesson; in the theatre, this lesson is often inferred rather than direct, allusive rather than obvious. It will prove often a counter-intuitive lesson: what not to do.
3. Death is a performance; in the theatre, the performance risks death itself, as it relies on a plausibility it constantly tests, on excellence at make-believe, on the successful establishment of a bond between the character and its audience. And this performance is always a *swan song* concerned with the aesthetics of the end.
4. Death in *the Craft* makes the invisible visible (the theatre of tempting demons); in the theatre, this phenomenon multiplies the levels of realities and perceptions that foster and flatter dramatic ironies (the audience often knows something the characters do not, sees what the character does not see). The theatre shortcuts reality by animating a set of signs that make the invisible visible: a character

<sup>24</sup> (Appleford, Kindle Locations 3229-3232).

opens an umbrella and the audience understands it is suddenly pouring. A character enters with a candle: night has fallen.

5. Death can turn the deathbed into a theatre of lies as it interrogates the interiority and the authentic repentance of the dying; in the theatre, the consciously made-up drama gives birth to a self-consciousness that often translates as metatheatricity, an element I will discuss at length and recurrently, as it is ‘the name of the game’ in this canon of plays.
6. Death operates through the manipulation of terror; the theatre will do so in even franker fashions, as the form itself, I contend, is a kind of terrorism with acquiescence, an agreed-upon and willful and wished-for terrorism.
7. *The Craft* makes aggressive demands on the dying for the promise of salvation; the theatre seems more invested in the staging of damnation to better emulate, or disparage salvation.
8. By embracing the continental practice of the *ars moriendi*, *the Craft* internationalizes, or universalizes death, it makes of a cosmopolitan devotional practice a national one; in the theatre, by inference, the cosmopolitan may prove diabolic.
9. *The Craft* establishes enduring metaphors in its diction of death; the theatre makes much capital of the metaphorical language found in this foundational text and explodes it to elaborate a novel stage-bound language.

I would sooner visit an instance that embodies these tropes (their appropriation by dramatists) in a specific text, Shakespeare’s *2 Henry VI*.<sup>25</sup> Once I make evident the vitalization of the *ars moriendi* tradition in this specific play, a wounded text responding to a wounded text to become a wounding one, we may verify the relevance of Amy Appleford’s claim that “the Craft of Dying circulated in a London experiencing its own fissuring processes, initially associated with the violent, shifting political terrain of the Wars of the Roses (1455– 87), which cast a shadow over the reign of Henry VII, later

<sup>25</sup> I use for all the Shakespeare excerpts the Norton Shakespeare based on the Oxford Edition edited by Stephen Greenblatt, Walter Cohen, Jean E. Howard and Katharine Eisaman Maus (1997).

with the early stages of the Reformation” (3258-3260). In other words, the wounded text of *The Craft* writes the following scene with its own blood.

It should hardly surprise that death scenes abound in all three parts of Shakespeare’s *Henry VI*; the trilogy, after all, chronicles the precipitating events and the unfurling of a violent dynastic war (the so-called War of the Roses) fought on multiple fronts: an incessant warring with a foreign nation (France) whose territories England occupies, a colonial insurgency in Ireland, a gangrenous dispute amongst the nobility of the realm over issues of monarchic legitimacy, and a civil rebellion mobilizing the disenfranchised lower-classes of England against their “learned” elites.<sup>26</sup> To this list, I haste to add another conflict persistently represented in the plays, and in fact one of their idiomatic motifs: the struggle of individuals with their own death. On or off stage, death in the *Henry VI* trilogy reaps its ample harvest and shocks with the inventiveness of its arsenal: strangulation, burning at the stake, stabbing, public execution, lynching, poisoning, and hand-to-hand battlefield combats. In these death scenes a motif of perpetration insistently appears: one invariably dies at the hand of another, in a replication of what most early moderns intensely feared: the *mors improvisa*, the sudden, unprepared death.<sup>27</sup>

This is perhaps why the singular poetic density and the ahistorical gloss brought to the dramatization of Cardinal Beaufort’s death in *2 Henry VI* are so compelling: only his own conscience, it seems, has agency over the harrowing tortures that fashion his end. This “death-by-conscience,” in what may arguably be called the first deathbed scene of the Shakespearian canon, has much to impart as to the issue of *the Craft* tradition as it

<sup>26</sup> Albeit fomented by a noble, Richard of York (2 Henry VI, 3.2. 349-383).

<sup>27</sup> “Sudden death was prayed against just as it had been before the Reformation. [If it was] not a token of damnation, ... [it remained] ‘a temporall judgment, and a signe of GODS anger’ ” (Ryrie, 461).

exposes many of the tropes I have enlisted.<sup>28</sup> I use Beaufort's death scene in *2 Henry VI* to signal the articulation of *The Craft's* tropes and their appropriation for dramatic purpose.

Beaufort's death sits halfway through the play, catapulting its plot into a poetic of chaos that lingers till the death of the usurper Richard III in the eponymous work that brings the tetralogy to its close.<sup>29</sup> Shakespeare models the "unexpected death of Cardinal Beaufort, raving mad in his bed, as if the pent-up guilt of a lifetime of ruthless greed and ambition has finally burst into him" (Tanner, 335). If that last comment describes the scene ably enough, it neglects some of its darker and somewhat cryptic features that

<sup>28</sup> Technically, it is the second deathbed scene of the play, but Shakespeare does not assort York's death with a speech from the victim; he dies ambushed in bed; however, much is made of the terrible postmortem figure York will cut, and it is his dead body that does the talking.

<sup>29</sup> It seems important to state that the organization of the plays into a trilogy (itself part of the so-called *first tetralogy*) by the compilers of the Folio who made enlightened editorial decisions, may have somewhat disserved *2 Henry VI*, and obfuscated its potency as an autonomous text. Written earlier than what is now called *1 Henry VI*, it is "the most dramatically satisfying of the three parts" (Auden, 2000, p.7). Jean Howard, in her introduction to the play, "one of Shakespeare's first works for the stage", points to its textual instability: published in 1594 (Q1), followed by subsequent quartos (those of 1600 & 1619) the play first appears under the name *The First Part of the Contention of The Houses of York and Lancaster*, a more adequate title to describe the play's narrative (1997, 201-213). These variant texts impact the reading of the play in obviously many ways, and specifically in matters of death and of its representation. The Quartos have the Duke of York (Humphrey) killed on stage in real time, while the Folio confines his death to the wings. For Beaufort's death scene, Q1's opening stage note reads: "*The Cardinal's bedroom. Enter the ghost of DUKE HUMPHREY to the Cardinal in bed*" and yet there is no such appearance of York's ghost in the Folio. Then will appear in subsequent editions the note "*Enter the king, Salisbury, and Warwick, to the Cardinal in bed, raving and staring as if he were mad.*" As Howard observes, these "vexing" textual variants in the publishing history of the play may be explained by the recourse to "memorial reconstruction (actors piecing together scripts from memory)" of performance (211). In a dissertation that means to insist on the critical function of actors, the "actors are critics" of my introduction, in the dissemination of the plays' inherent didacticism, this information bears significant weight. To explain the presence of dead York in Beaufort's death scene, we may propose the likeliness that actors went "literal" in a given production and chose to add his victim's ghost to adorn Beaufort's delirium; those transcribing or compiling the text may have decided to immortalize this juicy bit of stage business. But if the presence of Humphrey's ghost may add to the horror of Beaufort's death, and reify the Cardinal's guilt, it seems superfluous as it dilutes the ambiguity of the Cardinal's utterances. The stage note describing Beaufort's as *raving and staring as if mad* is just as superfluous; the Cardinal's speeches already prescribe such demeanor and he is so described by a character named Vaux in the preceding scene. In *Imagining Shakespeare* (2005), Stephen Orgel relates many such tales of stage business (particularly from the Victorian era) that inscribed themselves in subsequent editions of the plays as if they were meant by the author; this leads him to believe that the plays we have in our possession are more often than not the distillation of a history of productions, rather than the products of a trustable definitive authorship.



equally ‘burst’ out of the scene, if we only let them. Indeed, the Cardinal dies “a horrible and edifying death, suggesting that divine retribution is beginning to reveal its inexorable force” in this, a series of plays that have often been taxed with propagandist propensities as they dramatize the godless prelude to the providential advent of the Tudor dynasty (Bevington, 1988, p.134).

The use of the word *edifying* seems more than apt, particularly if David Bevington means by that, that Beaufort’s death is able to “instruct and inform, to improve in moral sense ... [in sometimes an] ironical” manner its audiences.<sup>30</sup> But to recognize the full potency of the moral instruction of this richly emblematic but insufficiently glossed scene, to acknowledge its theological indebtedness to the *ars moriendi* tradition, further excavation is required. I suggest we consider the 34-line-long scene as one such “bare ruined choirs, where late the sweet birds sang,” that is to say that as in Shakespeare’s sonnet (LXXIII, line 4), we should appreciate the scene as an allusive residual locus in which to glimpse, if in a shattered version, a vibrant, mutable, tenacious literary tradition born of the religious past, that of the *ars moriendi*. Significantly for my project, this line from Sonnet LXXXIII furnishes its two dominant metaphors: first, one of a ruined landscape with recognizable landmarks, and second, of birdsongs (this time, of swan songs) hauntingly filling the death scenes of this theatre. The theological underpinnings of *the Craft of Dying* are all in presence, imprinted and yet conveniently spectral. Because of its centrality to my argument, I reproduce the scene here in its entirety:

3.3 *Enter KING [HENRY and the Earls of] SALISBURY and WARWICK. Then the curtains be drawn [revealing] CARDINAL [BEAUFORT] in his bed raving and staring as if he were mad*

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<sup>30</sup> *To edify*, O.E.D.

KING HENRY  
CARDINAL           How fares my lord? Speak, Beaufort, to thy sovereign.  
If thou beest death, I'll give thee England's treasure,  
Enough to purchase such another island,  
So thou wilt let me live, and feel no pain.

KING HENRY       Ah, what a sign it is of evil life,  
Where death's approach is seen so terrible.

WARWICK  
CARDINAL           Beaufort, it is thy sovereign speaks to thee.  
Bring me unto my trial when you will.  
Died he not in his bed? Where should he die?  
Can I make men live, whe'er they will or no?  
O, torture me no more - I will confess.  
Alive again? Then show me where he is:  
I'll give a thousand pound to look upon him.  
He hath no eyes! The dust hath blinded them.  
Comb down his hair - look, look: it stands upright,  
Like lime twigs set to catch my winged soul.  
Give me some drink, and bid the apothecary  
Bring the strong poison that I bought of him.

KING HENRY       O thou eternal Mover of the heavens.  
Look with a gentle eye upon this wretch!  
O, beat away the busy meddling fiend  
That lays strong siege unto this wretch's soul.  
And from his bosom purge this black despair.

WARWICK  
SALISBURY  
KING HENRY       See, how the pangs of death do make him grin.  
Disturb him not; let him pass peaceably.  
Peace to his soul, if God's good pleasure be.  
Lord Card'nal, if thou think'st on heaven's bliss,  
Hold up thy hand, make signal of thy hope.  
He dies, and makes no sign. O God, forgive him!

WARWICK  
KING HENRY       So bad a death argues a monstrous life.  
Forbear to judge, for we are sinners all.  
Close up his eyes and draw the curtain close;  
And let us all to meditation. (3.3. 1-34)  
*Exeunt [drawing the curtains. The bed is removed].*

From the death of a Catholic prelate, a cardinal no less, i.e. electable to the papacy, one might legitimately expect a certain piety or at least the echo of a long frequentation with the “issues of death;” this is nowhere in evidence in this depiction of a delirious and panicked sinner at Hell's gates. If the early modern English theatre often looks judgmentally upon its national Catholic past, it does not systematically vilify its Catholic protagonists, far from it. In Shakespeare's hands, Beaufort receives such a vilification; in

the play that opens the trilogy, the author alerts us to his hypocritical nature, and in many scenes he is shown primarily as a politician and only then as a cleric with a compromised morality. By his death scene, *2 Henry VI* has already cast him as a Machiavel plotting the death of rivals, grappling for power and influence, and it has simultaneously exposed his sensualist's nature.

But Shakespeare has not neglected to also characterize Beaufort as a forceful individual, articulate in his convictions, prompt to anger, and masterful in his debating with others; there is, in other words, nothing feeble about him. Thus, next to nothing can presage the imminence of a death that occurs without warning. From a dramaturgical perspective, Shakespeare makes Beaufort's *mors improvisa* a formidable "coup de théâtre."

Beaufort receives, apparently at least, the most secular of demises, devoid of godly concern and yet, in a war play, the warlord oddly dies in the comfort of a bed that proves no less a formidable battle scene. I want to stress the ahistorical approach of this dramatization; while Shakespeare has been noted for his attentiveness to the historical chronicles in the elaboration of his plays, here the playwright gives full poetic license to his depiction of a Cardinal's death that has next to no historical accuracy. But historicizing the scene provides us with two magnificent ironies that may have eluded the playwright. First the *Tractatus* that becomes *the Craft* written in the first decades of the fifteenth century, was most likely commissioned by Pope Martin V at the conclusion of the council of Constance (1414-18), a convention that dragged its theological feet to put an end to a century of Papal chicaneries – there were at one point as many as three popes

and holy sees – and we know that Cardinal Beaufort attended the council. May he have had a hand in the writing of a protocol that Shakespeare shows him to ignore?

Second, there is little historical doubt as to Beaufort’s investment in the care of his soul in the afterlife, notwithstanding how secular an end Shakespeare gives him: the Cardinal’s will requests that “three daily masses [be sung] for the rest of his soul and 10,000 others (3,000 requiem masses, 3,000 *rorate coeli* [masses of appeasement], 3,000 holy ghost masses and 1,000 Trinity masses) to be celebrated as soon as possible after his death” [my translation] (Tenenti, 444). So Beaufort had made strict stipulations for the rest of his soul that were perfectly attuned to the religious mores of the period. Shakespeare, iconoclastically, ignores this, or, is ignorant of such dispositions. He is a playwright, not a historian. Then, how does he construe the scene? How does it unfold? And mostly how can the scene be shown as a ruinous theological landscape filled by the song of a dying swan? What then are the recognizable tropes I contend emerge from the scene?

First they are obviously situational. As the king and his entourage enter, they find a man in pains storming in his bed. The situation, that of diligent witnesses crowding the bed of a man in the throes of death, mimics the basic and preferred setting for the application of the *ars* ritual, the deathbed. The play relates events of a distant, but historically resonant past, a past, I must insist, that is contiguous to the publication of Caxton’s first edition. King Henry is shown throughout the trilogy as a pious man – he even dies in prayer - but he proves an ineffectual monarch who prefers the company of books to that of men; if any character in the play is susceptible to own a copy of what Beaty calls an “ubiquitous” book of the period, it is the king; the same might be said of

Winchester.<sup>31</sup> Confronted with the massive deaths that a permanent state of war inevitably causes, the Catholic king and his church's cardinal are professional funeral goers and regular deathbed attendants; they might have read such a book. But if the setting lends itself to such proceedings, Shakespeare seeks a different resolution, and designs a death for Winchester that will register at much higher stakes. As Helen Cooper has observed, Beaufort is to be given "the archetypal bad death" (119). The playwright seems less interested in the destination of Beaufort's soul than the effect the scene might have on its audience; it invests in his damnation. An important tenet of the *ars moriendi* tradition contends that the benefits of its practice extend to those attending the dying subject. Here Shakespeare invents an *ars moriendi* scene, indebted to the original, but made of idiosyncratic rules, to benefit his audience. I would suggest that Shakespeare validates in this brief and explosive scene Alain Badiou's contention that "audiences come to the theatre to be struck" (28). As I also contend, they come to be wounded anew.

Alerted of the gravity of a sudden and inexplicable illness that threatens his political tutor, and immediately following his viewing of York's body, the assassinated Lord Protector, Henry wants to see for himself:

VAUX            That Cardinal Beaufort is at point of death;  
                     For suddenly a grievous sickness took him,  
                     That makes him gasp and stare and catch the air,  
                     Blaspheming God and cursing men on earth.  
                     Sometimes he talks as if Duke Humphrey's ghost  
                     Were by his side; sometime he calls the King,  
                     And whispers to his pillow, as to him  
                     The secrets of his over-charged soul;  
                     And I am sent to tell his majesty  
                     That even now he cries aloud for him. (3.2. 371-380)

<sup>31</sup> In the penultimate scene of *3 Henry VI*, Richard Gloucester, about to murder him, finds King Henry reading in his cell. What might he be reading, one may ask? What if he were reading the *Tractatus*? Could this somewhat alter our understanding of the scene? And what if that might also be said of what Hamlet reads when Polonius inquires about his reading matters? (*Hamlet*, 2.2).

The controlled, scheming, logical Cardinal gasps, stares, catches the air, blasphemes, curses, calls the king, whispers to his pillow, cries aloud; he is out of character. In an orthodox *ars moriendi* scenario, the bed hosts a catastrophe in the making.

The scene starts with a commonplace strategy of playwriting, a question: “how fares my lord?” asks the king. No answer comes. The king adds “Speak, Beaufort, to thy sovereign.” There is already much to unpack here. What does the king see when he comes in? Must the actor simply illustrate what Vaux has described? In the *ars* tradition, questions to the dying about both his/her state of mind and faith are of capital importance; the moriens’ admissions must be made with the most rigorous sincerity and an entire chapter is devoted to such inquiries. “[The] interrogations ... should be asked of them that be in their death bed, while they may speak and understand” (3-4).<sup>32</sup> The king’s entrance then exposes a significant problem that must have presented itself with regularity: a dying subject incapacitated, unable to partake in the ritual, tyrannized as he

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<sup>32</sup> All the quotes from *the Craft* are taken from *The Art and Craft to Know Well To Die*, a rigorous rendering of Caxton first English translation from the Latin, circa 1450 – I have little explanation for the difference in title or for what justifies the unnecessary editorial colluding of “art and craft” put here side by side to translate the word “ars”, though telling this rhetorical move is. This said, I chose this edition because its frontispiece presents it as the “first [translation] done into modern spelling [or rather as those living in 1917 conceived of modern English] and edited by Frances M. M. Comper.” Comper has had a long involvement in the study of death tracts, manifested by her impressive output of still-in-print works on medieval mysticism and spiritual poetry. Under her editorial gaze, Caxton’s modernized translation appears in its entirety, amongst other death treatises most often excerpted, in a larger volume published under the title *The Book of The Craft of Dying and other early English tracts concerning Death*, prefaced by Rev. George Congreve, S.S.J.E. [Society of Saint John the Evangelist, a monastic community of The Episcopal Church]. I thought using this version would save much labor to my reader (and myself) and I can attest to its fidelity to the original. Strangely, the dedication Comper makes in her book initially piqued my curiosity: on page v, we read “All that is mine in this book I dedicate to the loved memory of one who has already learnt this craft.” The subject of her dedication remembered through “loving memory” might very well have passed, in fact this is probably what the reader is meant to assume – my researches have brought little light to his or her identity. But the dedication nonetheless could easily make for an open-ended conclusion; what if the dedication’s subject had been alive at the time of publication, and that something other than death had separated them? The question is not as rhetorical as may seem. If so, wouldn’t this raise an important topic? Can the *craft of dying* be learnt as I asked earlier? Or rather, can it be learnt without the experience of death? What would such knowledge look like, and how could it be applied in consideration of events to come?

may be by the pangs of illness. Yet Beaufort is speaking, somewhat cogently though deluded as he mistakes the king for death itself. At a purely metaphorical level, and in light of the powers invested in monarchy in the period, Beaufort is not entirely wrong: a sovereign has indeed power of life and death over his subjects, and a Christological valence to kingship, one that positions the king as an appointee of God, his deputy on earth, may also inform Beaufort's logic. There might yet be another logic to Beaufort's terror: as a conspirator to York's death, he knows all too well that murderers do come at ungodly hours to surprise the sleeper into death.

Seeing whom he takes to be Death itself, Beaufort offers his immense treasure—"enough to purchase such another island"—in exchange for an alleviation of his pains. We may remember that to accede to the Catholic sacerdotal estate, the aspiring priest, who might in time become the highest of prelates, has to take vows of obedience, chastity and poverty. There is little need to linger on how some have often taken to these strictures only nominally; the anti-clericalism that imbues so much of the literature of the period – of any period – was born of a justified outrage for such hypocrisies. But Beaufort's offers of financial largess in exchange for the relief of his affliction also aims at showing the immense measure of his secular power, his easy access to funds from the national treasure. Of course, unlike the king, we as audience members are privy to his guilt. Ten minutes earlier (of stage time, the night before in the narrative), in a shocking exposition of moral relativism, the cardinal had himself sanctioned the old man's murder with a realpolitik sense that must evade received ideas of morality:

CARDINAL That he should die is worthy policy;  
 But yet we want a colour for his death:  
 'Tis meet he be condemn'd by course of law. (3.1. 235-237)

I relish in this passage, scandalous from the mouth of a cleric: it echoes the discourse of Italian casuists who, fomenting the death of Elizabeth I, did indeed paint her potential slaughter in relativistic ‘colours;’ they were pressing the idea that her murder (a mortal sin) would in fact bestow points of merit for the eternity of her willing assassins. What are we as audience members, as surrogate attendants to Beaufort’s deathbed, meant to conclude upon the king’s arrival? What color does Shakespeare ask us to read in this abrupt fall? Does he want us to believe that his guilt over York’s assassination has poisoned the Cardinal into death? That Beaufort’s conscience suddenly moonlights as his own executioner? From what can this man be dying if not from his guilt? Such a reading may flatter a reassuring belief in an innate goodness in our species, as even after our worst deeds, we can ultimately come to our best senses, and admit guilt. We may think: “so, the corrupt prelate has indeed a conscience,” the very conscience that Hamlet contends “doth make cowards of us all” (3.3.85). But what Shakespeare is about to show is actually far more terrifying, terrorist in fact. The king, appalled or edified (the actor will decide) by Beaufort’s attempts at bargaining, will say:

KING HENRY            Ah, what a sign it is of evil life,  
   Where death’s approach is seen so terrible. (3.3. 5-6)

To modern ears, Henry’s pronouncement may sound fanatically shortsighted or even downright outrageous; when historicized as a late medieval element of faith, the statement makes absolute sense as it articulates theologically sound ideas that themselves had immense bearings upon the construction of the *ars moriendi* tradition as a soul-



restorative ritual. From the king's speech, we are to believe that the way a man dies reflects the moral tenor of his antecedent life.<sup>33</sup>

For certain, we need not question King Henry's sincerity in this matter: he believes like most of his contemporaries that the manner of death reflects the moral essence of the moriens; he is the sum of his sins. *The Craft*, published under his reign, clearly puts its trust in the agency of good *works*; that, simply put, means that the protocol subscribes to the belief that beyond assiduous sacramental piety, an individual's virtuous deeds can positively enhance the odds of his salvation. As I mentioned earlier, the modalities for salvific attainment took their quick historical turn toward commerce and commodification.<sup>34</sup>

For now, what the *craft* proposes for the moment of death is an occasion for Man to see what he has expected or feared; death has arrived and cracks the door open to what awaits the moriens: if he reacts in peace, we are to believe he might already have set foot in Heaven. King Henry witnesses his Cardinal assailed by a disorder of demons eliciting his impatience, his pride, his despair, his lack of faith, and as we just heard, his

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<sup>33</sup> Only very dogmatic people would risk such theories today. But such people exist. American Evangelists Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson, to name but two, professed that the manner of death of certain individuals is warranted by their disregard for Christian tenets that rightly (righteously in my view) condemns their lifestyles. Falwell has called the AIDS epidemic "God's angry response to those engaging in homosexual hedonism", and Robertson, a mere few hours after the events of 9/11, blamed both homosexuals, and Americans who had abandoned the precepts of Christianity as the true culprits for the terrorists attacks. Like Beaufort, these "godly men" have the politician's touch, the pragmatic callousness that often assorts it and worse, its damning sincerity (or one can hope).

<sup>34</sup> Though I have already mentioned the thorny issue of Indulgences, I mean to make a few precisions to help posit *the Craft* in relation to the devolvement of the practice. At the behest of the Church, salvific commerce bloomed and, besides his charitable actions, a Christian could purchase a chance at eternity through increasingly intricate schemes of monetary compensations for the Church, through the commerce of indulgences, the building of chantries, contributions to parish funds, through tithe and the purchase of requiem masses. If this song of corruption is all too well known, it remains contested as a simplification servicing Protestant discourse, and the modes of its unfolding still stir debates. Suffice it to say that the *Craft of Dying* tradition belongs to this movement toward salvation, and the Reformation, as I have already signaled, altered its ethical fabric, disposed of good *works* as an agent of salvation, and would return the *Craft of Dying* to what reforming thinkers thought it ought to have been in the first place: an art of living, that I will later explore.

foolishness with material concerns, prompt as he is to offer England's gold for a bit of respite. Beaufort admits to his part in the crime if obliquely: "Bring me unto my trial when you will." Beaufort makes feeble defenses, and ultimately confesses. But the delusions, the visions, the invisible theatre of his guilt cast all the temptations in a concert where they speak all at once. His discourse is erratic yet consistent as he sees, or imagines York dead in his bed.

CARDINAL Died he not in his bed? Where should he die?  
 Can I make men live, whe'er they will or no?  
 O, torture me no more - I will confess.  
 Alive again? Then show me where he is:  
 I'll give a thousand pound to look upon him.  
 He hath no eyes! The dust hath blinded them.  
 Comb down his hair - look, look: it stands upright,  
 Like lime twigs set to catch my winged soul.  
 Give me some drink, and bid the apothecary  
 Bring the strong poison that I bought of him. (3.3.8-17)

The Cardinal will even compare himself (his soul) to a bird caught in a hunter's trap (the hair of his victim) alluding to a hunting technique of the period, gluing tall grass to catch small game. The torture too infernal for him, he asks for poison, the very one he purchased – for whom does he plan to use it? Himself? - thus revealing further his evil nature as a potential Cardinal-poisoner. That is his swan song, that of a bird trapped in the glue of his own crime, in the hair of his victim, the song of a hunter hunted.

A young playwright creates this terrifying deathbed scene, his earliest in a long series of dramatized meditations on the topic; this first deathbed scene is built with the blueprint of *the Craft*, but its architect seems intoxicated with a spectacularity that explodes its model. The emotions conjured by the terrors of death are here welcome in a theatre that means to wound. Much grutching (this superb word!) is therefor allowed; it is in fact relished. The king offers him, as *The Craft* prescribes, a last chance at salvation,

and what the cardinal does not ask for himself, what he cannot ask perhaps, or will not, King Henry nonetheless requests:

KING HENRY            Lord Card'nal, if thou think'st on heaven's bliss,  
                                  Hold up thy hand, make signal of thy hope.  
                                  He dies, and makes no sign. O God, forgive him! (3.3. 29-31)

Hope has no room here. *The Craft* mentions in its fifth chapter that what has just unfurled, this theatre of despair, to be expected, is in fact more the rule than the exception: "But it is seldom seen that any secular or carnal man – or religious either - will dispose himself to death; or furthermore, that is worse, will hear anything on the matter of death" (20). Men at the gates of death will grutch. We grutch before our ends. As the Cardinal lays silent, forbidden, aghast - the actor looking at the audience in my ideal production - he dies without signaling an inkling of a thought on heaven's bliss. Warwick paraphrases the king's earlier thought, reifying his early conclusion on the meaning of the *bad death*, and in a small gesture that says much about this character's deeply felt charity, the king, edified, echoes the *Gospel* of Matthew: "judge not, that ye be not judged. For what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again" (7.1-2).

They leave the scene to meditate about the spectacle they have witnessed. So do we. What Shakespeare brings to the drama of Beaufort's death, inchoately perhaps, is I believe a certain idea of justice, but a terrifying one. Beaufort could probably have finessed his innocence in the death of York, or parlayed his gullible king into the realpolitik stakes that ordained the Lord Protector's fall; he even succeeds in his death delirium at blinding his victim so as to be invisible to him; Shakespeare will have none of it. The playwright does not like loose ends – he never leaves a play without some

governance in place. In the small play that unfolds at Beaufort's deathbed, cast with invisible demons, within a 34-line scene, itself part of a play, itself part of larger set of plays, he inaugurates an exploration of the experience of dying that will taint many plays to come. And he makes sure Beaufort gets his comeuppance, not wherever he is going, but right here; in this hell made on earth, he makes sure that the cardinal does not escape an Orwellian all-seeing God.

WARWICK            So bad a death argues a monstrous life.  
 KING HENRY        Forbear to judge, for we are sinners all.  
                           Close up his eyes and draw the curtain close;  
                           And let us all to meditation (3.3. 31-34).

So let us follow King Henry and meditate for a moment to better close this chapter. Are our current agonies so foreign to what we have just witnessed? Mitigated as our fear of death may be, assuaged by the comfort of scientific advancement, the medical protocols for the suppression of pain, eased by our ever-extending longevities and by fragmented conceptions of the afterlife (or its non-existence for that matter), do we not remain stirred by anxieties close to those of our forefathers? Our diction of death, our "agonal poetics" may no doubt have been altered:

Modern medicine, by extending the period of dying, has rather done for famous last words, given that their utterance depends upon the speaker knowing it is time to deliver them. Those determined to go out on a phrase could, I suppose, pronounce it and then lapse into a deliberate monastic silence until it is all over. But there was always something heroic about famous last words, and given that we no longer live in heroic time, their loss will not be much lamented. We should celebrate instead ungrandiose, yet still characterful, last words. (Barnes, 167-168).

Despite Barnes' nostalgia for the heroic time, lasting determinisms still rule our agonies. The eternal paradoxes of the human experience have hardly changed; any writing on the topic must weigh in those enduring paradoxes. Let us gather a few: we learn from a very young age that all things, to quote a Buddhist tenet, are "impermanent and bound to die,"

that we, despite our Becker-signaled denials, our supplications, even our prayers for those of us who pray, there is no escaping that dreaded exit. If we are also told that we may somewhat, somewhere and in whatever form go on, we soon realize our eternities are not of this world: they belong, should they exist at all, to a different realm accessible solely through the very act of dying. Rabelais' famous last words (if he uttered them at all) capture this hopeful foreseeing when he speaks "Je m'en vais chercher le Grand Peut-Être; tirer le Rideau, la farce est finie" [I'm on a quest to find the Big Perhaps; draw the curtain, the comedy is over; *my translation*].

And so [Death] stays just on the edge of vision,  
 A small unfocused blur, a standing chill  
 That slows each impulse down to indecision.  
 Most things may never happen: this one will  
 And realization of it rages out  
 In furnace-fear when we are caught without  
 People or drink.

Philip Larkin, *Aubade*.<sup>35</sup>

Our biological destiny, Larkin reminds us, lurks, discreetly perhaps, but intently and poetically over our lives. Death may prove one of the rare human experiences that its subject cannot a posteriori assess, revisit, let alone relate to others. That of course has not stopped our imaginings, the very ones that fashioned for centuries literatures saturated with the projections on death and the afterlife. If I am laboring the obvious it is to make a final point. Or show my hidden card. I wish this study to impact our current experiences and anxieties about dying. Writing about death has its costs. Plunging oneself in death literature as I have done for the last seven years must serve a greater purpose.

In *Dying Modern* (2013), her brilliant study of elegiac poetry in the Anglosphere literature of the last two centuries, Diana Fuss attempts "an act of literary criticism [that

<sup>35</sup> Larkin, Philip. *Collected Poems*, 2003, p. 208-9. All mentions of Larkin's works in this dissertation are taken from this edition.

aims at] inventing more than recovering a modern *ars moriendi* that comes fully to life through a labor of rhetorical and critical animation” (3). Early in this work Fuss asks a question that inevitably interpolates texts well outside the temporal scope and the literary form she examines: “pushing voice to its furthest limit what exactly do poets hope to learn by imagining, and reimagining the dying hour?” (9). I mean to emphasize the particular issue raised here, this ‘hope of learning’ and suggest Fuss’ inquiry loses none of its relevance when directed at the dramatists responsible for the great literary efflorescence and the intense professionalization of the theatrical *métier* we have come to associate with the late Elizabethan and Jacobean eras.

What did Shakespeare, Marlowe, Kyd, Jonson “hope to learn” by writing plays so committed to repeated, obstinate imaginings of death, in which they “pushed to their poetic limit” the voice of individuals in agony? Formulating the question with the works of Shakespeare and his contemporaries in mind may even intensify its charge; in stage-bound texts the so-called “hopes of learning” share themselves dialectically in performance; they do so at arguably various levels, but inherently I repeat, at a didactic one. I stressed earlier my belief as a theatre artist that a latent didacticism inherently attends the dramatic praxis, however unconscious or pointed, diffuse or oblique the intent of the creators may be. Any communication, any exchange can prove an occasion for learning. There exists a good didacticism that challenges - I will not use *subvert* - the order of things and that demands and may effect change. Such hopes galvanize theatre artists.

At Fuss’ suggestion, I propose that by critically animating the rhetorical representations of “dying on stage,” in specific texts of the early modern English

dramatic canon, by assessing the preoccupations (both aesthetic and spiritual) hosted by such representations, we may distill for our death-denying/death-preventing/death-delaying times, instruments of knowledge, or occasions of intelligence, that could enrich our current “imagination” on the issue. But before essaying an *ars moriendi* for our times, it seemed important to examine in this chapter the tradition of ‘*dying well*’ itself, its sources, its history and the diachronic acculturation that its aesthetics shaped into a language created for the stage. We continue this etude in the deployment of nine of *The Craft*’s tropes in the next three chapters, one touching on the death of kings, one addressing the deaths of women and finally one examining the issue of dying in comedies. This should allow opportunities to “grutch” a plenty and in all registers.

CHAPTER II  
 Let Us Sit Upon the Ground, Shall We?  
*Fashioning Dying-Voice Literacy through the Death of Kings*

RICHARD  
 For you have mistook me all this while,  
 I live with bread like you, feel want,  
 Taste grief. Need friends. Subjected thus,  
 How can you say to me I am a king?  
*Richard II*, William Shakespeare. 1595.

“A subject and a sovereign are clean different things. ... I go from a corruptible crown to an incorruptible crown, where no disturbance can be, no disturbance in the world”. ... *The King put off his doublet, ... then, looking upon the Block said to the Executioner*, “You must set it fast.

Executioner	It is fast, sir.
	[ <i>The king, we can imagine, assesses the block’s surprising low height</i> ].
King	It might have been a little higher.
Executioner	It can be no higher, sir.
King	When I put out my hands this way ( <i>stretching them out</i> ) – then... ... Stay for the sign!” <sup>36</sup>

*Charles I, on the scaffold*. 1649.

“SHOW US YOU CARE, MAM”.

Headline of the *London Daily News* six days into the silence of Buckingham Palace over the death of Diana, Princess of Wales. 1997.

CAMILLA	My wond’rous Charles you looked composed throughout You did her proud, for as she would have liked You never showed your pain, but stood instead ... Immovable, inscrutable as stone.
CHARLES	Please don’t. It’s simply what I had to do. ... What lurks within the public mind that needs Us less than human made of tin. All stiff And empty. Soulless, unemotive droids. <span style="display: block; text-align: right;"><i>King Charles III</i>,        A play by Mike Bartlett. 2014.</span>

In this and the chapters that follow I pursue my hunt for the fugitive tropes of the *ars moriendi* tradition, focusing on specific types of moriens, to assess how personal status (that of kings, women and clowns) and emotive registers (the tragic and the comedic) singularize and individuate in representation the universality of mortality on the

<sup>36</sup> Iagomarsino, David & Wood, Charles J., editors. *The Trial of Charles I, a Documentary History*, Hanover: Darmouth University Press. 1989. (p.143-144).



English early modern stage. I think we can safely say that beyond type, register, or personal status, the dying voice has of itself an inherent singularity; it is, as we say in French, *évènementiel*.<sup>37</sup> John of Gaunt in Shakespeare's *Richard II* (1595, first recorded performance) is quite explicit on this issue:

JOHN OF GAUNT    O, but they say that the tongues of dying men  
                           Enforce attention, like deep harmony.  
                           Where words are scarce they are seldom spent in vain,  
                           For they breathe truth that breathe their words in pain.  
                           He that no more must say is listened more  
                           Than they whom youth and ease have taught to glose.  
                           More are men's ends marked than their lives before.  
                           The setting sun, the music at the close,  
                           As the last taste of sweet, is sweetest last,  
                           Writ in remembrance more than things long past.

(2.1. 5-14)

Lest one would deem this a license for torture for our *War on Terror* age (“they breathe truth that breathe their words in pain”), old Gaunt mainly signals here that the words of the dying, akin to music, may more aptly convince; they are inherently eloquent; they are arresting and “*teach* not to glose” [talk erroneously, emphases mine]; the deep harmony of the dying’s words (i.e. their swan songs) enforce attention. Gaunt is talking about himself of course (he is, after all, dying), but notice how he is suddenly rhyming. Notice also that this passage is almost a sonnet, which finds its finishing couplet in Gaunt’s last utterance in the scene: “Convey me to my bed, then to my grave/ Love they to live that love and honor have” (2.2.138-9). Of his end, John of Gaunt makes a poem, a sonnet, idiosyncratic in rhyme scheme, as well he should, as an individuated death requires. But John of Gaunt also reprises a primeval belief clearly enunciated in a very ancient trilogy of plays, namely Aeschylus’ *The Oresteia* (458 BCE):

<sup>37</sup> There is no proper word to convey this meaning in English, (anyhow not one that I have yet found, and not from lack of trying): “it is an occasion, or, is always an event” would perhaps serve best, and yet, it does not do it semantic justice. So pardon my French...as they say in English.

CHORUS

I am the man to tell this tale  
 Old age takes away everything  
 Except a few words that gods have tested.  
 For the eye that opens towards the grave  
 Sees the core of things and is prophetic.

(*Agamemnon*, translated by Hugues, p.10).

True enough: the words of the dying carry a different weight. But as we will see, social status, gender, sexual orientation, religious belief, and age pack on the pounds.

This chapter strictly concerns itself with the representation of the deaths of rarefied and exceptional individuals: royal persons, often believed to be God-appointed or Christ-like. We can hardly ignore that the theatre that here hosts royal deaths just as often offers these individuals as “made-up” creations. The plays accomplish this distinction dialectically, first by praxis and then by embracing the narrative imperatives of historicity; this is a problematic and recurrent aspect of plays addressing the accouterments of kingship: an actor puts on a crown, et voilà, he is a king; or in a dramatized narrative that borrows from the historical chronicles, an ambitious courtier deposes a sitting monarch, and minutes later bends the knees of those who have helped him overthrow the tyrant; *Richard II* is a case in point: though there is legitimacy to Bolingbroke’s claims to the throne, he is nonetheless a self-made king. And God-appointed Henry V remains the son of a self-appointed monarch, his father, Henry IV formerly known as Bolingbroke.

In this chapter that scrutinizes the *gestalt* of the death of kings, I give myself a further task: beside resuming the mapping of the migration of *the Craft*’s nine tropes (established in chapter I) upon the theatrical representation of the deaths of royal figures, I juxtapose specific tropes to specific passages to expound on their meaning and

better expose their ideological and theological indebtedness to *The Craft*.<sup>38</sup> Of course, the tropes appear in various shapes and forms in all the scenes selected, but my strategy is to recognize how this or that death scene becomes a privileged locus of deployment for a specific trope. The ninth trope (the import of a figurative diction, and inevitably of its ideological baggage) is a given in all the scenes; thus, it posits the dramatization of royal agonies, as a dominant acculturating factor of the dying-voice literacy I seek to expose. And I will end the chapter with a further exploration of the five temptations in my discussion of Shakespeare's *King Lear* (1606, first performance).

Let me argue at the outset why I take these representations of figures of authority often debased into death, or in the words of one of Shakespeare's kings "deposed, slain in war, ... poisoned by their wives, some sleeping killed, all murdered," humiliated, and though God-appointed nonetheless confronted with mortality, to significantly engross the dying-voice literacy (*Richard II*, 3.2. 153-6). Simply put, these royal deaths play an accretive role in the construction of the stage-bound idiom because of the subjected listening their protagonists' status ordains. The bowl shapes the liquid poured into it. In my scheme, kings stand as scholarly figures in this acculturating process of the death discourse. They stand as neologists of this idiom.

Does the *ultima verba* of a king carry more weight than the last words of his subject? It does, and for obvious reasons: the *de casibus* tradition, and the indebtedness to the ancient Greek and Roman dramaturgies.<sup>39</sup> In fact Paul Budra contends that for

<sup>38</sup> I want to insure my reader realizes that I all-too-well recognize the arbitrariness of my classification, my list of tropes. Many other elements, and issues, could or should have been raised, but I limit myself to nine such elements as I believe they make the argument more concisely and more directly.

<sup>39</sup> The *de casibus* literary tradition may be best understood as "those works written in direct imitation of the form of Boccaccio's *De casibus virorum illustrium* [first emerging in print in England in 1494, i.e. four years after the first publication of *The Craft*]. ... [Though] not based on ideas or forms of tragedy ... *de casibus* literature was a form of history writing that used concatenated biographies to demonstrate a

instance, *Richard II* is a play “that seems, in many ways, to be Shakespeare’s meditation on the *de casibus* form” (85). This said, a position of privilege does not forbid a lack of insight before (or even after) the *issues of death*. As early as Lucian’s *Dialogues of the Dead*, we find Menippus,

that in his travels through hell, ... knew not the kings of the earth from other men but only by their louder cryings and tears, which were fostered in them through the remorseful memory of the good days they had seen, and the fruitful havings which they so unwillingly left behind them (213).<sup>40</sup>

In this relating of Menippus’ journey through hell, the reader chances upon King Philip of Macedonia chiding his son for thinking that, even in death, he is still an exceptional being, when Alexander the Great compares himself to Hercules: “Heracles and Dionysus, indeed! You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Alexander; when will you learn to drop that bombast, and know yourself for the *shade* that you are?” (*Dialogue XII*, emphasizes mine).<sup>41</sup>

Whether the royal voice is spiritually enlightened or not, instructed into death or not, the fact remains that this dramatic canon (here encapsulated in a selection of historical plays by Marlowe and Shakespeare) gives precedence to the dying voices of princes, a modeling of classical tragedy, though Aristotle never stipulates that the characters of a good tragedy ought to be of royal blood.<sup>42</sup> Philip Sidney does (if

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teleology (in the theological sense of that word) at work in the course of human events” (Budra, xiii). In England, *A Mirror for Magistrates* (1559) [a revised and enlarged version of John Lydgate’s *Fall of Princes* (1527, a translation of Boccaccio’s work)], Chaucer’s *Monk’s Tale* in his *Canterbury Tales* (first published in print by William Caxton in 1478, the publisher of *The Craft*) and even Foxe’s *Book of Martyrs* (first published in 1576, but greatly enhanced and edited in further iterations) can all be considered as texts partaking of this tradition.

<sup>40</sup> *On Death*, by Francis Bacon, (1597).

<sup>41</sup> *Dialogues of the Dead* by Lucian of Samosata (Circa 125-180 CE), translated by H. W. & F. G. Fowler.

<sup>42</sup> In his *Poetics*, Aristotle insists in section B. *With Respect to Character*, that the tragedian must aim at representing a) “first and foremost characters [who] should be morally good...; b) the characters represented should be suitable; c) they should be life-like; d) they should be consistent” (69); nor is Aristotle expressly opposed to the staging of violence and death on stage. In his section on *The Elements of the Plot*, at the article (iii) on *Pathos*, we find: “a Pathos is an act involving destruction or pain, for example

obliquely) in *The Defence of Poesy* (c.1580; printed 1595); Sidney contends that tragedies should concern themselves with the fate of kings as he deplores the dramaturgical efforts of his period (save *Gordobuc!*) where “besides ... gross absurdities, ... all their plays be neither right tragedies nor right comedies, mingling kings and clowns (46). We may infer from that that Sidney wants kings confined to tragedies, and clowns to comedies. George Puttenham is more direct in his belief “that the great princes and

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*deaths on stage and physical agonies and woundings and so on* (65, emphases mine). It is a commonly received idea that no one dies on stage in Greek tragedies because it would prove contrary to decorum, or “ob/skene”, obscene; that is of course, not the case: Ajax commits suicide in Sophocles’ eponymous play (442 BCE):

(*Ajax prepares to fall on his sword.*)

AJAX     Death! Death! Do you see me?

...

These are the last words of Ajax.

*Now he speaks* in Hades to the dead (lines 855-865, my italics).

The text is explicit enough; though Ajax still speaks, he has died.

Alcestis dies on stage in Euripides’ play named after her (438 BCE):

ALCESTIS     A god is deciding this, not me.

ADMETOS     Alcestis. Alcestis. O Alcestis.

CHORUS I     She is dead (24-25, in *Ted Hughes’ translation*, 1999).

In Euripides’ *Hippolytus* (428 BCE) the eponymous hero also dies on stage:

HIPPOLYTUS     My endurance is at an end – my death is upon me, father. With all due speed place a covering my face.

...

*[Theseus goes out and the body of Hippolytus is carried out]* (80).

Thus this decorum business remains a thorny issue. True enough, the extant canon of Greek tragedies gives few scenes that host what Roland Barthes calls *la mort-durée*. The Roman Seneca frequently has his characters die on stage in the most graphic and gory manner; yet we do not know if the plays were ever performed, other than possibly publicly read as an after-dinner entertainment. Seneca himself in his letters expressly condemns the spectacularization of violence and murder: in his essay/letter *On Crowds*, he warns his disciple against going to the Circus Maximus, as “nothing is more injurious to character as lounging at the show. [Seneca speaks at length of the gratuitous violence as if the spectators, bored with the gladiators’ resilience would say] “Let’s have a little throat-cutting; we must have some action” ‘Listen, can’t you even understand that bad examples backfire on the doer? ... Retire into yourself, so far as you can” (172-173). In true Stoic form, for Seneca the theatre is anti-Stoic and his letters and essays show a man who does not seem to like it much. This commentary from the man who wrote *Thyestes*, the *Titus Andronicus* of Antiquity, is to say the least, arresting.

dominators of the world were honored ... by tragedy in especial (and not till after their deaths)” (86).<sup>43</sup> But as George Steiner piercingly sums up in a now much-contested view:

The Athenian and the Elizabethan theatre were innocent of theoretical debate. The *Poetics* were conceived after the fact, and Shakespeare left no manual of style in the Seventeenth century, this innocence and the attendant freedom of imaginative life were forever lost. (38).<sup>44</sup>

Though Steiner might be right (albeit in a literal way), I would object to his view that the plays themselves are “innocent” of theoretical debate; they frankly engage in such debates if by praxis; the ubiquity of metatheatricality alone forces us to gage the playwrights as constant thinkers on efficacious playwriting; they constantly ponder issues of verisimilitude, style, and pragmatism. For Steiner, Dryden is the first English critic-playwright, and I will have further engagement with Dryden’s critical views in my discussion of death in the comedic register in chapter four.

For now, as I am unpacking a stage-bound language born of hybridity, I ask my reader to consider the following “imperial” simile for this discussion: what the

<sup>43</sup> *The Art of English Poesy*, (1589).

<sup>44</sup> George Steiner, hardly a post-modern critic, publishes *The Death of Tragedy* in 1961, the year of my birth. He poses as the obituarist of the tragic form, but as Terry Eagleton suggests in his penetrating *Sweet Violence, the idea of the tragic* (2003), a study that repeatedly rebuts Steiner’s views and not always in the kindest manner, the tragic genre had better ventriloquize Mark Twain and claim that “the reports of its death have been greatly exaggerated”. Steiner’s progressivist agenda posits Christianity and Marxism as incompatible with the idea of the tragic; his book has been consistently reissued (1963, 1980, 1996, 2010). For all its shortcomings, *The Death of Tragedy* remains a superb read, stupendously erudite, and can be more calmly considered in the light that it was evidently written before Foucault, before Greenblatt, before Dollimore’s subsequent rebuttal of New Historicism, before we were told that both this “innocence”, this “freedom” were illusory or rather, self-nullifying. And in truth, one feels in Steiner’s prose the residual imprint of E.M.W. Tillyard’s *The Elizabethan World Picture* (1959), an important but now oft-derided work published two years before Steiner’s work. In *The Death of Tragedy*, a study that neither quotes nor alludes to Tillyard, Steiner writes: “in the major part of Shakespearian drama, the conception of politics is not far removed from medieval thought, and the treatment of political action is subordinate to that of the individual dramatic characters” (55). Go tell that, [at your own risks], to Jonathan Dollimore, the author of *Radical Tragedy* (2004, fourth edition, with a new introduction by its author)! In acquiescence with Steiner, no less eminent a critic than Marvin Carlson, who embraced the seismic imports of cultural studies upon academia, states in 1993 that “although...the development of the concept of decorum, *no systematic discussion of the drama* had significant impact on subsequent dramatic theory, was produced in England at that time” (76, my italics). Both Eagleton and Dollimore would find that “hardly a word of this holds generally true” (Eagleton in Dollimore, 2003, 7); like them, I believe the plays tell otherwise.

theatricalization of royal deaths does for the dying-voice literacy is akin to what William the Conqueror did for the English language. The Anglo-Saxon idiom receives after the 1066 invasion an injection of French culture that doubles its vocabulary and alters its culture. Similarly, the royal dying-voice of the plays enriches *The Craft's* imported linguistics. If Charles I can claim that “a subject and a sovereign are clean different things,” these pages investigate how those legitimate (but not so clean) differences inform the experience of agony and its representation. Let me first return to the epigrams that crown this chapter as they exemplify the first two tropes in eloquent ways: 1. *Death is an action, a task to accomplish in various manners*; 2. *Death is a lesson, frank, inferred or allusive*.

My reader may have detected an ironic tone in both the title of this chapter and in its choice of epigrams that aim at situating the chapter's thematic and its stakes; if so, my reader is correct. The *we* in the “shall we?” of the title points indeed at an irony that is two-fold. First, it alludes fittingly to the royal “we”, the “we” that stridently states its supersession, its self-importance, but that also parlays itself into a political theology where the royal body makes double office: that of the prince himself (his human body), and that of the people or realm he embodies (his body politic); this double office “describes the mystical union of the king's two bodies in Tudor legal and political theory” (McCoy, 2013, 4). I will return to this doctrine later on in this chapter. The other *we* is a far more thorny affair; it is the one we find in countless academic and devotional prose, starting with *The Book of the Craft of Dying Well* (1490) itself; in chapter I of the foundational text of the tradition, we find the sentence:

And sith, as it is foresaid, *we* may not, in no wise, neither flee nor escape, neither change the inevitable necessity of the passage of death, therefore *we* ought to take

our death when God will, willfully and gladly, without any grutching or contradiction, through the might and boldness of the will of *our* very discretion (8, emphases mine).

Or see the *we* appearing as *us* in the opening lines of Erasmus' *Preparation to Death* (1538):

Of all dradfvull things, death is moste dradfull, ...whyche hath taught *us*, not onely with words, but also with euydente examples, that a man perishes not by death of body, but is drawn in sondre, and that the soul is ledde forth as it were our of a prison most paunful in to blessed reste (37, emphases mine).

Or the opening statements in the immensely popular *A Salve for a Sicke Man* (1595) by Williams Perkins: the author insists we must learn to die so “that *we* may come to the true and proper sense of the precept or rule” he gives as an introduction (p.127, emphases mine). Or even the opening sentence of John More's *A Lively Anatomie of Death...teaching to teach man to lyve and die well to the Lord* (1596): “*We* see it verified by experience that all earthly and transitorie things have their ende to the whiche they tend” (165, emphases mine). This use of “we” is also a doctrine of two bodies where a rhetoric of inclusion invites the reader to be one with the author's mind and argument. The practice has a long history and endures. I cannot find one essay of Doctor Johnson where the “we” does not appear; idem for Hazlitt. Nearer to us, in *Essays on Elizabethan Drama* (1932), T. S. Eliot peppers his argument with the “we”. Auden, Bloom, Cavell, Montrose, Greenblatt, Garber all tend to this inclusive rhetoric gesture. Most current academic prose, wised by the ghosting tyrannies of hegemonic discourse, makes a prudent use of the form. Still, it pops up with resistant regularity. The academic “we” is convivial, though off-putting to many, but it always calls for a form of engagement, (if disavowing it can be interpreted as a form of engagement). I will use “we” as these are my facts: I am writing about death, death as it is represented in ancient texts that



dramatize its progress; I evaluate how those dramatizations may edify audiences on issues of dying; inescapably I am also writing about our death, “what we know, have always known, know that we can’t escape, yet can’t accept” (Larkin, *Aubade*, lines 41-43). Besides, the death of kings concerns me in more ways than my reader perhaps can imagine.<sup>45</sup>

The four epigrams all aim at highlighting diachronically and in different tonalities a crisis of representation that puts the “we” question at its epicenter. The first one comes from Shakespeare’s *Richard II*, a work of fiction based on historical facts: the king, recently deposed, delivers an exquisite soliloquy that culminates with a demand that his loyal followers cover their heads, as his fall has made ordinariness of his former exceptionality; they will not; his debasement, and his dignity in debasement is what makes him even more kingly to them. By claiming that he is one of them, he estranges himself further. But this famous speech on the death of kings prepares us for his Boethius-like confession in the fifth act of the play. Richard embraces (reluctantly, cynically perhaps) his mortal condition. This is what the speech accomplishes; it is its

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<sup>45</sup> I am an actor who comes from a theatrical dynasty (both my father and grandfather were celebrated theatre artists in my country of birth). I am also a man who knows he is going to die and for whom “the stakes” of death and its representation are not mere academic topics but occasions of anguish and intelligence. Finally, born and raised in Canada, a parliamentary monarchy, I have had a long engagement with the tropes of kingship, and specifically those of English royalty. Monarchy is no quaint affair in my life. The Queen’s birthday (Victoria) was/is a school holiday in my birth country; Queen Elizabeth II attends to every transaction of our capitalist economy as her effigy appears on all notes and coins. I spent most of my adolescence hanging around Place George V, a park in the old city. Or I loitered on Place Royale, where a bust of Louis XIV, our beloved king before the conquest, observed, stone-faced, my idleness. When my father was elected “Grand Officier” of the Canada Arts Council, it was through a royal promulgation that, once framed, found a place of choice on the walls of our family home. In England, my father would have been Sir Louis Fortin. He was about to receive the *Order of Canada* when he abruptly died, during a Sunday brunch, surrounded by friends and family, in our country home, a glass of wine in his hand, in the middle of one of his marvelous stories. When I returned from England, having studied acting in London on a Canada Art Council grant, I was presented to her Majesty during a ceremony at City Hall in Quebec City (1987). I have played Prince Hal, Henry V, Bérenger I in Ionesco’s *Exit the King* (in two different productions). I have played Oberon, king of the fairies! I have acted Prince Haemon in Sophocles’ *Antigone*, the Church prince Cardinal Richelieu in *The Three Musketeers*. In my experience, kings, death and the theatre are “lived” realities. Here ends the second confession.

action, an action that imitates the opening lines of *The Craft*. The second epigram is historical rather than fictional: Charles I has spoken for about four minutes, though as he mentions at the beginning of his last public address “I shall be little heard of anybody here, I shall therefore speak a word [his *ultima verba*] unto you here” (140). He is ready for the ax. But he notices how low the block is and “we, are not amused.” The crowd could hardly hear Charles, and the scaffold had been dressed up in a way that would not allow the public to see him lose his head. His reaction (captured in the epigram) may mean that, one, he is humiliated by having to bend so low to the ground; two, that he is displeased that his death will not be the spectacle he had rehearsed. Stephen Greenblatt speaks of these monarchical public displays (the richly orchestrated progresses, the coronations, the funerals) as occasions of “privileged visibility” (64).<sup>46</sup> Charles wants his death to edify, he wants to make perfectly clear that he is prepared, has been apprenticed into what is going to come after he speaks. But Charles wanted a show. What separate him from death are now mere words. This is *his* agony, not the words of *The Craft*, but those he has been, we can imagine, carefully rehearsing for weeks. Yet for that lesson to take, it needs to be shown and seen. In order to assess the state of faith of the moriens, the attendants around the deathbed need hear it.

The two opening epigrams are thus both theatrical in essence, and yet clear iterations borrowed from *The Craft*: the first one (the fictional Richard’s) is an unveiling, a demystifying, a “facing the facts,” while the second, (the historical Charles’) exposes a disappointment as “my death will not unfurl as I planned it.” Both quotations expose the tension that puts kingship at odds with the vulnerable humanity of those meant to be its

<sup>46</sup> From the essay “Invisible Bullets” in *Shakespearean Negotiations*, (1988). The usually invisible but omnipresent monarch is finally visible at his hour of death.

embodiment, when mortality must reveal both the artifices and limitations of power. The theatre thrives on this tension.<sup>47</sup> Death as action and as lesson are thus perfectly established in these two epigrams.

The next epigrams (3 and 4) help create a little transhistorical dialogue between all four epigrams; this dialogue mirrors what I contend is the praxis of the dramatists themselves. They engaged in a form of Presentism “*avant la lettre*.”<sup>48</sup> Following Hugh Grady and Terence Hawkes, I firmly believe that the theatre, and that theatrical performance above all, make evident that “it’s always the present that makes the past speak, [and] it speaks always and only to - and about – ourselves” (5). We, ourselves, our deaths. This “we” is incontrovertible in this discussion of the death of kings; it cannot be evaded. In practice, what does that mean? We, who live in democratic societies, and pay a high fee to come and watch Lear die on stage, his kingliness quaint or antiquated, his sacredness theatrical rather than ideological, are still “privileged viewers” of a drama of death that we can’t ignore will one day be ours.

The third epigram is a newspaper headline: “Show us you care, Mam,” a request for action from the royal house of Windsor, that has yet to make a public statement on the accidental death in late August 1997 of Diana, rogue Princess of Wales. The public wants acknowledgement, wants to, like Richard II, “feel grief” with the royal house that has stayed mute on the issue. This touches *The Craft*’s second trope all too obviously and in a vibrant and touching way: the subjects want to be one with their monarch; they want

<sup>47</sup> And still, the verb “to subvert” will not appear in these pages.

<sup>48</sup> A good example of this proto-Presentist approach might found in *King John*, where the eponymous hero is turned into a proto-Protestant, and his death dramatized as the consequence of an act of Catholic terrorism. Though King John’s quarrels with papal authorities bear unimpeachable historicity, it is quite a stretch to turn the signatory of the *Magna Carta* (1215), a document effecting the derogation of monarchical prerogatives, into a teleological milestone of the great schism.

confirmation of the doctrine of the King's Two Bodies; they want the "we." In Caxton's text, the presence of attendants is an occasion of instruction, for as much as they will comply and react.

It is not an exaggeration to say that an absence of reaction from the British royal family nearly terminated monarchy in England. Republicanism flourished for a while.<sup>49</sup> The final epigram is from a recent play by Mike Bartlett, (still playing and planning a transatlantic transfer to Broadway next season) called *Charles III*. The play, written in iambic pentameter, has but a few passages in prose when Prince Harry, in a rather neat wink to Prince Hal, goes to a nightclub and falls in love with a republican girl out on the town. The play imagines the aftermath of Queen Elizabeth II's death, where Charles, now king, proposes to block a law that would criminalize phone hacking in the name of press freedom. Charles III wants more than to simply play his symbolic role. His refusal to sign the bill brings the kingdom to a political crisis of epic proportions with tanks posted at the gates at Buckingham Palace against an enraged population. Princess Diana appears in the play as a ghost. The excerpt, served as epigram, inaugurates the play when Camilla congratulates her husband for his stoic deportment during his mother's funeral. He responds by simply saying he did what he had to do: not show emotions, remain impassible; that was his royal duty. But something else slips through his lines: he wonders why royal figures should be thought of as "All stiff /And empty. Soulless, unemotive droids." In this play, Charles wants most of all to be human, and he proves

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<sup>49</sup> These events are admirably dramatized in the movie *The Queen* (2006, Peter Morgan, writer, with Stephens Frears, directing). The film is credited to have done marvels to re-establish the necessity and the symbolic importance of monarchical ceremonies in the United Kingdom. And truth is, the film humanizes in a discreet and subtle fashion the seemingly unapproachable Queen. Drama, once more, willfully or not, propagandist or not, revisionist for sure, participates in the edification of the political. It does not simply reify as New Historicists would have it; something is changed and I intuit it has to do with a humanizing of the symbolic. It is of course to the advantage of what is already in place; yet, certain mistakes will not be made again.

rather ungifted for the task. The play is a magnificent work that resonates with its Elizabethan and Jacobean ancestors and its lesson is one of humanity. The lesson of *The Craft*, really, when all is said and done, is that we get to assess what the words of the protocols actually accomplish beyond (or because of) their theological strictures: a communion between the dying and those surrounding her, a collective *we* assembled in a room, or a theater, watching in grief or joy, participating in the progress of agony.

Though I touch on other texts, I anchor my discussion on Shakespeare's *King John* and Marlowe's *The Massacre at Paris*, and I close this chapter with Shakespeare's *King Lear*. In their representation of kingly deaths, Shakespeare and Marlowe make dramaturgical propositions that obviously accomplish more than a mere articulation of mortality; they furnish their stage with death scenes that engage political, ethical, and religious issues, and those too must attend my discussion. As to the political issues these moments raise, I am particularly interested in how the theatre exposes its own fictions in these texts through metatheatricity, and further, in the theatricality of kingship itself, or its reliance on practices of make-believe borrowed from the theatre. A rich scholarship exists on these matters and I will refer to it when need be. Yet I am mainly here to hunt swans, those most royal birds (the swans are still crown properties in England), or rather I am hunting their death songs that we already recognize as actions, and as lessons; now I juxtapose moments from the scenes with the next seven tropes.

*Trope 3. Death is a performance.*

I suggest Shakespeare and Marlowe found in their dramatization of the deaths of kings an opportunity to explore sublimity, creating swan songs or better put, 'good poetic deaths' that, with their loose entanglement with historicity, taught or proposed eccentric

models as to how one may die.<sup>50</sup> They showcased the deaths of these all-too-mortal yet sacred figures as occasions of exemplarity (what to do, what not to do). While Michael Neill has convincingly elevated these texts to being the “principal instruments by which the culture of early modern England reinvented death,” I believe they endure because they still permit us to invent our deaths, a point I made in the closing statement of my opening chapter (3).

Let us consider what is performed through the poetics of such representations: an expressive deployment of the enormity of death, its catastrophic pull and its cosmological impact. The death of a king is performative in the theatre as it alters the reality of the narrative. Kingly deaths raise the stakes of loss-through-death, exposing the cosmological disorder they may bring. In *Macbeth* (1606) for instance, the murder of King Duncan induces horrendous cosmological mutations where

ROSS Duncan’s horses – a thing most strange and certain –  
Beauteous and swift, the minions of their race,  
Turned wild against nature, broke their stalls, flung out,  
Contending ’gainst obedience, as they would  
Make war with mankind.

OLD MAN ’Tis said they ate each other.

ROSS They did so, to th’ amazement of mine eyes  
That looked upon’t (3.1. 14-21)

The king’s horses, vegetarian animals, cannibalize themselves when their master unnaturally dies. What is here as important as the cosmic disfigurement brought by the royal death is the theatre it generates: Ross watches in amazement. In *Julius Caesar*

<sup>50</sup> I do not use the term *Sublime* without discernment; and I want to establish the valence in which I hold this mutable concept: I side mainly with Kant as his views most compellingly apply to theatrical performance, where the experience of sublimity is described “as a rapid sequence of painful blockage and pleasurable release – ‘the feeling of a momentary check to the vital forces followed at once by a discharge all the more powerful’ (Kant quoted in M. H. Abrams, 2009, p.356). I think of the *Sublime* as the gateway to Catharsis, another thorny nest of meanings, that I simply – as if I could – consider through theatrical practice, as a moment of communion between the audience and the performers, of heightened sensibility, and of rhetorical indescribability. I know when I experience it, but I cannot speak of it; I know what it is, how it feels, but its essence is incommunicable.

(1599), the assassination of the “monarch” makes “men, wives, and children stare, cry out, and run as it were doomsday” (3.1.98-99). Yet Shakespeare recognizes that the death of a man, be he an emperor in the making, remains to the indifferent immensity of the universe little more than the fracturing of one its atoms. In *Antony and Cleopatra* (c.1606-07), when Decretas informs Octavius Caesar of Antony’s death, he will say:

DECRETAS	I say, O Caesar, that Antony is dead.
CAESAR	The breaking of so great a thing should make A greater crack. The rived world Should have lions into civil streets, And citizens to their dens. The death of Antony Is not a single doom; in that name lay A moiety of the world. (5.1.13-19).

This is a theatre then that hosts both postures: the death of the king can prove both insignificantly personal and grandly cosmological. It performs the grandiose, and can simultaneously induce the dumbfounding awe that it performs next to nothing. This said, the death of kings privileges the former: with recurrence, pathetic fallacies imbue the discourse of royal deaths and not just in the theatre.<sup>51</sup> If on the one hand Prince Hamlet sees the fictions of the theatre as an apparatus to expose reality, as the “purpose of playing ... was and is to hold a mirror up to nature” (3.2. 19-20), Henry IV on the other hand, is on his deathbed quick to confess to his son that his hold on power did in fact repose on theatrics aimed at justifying his royal legitimacy:

KING HENRY	For all my reign hath been but a scene Acting that argument. (4.3.325-326).
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Henry confesses that royalty is little more than performance, a theatre with its own rules, and a kingly death to register with more amplitude than that of a subject, must deploy a differentiated expressive arsenal that will effect the “alteration of state” such

<sup>51</sup> See the reports on Elizabeth I’s death in the following chapters.

deaths are believed to provide; thus, the last utterance of a king requires a heightened rhetorical register, a self-denouncing performance (perceived as metatheatrical at times) designed to match the catastrophe constituted (or not) by the events of royal death. *The Craft* does the same: it is performed as in theatre practice with a prescribed script with the difference that its script, unlike those of plays, universalizes the modalities of the dying praxis. In *Dying Modern*, Diana Fuss asks:

Exactly what are last words to a poet? And why has the poetry of last words lasted? Poetry's abiding interest in last words is partly a function of the capacity of last words to mimic poetry. Like any good poem, last words reflect a heightened awareness of audience, an acute concentration of language, and a profound intensification of meaning (36).

In the logic of this mimesis, the theatrical royal death would command a heightened, a royal kind of listening. This is hardly the sole province of the theatre. Historical precedents show royals figures catering for the events of their deaths. Two anecdotes may suffice to make this case.

On the arctic morning that greeted his execution, King Charles I reportedly asked for a second shirt claiming "[I do] not want to be seen shivering lest onlookers mistake it as a sign of fear" (Starkey, 347). Sixty years earlier at Fotheringhay Castle, his grandmother too had requested a particular garment to dress up her own execution: a scarlet petticoat she kept under a black cape, and that she theatrically revealed only before kneeling at the block. Both events inevitably bring to mind the theatre of the scaffold, the 'dressing up' of death; the aforementioned execution speaks of dressing up in order to conceal subjection (to the winter cold), the latter of costuming to better defy Mary Stuart's executioners and betray her secret longing for martyrdom. Intriguingly, both executions also bookend in quasi-perfect temporality the great instance of



professionalization of the Early Modern English theatre, the very cultural moment that produced an unprecedented corpus of plays featuring the death and in so many instances, the killing of royal persons.<sup>52</sup> *The Craft* is a performance, and so is kingship. The death of a king is a performance within a performance, thus an embodiment of the metatheatrical.

#### 4. *Death makes the invisible visible.*

This idea of ‘dressing up’ or aestheticizing the death of kings finds a most vivid instance in *King John* (1596) that directly interpolates the swan song trope. A. J. Piesse in his assessment of the critical history of *King John* contends that overall the criticism has focused on issues of political legitimacy, primogeniture and historiography and that if this “deliberately unstable” work has “prompted [a] vibrant revival of critical interest” it is mostly attributable to its “keeping with a view of history as unstable.”<sup>53</sup> But even in this surge of interest for the play, the discussion of death in *King John* remains critically neglected. James H. Morey devotes a brief article to the commonalities of themes and historicity in sources between Bale’s *King Johan* (before 1560) and Shakespeare’s play, rather than the usual nexus made to the Anonymous *Troublesome Raigne of John, King of England* (1591); the scholar argues that both plays host in their handling of the monkish poisoner, a Judas Iscariot figure. This leads him to conclude that

John, like Richard [of *Richard II*] is depicted as weak and morally culpable, but the clear typological correspondences in Bale and *Richard II*, suggest that Shakespeare intended – and achieved – a consistent parallel in *King John*: the traitor is Judas, the king is Christ (331).

Morey also reproduces for his short article the woodcuts found in John Foxe’s 1596 edition of *Actes and Monuments*, these images unambiguously veer into historical

<sup>52</sup> As Mary dies in 1588, Marlowe and Kyd are about to make their first noise, and by the time Charles is put to death, the theatres have been closed indefinitely.

<sup>53</sup> *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare’s History Plays*, edited by Michael Hattaway. Kindle location (2862-2864)

revisionism and make of this Catholic king killed by a monk, a proto-Protestant martyr. His discussion is useful but focuses on the assassin rather than the victim. While Walter Cohen describes the “outcome” of the play, the king’s death poisoned by a monk (like that of Henri III in *The Massacre*) as lacking in “dramatic logic,” I would posit that *King John* bolsters a different kind of logic, an aesthetic one, and that it does so with great cogency until breaking it apart in the last scene to effect a heightened representation of kingly death (1015). As we will see, something invisible is made visible.

Until the very end, the play conveys the horrors of both war and death through language rather than stage action. Speech becomes vision as the play privileges telling over showing. Until John’s death scene, war is related through speeches and war-preparation pageantry; its atrocities never materialize on stage: the citizens of Angers watch the theatre of war from the top of the city walls, urging the rival factions to make peace and allow its citizens to “die in beds” (2.1. 420). Queen Eleanor, John’s mother, and Constance, mother of Prince Arthur, casualties of the play, both die in the wings. Shakespeare reserves the dramatization of death, its pangs and its pains, for the end, John’s end. Only in the body of the king, who doubles as England (the body politic), is the death-delivering function of war made visible. In *King John*, the representation of death is thus a royal prerogative and the playwright situates it in a richly symbolic orchard, a pastoral-infused moment, a return to Eden and its tree of knowledge: the biblical is allusive, almost invisible, and John’s death materializes it.

The body of the king itself, before he is killed, will have been rhetorically rehearsed in ways that posit the medieval theory of the king’s two bodies, the theatricality of kingship and received ideas on Platonic dualism. As to the latter, the body is in the

play presented as “the soul’s frail dwelling-house” (5.7. 3). John himself describes it as “a wall of flesh,” hinting at *Richard II*’s famous death of kings’ speech where monarchs live “infused with the self and vain conceit, that this flesh which walls about [their] life were brass impregnable” (3.2.162-164). During John’s ongoing secret talks with Hubert, the reluctant hired killer of young Arthur, the duality soul/body emerges again when Salisbury notices how the “humours” of the king seem to fashion his body:

SALISBURY            The colour of the King doth come and go  
                               Between his purpose and his conscience,  
                               Like heralds ‘twixt two dreadful battles set.  
                               His passion is so ripe it needs must break. (4.2.76-79)

The conscience, an invisible agent here, declares war with the body’s royal decorum that it controls and shapes. Death makes the invisible visible here: the newly acquired color on the king’s face anticipates the death scene where poison explodes the “wall of flesh.” *The theatre of kingship* is also obliquely addressed. When John repents for having ordered the death of a prince — who is still alive, thanks to Hubert’s retrieved moral compass —he blames the shortsightedness of his subjects (here, of Hubert) who have misread the body of the king, and mistaken its theatre for truth:

KING JOHN            It is the curse of kings to be attended  
                               By slaves that take their humours for a warrant  
                               To break with the bloody house of life<sup>54</sup>  
                               And on the winking of authority  
                               To understand a law, to know the meaning  
                               Of dangerous majesty... (4.2.209-214)

Of his own recognizance, John contends that the words of a king are at once charismatic (“in Edward Shil’s phrase, ... [they have] ‘awe-arousing centrality’”) and chasmal: they are a “theatrical” text, open to interpretation and equivocation that, in the same breath,

<sup>54</sup> Here an iteration of both the human body and the dynastic body.

have force of law.<sup>55</sup> Earlier when John orders the death of Arthur, he does it economically but unambiguously:

KING JOHN:	Death.
HUBERT:	My lord.
KING JOHN:	A grave.
HUBERT:	He shall not live.
KING JOHN:	Enough. (3.3.66)

The words here dance around each other like unseen devils deployed to torment the *morians* of *The Craft*; their metonymic invisibility effects the death of Arthur, who might have been king. A mere iambic pentameter with a feminine ending seals the fate of a prince, and of a nation, in this politically tinted verbal economy. What the king says goes, even if it may warrant future ambiguations. This double office of monarchical expression is obviously not indigenous to *King John*. *Richard II* is also rich in such instances: the banished Bolingbroke has the length of his sentence reduced through the mediation of his father John of Gaunt and remarks: “How long a time lies in one little word! ... Such is the breath of kings” (1.3. 206-208). And yet, at the end of the play, Bolingbroke, now Henry IV, disavows having ordered the death of Richard:

EXTON	From your own mouth, my lord, did I this deed.
KING HENRY	They love not poison that do poison need; Nor do I thee. Though I did wish him dead, I hate the murderer, love him murdered. (5.6 37-40)

Royalty has a *sui generis* logic, reinventing itself in each moment, given to revisionism. And in *Julius Caesar*, Cassius demystifies the constructed “breath” of kings: in his scene of seduction-into-sedition with Brutus, he skillfully exposes the constructs of sacredness; observe his bitter delectation in pointing to the insufficiencies of Caesar’s newly-sacralized body as he tells of the great man’s near-drowning during a swimming contest,

<sup>55</sup> Shil, quoted in Greenblatt, (1988, p.96).

a drowning that no doubt would have taken place, had not Cassius rescued him; the conspirator spurts:

CASSIUS ...And this man  
Is now become a god? And Cassius is  
A wretched creature and must bend his body  
If Caesar carelessly but nod on him... (1.2.117-120).

And again, belittling the mystical valence given to a king's words, Cassius alludes to a bout of fever he witnessed:

CASSIUS I did hear him groan,  
Ay, and that tongue of his that bade the Romans  
Mark him and write his speeches in their books,  
'Alas' it cried, 'Give me some drink Titinius',  
As a sick girl.  
(1.2.126-130).

In *King John*, Shakespeare alludes specifically to the doctrine of the king's two bodies in two passages. I pause to further expound on its implications: the doctrine is a complex medieval iteration of kingly power where, as Richard McCoy states, “[this] venerable concept ... informs the claim that the monarch’s well-being preserves his subjects’ ‘many many bodies’ making the king’s body a godly entity imbued with sacred powers” (2002, xiii). Ernst Kantorowicz discusses this concept at length in his classic study *The King's Two Bodies*, whose “title refers to a legal fiction, promulgated by Tudor jurists to support the notion of divine rights of secular powers” (Tanner, 397-98). The doctrine, simply put, contends that the king has two bodies, a body natural that dies with him, and a body politic, or mystical body that endures; the concept illuminates with poetic force the apparently oxymoronic expression pronounced upon the death of kings: “the king is dead, long live the king.” The doctrine plausibly explains the profundity rather than the

apparent pomposity of the use of the royal “we.” *King John* raises the doctrine when John realizes that his “borrowed majesty” is threatened, as he speaks:

KING JOHN: My nobles leave me, and my state is braved  
Even at my gates, with ranks of foreign powers;  
Nay, in the body of this fleshly land,  
This kingdom, this confine of blood and breath,  
Hostility and civil tumults reigns  
Between my conscience and my cousin’s death.  
HUBERT Arm you against your other enemies.  
I’ll make peace between your soul and you.  
Young Arthur is alive. (4.2. 243-252)

Here are at once rehearsed the soul/body nexus, and the body natural/body politic of the king. This happens in a discussion of death that makes the invisibility of both nexi, incarnated in the situation at play. Finally when finding the inert body of Prince Arthur, fallen from the high wall, the Bastard observes as Hubert takes his corpse away: “How easy dost thou take all England up!” (4.3.143), calling the dead child, “this morsel of dead royalty,” an analogue to the land now “left to tug and scramble” (4.3.144-146). So before being conveyed to attend the royal death, the audience has been schooled to its inherent symbolisms.

In the penultimate scene, the Bastard returns from the battlefields to report his grave military losses; he finds the king’s right-hand man, Hubert, in a state of great distress:

BASTARD Brief, then, what’s the news?  
HUBERT Oh my sweet sir, news fitting to the night:  
Black, fearful, comfortless, and horrible.  
...  
The king, I fear, is poisoned by a monk,  
I left him almost speechless: and broke out  
To acquaint with this evil.  
...  
BASTARD How did he take it? Who did taste to him?  
HUBERT A monk, I tell you; a resolved villain,

Whose bowels suddenly burst out: The king  
Yet speaks and peradventure may recover. (5.1. 19-32)

The king yet speaks, and because he still has language, the vital elixir of the theatre—I speak therefore I am—he lives on; this brief exchange recalls another well-known dramaturgical convention of Greek tragedies: that of the messenger that reports rather than shows. But in *King John*, the convention is there to deceive: in tragedies of yore, so goes the popular belief, the death would have been related, not shown. Traditionally to propel the play’s plot, the witness who “saw it all” returns to relate the most recent developments, these “news fitting to the [narrative] night” that at this juncture engulfs the play (5.1.20). But in a subtle novel gesture, here the messenger not only conveys but receives bad news. Something far more theatrically daring is brewing; here, as in so many dramas performed on the early modern English stage, Shakespeare elects to “show ... the wound of [these] ill news.” Again, this is a wounded/wounding text. Like the entrails of the poisoning monk, Shakespeare “bursts out” the bowels of an enduring decorum in his play: in this wounding theatre, King John will give up the ghost and that ghost will fly with a rather different set of wings: those of swans.

In the final scene, Prince Henry – soon to be king – informs us that:

PRINCE HENRY     It is too late; the life of all his blood  
                              Is touch’d corruptibly, and his pure brain,  
                              Which some suppose the soul’s frail dwelling house,  
                              Doth by the idle comments it makes  
                              Foretell the ending of mortality.                     (5.7.1-5).

That “idle comments” would herald the “ending of mortality” makes a rather perplexing point; nonsensical speech, “gaga-ism,” a symptom of dying? Not in this theatre no more than in *The Craft*. Death has in fact already been foretold; it is doubly imminent: before the attack by the monk, the king was already displaying signs of illness, a “fever that had

troubled [him] so long [was lying] heavy on [him];” “Oh my heart is sick,” John says (5.3. 3-4). But in reality the monk-poisoner brings the “end of mortality.” Does the locution awake the tropes of the Christian afterlife (after mortality comes eternity and its sectarian eschatologies) or is it a clumsy tautology? Is not mortality on both sides of the conformist spectrum (from the ultra-Catholic to the radical Protestant) a beginning rather than an end? Or, as Charles I says, the journey toward “an incorruptible crown?” But *idle*, as we will see, is more than apt; the word in its obsolete use means “vacant, void of meaning, of any real worth.”<sup>56</sup> This sense of idleness hardly rhymes with the clarity of purpose attributed to dying words as expounded by John of Gaunt in *Richard II*, words that in the apocalypse of death, host “deep harmony,” studious listening, and prophetic motifs.

And indeed the death of King John seems vacated or disengaged from the issue of the last things. It waxes secular, when secularism means the absence or the ignoring of godly matters. I would suggest that we might rather recognize in *idle talk* what really is at play here: artistic expression, metaphorical diction. We have seen in chapter I that the *ars moriendi* tradition, in its diachronic English journey of composition (from *The Craft* to Taylor’s *Holy Dying*), goes through a slow but significant poeticizing intensification, and that insistent metaphors, and enduring rituals turn the preparation of death into a rhetorical discipline. The use of the expression “idle comments” by Prince Henry may conjure for modern ears the notion of a suspended motion, indulgent, temporally elastic, perhaps visionary, qualities that the craft of dying in this novel stage-bound idiom is keen to deploy.

<sup>56</sup> "idle, adj. and n." OED Online. Oxford University Press, March 2014. Web. 2 April 2014.



Pembroke enters to announce that the King is still speaking and wishes to temper his fever with the fresh air of the orchard of Swineshead Abbey. “Let him be brought into the orchard here” (5.7.10). This is a telling location: earlier in the play, King John has mentioned that a “churchyard” (a cemetery adjacent to a church) might prove more conducive to a conversation about death, or about a murder-for-hire. “If this same were a churchyard where we stand,” then, only then, ordering the death of Prince Arthur might be opportune, John contrives to say as he prepares himself to order the murder anyway (3.3.40). A discussion of death must unfold with spatial decorum too, in a proper or symbolic space. *Swineshead*, an abbey that was one of the first casualties of the dissolution of the monasteries in 1536 (through the first *Act of Suppression*) plants by its name alone the issue of stubbornness: in French, it means “tête de cochon” or “pig-headed” and there is indeed a resistant motif at play here, both allusively biblical and pastoral. Its locale references the biblical realm of *Genesis* since the sinful king will die in an orchard.<sup>57</sup> The snake is no longer able to tempt as John had it killed: he spoke of the “young boy” Prince Arthur in the laconic murder-for-hire scene as “the very serpent in [his] way, [that] wheresoe’er this foot of [his] tread, he lies before [him]” (3.3.61-63).

The scene also chimes a pastoral tone, as the ugliness of political chicaneries, their urbane crassness, has displaced itself to a simpler, bucolic landscape, where language has become irrational, in a churchyard, an orchard where the monks of the past in Thomas Gray’s coining are “each in his narrow cell forever laid” (15).<sup>58</sup> Shakespeare brings to mind the elegist’s task. The scene to come, at least to me, inevitably rehearses an inverted iteration of Thomas Gray’s famed elegy, if by prolepsis. The king is brought

<sup>57</sup> An orchard that may or may not be also a cemetery, though were I to direct the play, it would be a cemetery under the apple trees, an echo of the Garden of Eden.

<sup>58</sup> Thomas Gray, *Elegy written in a Country Churchyard*, (1751).

to the abbey's orchard showing that "the paths of glory lead but to the grave" (36), but unlike Gray's dead who sleep in his country churchyard, those un-realized "Miltons," those "Cromwells-but-in-thought," John has not seen his "crimes confined;" he has in thought at least "wade[d] through slaughter to a throne" (Gray, 66-67). Like Henry IV, he confirms his cooked-up sacralty. And like Adam and Eve, John discovers or confesses his nakedness. The orchard as locale for the death scene also brings to mind the pastoral fictions of "merry old England" associated with King John's reign. In his discussion of language in Shakespeare's plays, Russ McDonald expounds on how Shakespeare often uses location in the elaboration of his plots "for the development of symbol[s]." McDonald contends that as "Shakespeare develops his poetic skills he begins to augment the semantic possibilities of certain images so that they evoke a profound range of potential meanings. Three of the most suggestive Shakespearian symbols are the garden, the sea, and the stage" (79). McDonald uses *Richard II* to make this demonstration as he observes "the strife-torn kingdom [standing as an analogue] for a garden neglected by its overseer, [and the king] is its derelict gardener" (79).

Of the dying King John, "Doth he still rage?" asks Prince Henry (5.7.11).

PEMBROKE:           He is more patient  
                              Than when you left him; even now he sung (5.7.12-13).

He sung? A dying man singing? Of course, *The Craft* favors singing at death's door, as many of the orations had been set to music. But the playwright knows his *métier* and I would suggest it is not that kind of singing he intends to show. To sensationalize the imminent entrance of the king and his imminent death, Shakespeare plants the fantastical image of the monk's entrails exploding from the poison. The king we are told, "was [upon drinking the poison] speechless" but, "even now [has] sung."

Prince Henry: 'Tis strange that death should sing.  
 I am the cygnet to this pale faint swan,  
 Who chants a doleful hymn to his own death,  
 And from the organ-pipe of frailty sings  
 His soul and body to their lasting rest.

...

*Enter attendants, and Bigot, carrying KING JOHN in a chair.*

King John: Ay, marry, now my soul hath elbow-room:  
 It would not out at windows nor at doors.  
 There is so hot a summer in my bosom,  
 That all my bowels crumble up to dust.  
 I am a scribbled form drawn with a pen  
 Upon a parchment, and against this fire  
 Do I shrink up. (5.7. 20-33)

The governing metaphor (the swan song) of the theatrical death well in place, Shakespeare may marshal his art of dying on stage; we may proceed. The king is right: he is at this juncture “a scribbled form;” his death is penned on parchment (with a swan’s quill?) through the imaginative praxis of a playwright; there are antecedents, historical sources to dwell upon, but his death has entirely become the domain of the playwright and of the actor, of their combined imaginations. John, the “faint pale swan,” prepares himself to sing. It might be long, arduous, brief or dazzling, but it will be *crafty*. John accomplishes his agony in 28 lines.

I do not mean that *King John* inaugurates the death speech as swan song; but the play spells the metaphor out, and gives the task of dying its name; playwrights write countless swan songs, anticipating the aria of death, a staple of the operatic form then in its infancy. It hardly surprises that the first operas, the *Eurydice* of Jacopo Peri (1600) and Monteverdi’s *Orfeo* (1607) both borrow the Orphic myth as their main narrative.<sup>59</sup> The death scene’s manifold indebtedness to the *ars moriendi* tradition is clear enough,

<sup>59</sup> Technically, Jacopo Peri’s *Daphne* is the first opera, probably performed in 1597 in Florence during the Carnival. Its score however has been lost.

but the swan song is also steeped in Orphism; like *The Craft*, the myth of Orpheus hosts the belief that music-making can transform the moral character of the soul.<sup>60</sup>

But *King John* aborts an Orphism that could move stones. The king wants little more than to die and alleviate the pain of dying; he remains indifferent – as far his speech denotes – to which outposts of the afterlife his life may lead him. Thus the spiritual materialism attending *The Craft*, written after the events dramatized in the play, is absent from the scene. In this, John as he is dying may look somewhat more Protestant than not; he is not purchasing his eternity through prayers. *The Craft* bathes in an ethos of Catholic “works,” spiritually materialistic, where one gains spiritual advantage by making a *good death*. None of these afterlife preoccupations attend the death of King John. As death penetrates him, John describes its progress but, unlike Orpheus’ music, his death song is unable to effectuate anything. The pathetic fallacies are gone, they have been internalized: the cosmos is inside the king. It is invisible, and his rhetoric of excess will expound to his invisible inner hell. Auden thinks “the fantasticalness of the rhetoric ... dramatically appropriate” (67). I am not quite sure what the poet means by appropriate, I think it rather instructive:

PRINCE HENRY	How fares your majesty?
KING JOHN	Poisoned, ill fare! Dead, forsook, cast off;

<sup>60</sup> Like in the myth of Orpheus then, death scenes often present agonizing Characters who dare look back. In his *Defense of Poesy*, Sir Philip Sidney tells his reader how during the Renaissance “wild untamed wits [were drawn by Orpheus] to an admiration of knowledge.” The death scene, as I have argued so far, teaches. “When Orpheus sang, he also provoked remembrance” (Wroe, 66). In *All Is True (Henry VIII, 1613)*, Shakespeare puts the Orphic myth to use; Queen Catherine praises his ability to bring, through song, stillness unto the world:

CATHERINE	Orpheus with his lute made trees, And the mountain tops that freeze, Bow themselves when he did sing. ... In sweet music is such art, Killing care and grief of heart Fall asleep, or hearing die.	(3.1. 4-14)
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And none of you will bid the winter come  
 To thrust his icy fingers in my maw,  
 Nor let my kingdom's rivers take their course  
 Through my burned bosom, nor entreat the north  
 To make his bleak winds kiss my parched lips  
 And comfort me with cold. I do not ask you much,  
 I beg cold comfort; and you are so strait  
 And so ingrateful, you deny me that.

PRINCE HENRY O that there were some virtue in my tears,  
 That might relieve you!

KING JOHN The salt in them is hot.  
 Within me is a hell; and there the poison  
 Is as a fiend confined to tyrannize  
 On unreprievable condemned blood.

Enter [the] BASTARD.

BASTARD O, I am scalded with my violent motion,  
 And spleen of speed to see your majesty!

KING JOHN O cousin, thou art come to set mine eye:  
 The tackle of my heart is crack'd and burn'd,  
 And all the shrouds wherewith my life should sail  
 Are turned to one thread, one little hair:  
 My heart hath one poor string to stay it by,  
 Which holds but till thy news be uttered;  
 And then all this thou seest is but a clod  
 And module of confounded royalty.

(5.7.35-64)

Before giving in to anger, an exemplary failure of the “good death” in *The Craft*, King John bemoans his imminent banishment, his outcast status. He tells oxymoronicly that he is “dead.” Banished, he retreats to the inner hell that is invisible to those around him, and then he blames them for their incapacity to bring a winter into his body. He wants winter, an analogue to death, in his already-dead person. His corporeality seems despicable to him. In Shakespeare’s telling, he gives in to despair, to anger, to faithlessness, to vainglory, and he does not name an heir, giving into the sin of avariciousness. He cannot resist any of the five temptations of *The Craft*; thus, his death is theologically a bad one. There is, I insist, no historicity to this scene; the king in fact took the Eucharist on that day from the abbot of Croxton:

Another monastic historian, Ralph of Coggeshall, [is] more explicit in attacking John through describing his manner of death, claiming that John's illness, dysentery, had been brought on by his self-indulgence in food at Lynn a few days earlier. ... Again we see the link being drawn between the king's self-indulgence, and his death, through corruption within, particularly in the belly. In case we have missed the point, Ralph describes a terrible storm at Newark that accompanied his death, accompanied by "horrible and fantastical visions" (Evans, 66).

The chronicler insists on pathetic fallacies; Shakespeare does not. The playwright will not allow the cosmos to resonate with this "cease of majesty." If it is a bad death in view of *The Craft*, it is also a magnificent artistic achievement. Death teaches John nothing: no moral enlightenment, no repentance, not the least apparent care for the destination of his soul. He remains unchanged by the events of death, as petulant, as tyrannical as the play has shown him to be. Even the compassion of his son, his tears, are dismissed, as the "salt in them is too hot" (5.7. 45). Death here is a rhetorical laboratory to aestheticize the body descanted into a season, an infernal summer, or John's hellish interiority. For the witnesses of his death and the commentators of the end of his reign, it is almost as if John would rather have the coldness of historical judgment (that, he will get plenty), as he rejects the warmth of compassion. His swan song bears a faint Orphic motif, where the heart becomes a broken lyre:

KING JOHN                      My heart hath one poor string to stay it by,  
Which holds but till thy news be uttered,  
And then all this thou seest is but a clod  
And module of confounded royalty.                      (5.7. 61-64)

John at least acknowledges his measure as death sits in his hollow crown, "scoffing his state, and grinning at his pomp" (*RII*, 3.2. 159): he has become a "module," a measure, a scale where royalty is shown to be a fiction that in matters of death does not distinguish a king from a subject; death confounds them. He is not "every inch a king," but a king

reduced to an inch (*King Lear*, 4.6.105). He was after all only a man. The king is dead, and in the last throes of agony, he showed no interest in knowing to whom those left in grief will scant their “long live the king.” The stage note [*KING JOHN dies*] occurs after the Bastard’s speech that relates the devastation a sea storm has inflicted upon his army, and it is unclear whether this ill news gives the final blow. But that is of little relevance as the swan has no more to sing; the song is ended, a gorgeous affair where John proved to be little more than an irascible man, a king made subject by death. We will have to wait for more regal death songs, songs that articulate the complexities of kingship and mortality, we will have to wait for kings who can “hammer [them] out” (*Richard II*, 5.5.5).

*Trope 5. Death can become a theatre of lies. Its ethics are revisionist; and Trope 7. Death universalizes and paradoxically creates “the other,” the suspicious cosmopolitan.*

The great lie of monarchy is, as far as I am concerned, best captured by a verse from Lucan in *Pharsalia*, re-introduced in the Renaissance through a dialogue Petrarch invents between Saint Augustine and himself in *De secreto conflictu curarum mearum* (published after his death in 1473). Ending their long imaginary debate, Augustine quotes from Lucan, the portion here in italics:

Fate has no time to judge  
Your lives and deaths. The fortunes of the world  
Follow heroic souls: *for the fit few*  
*The many live.*

(*Pharsalia*, V. 341- 343)

For the fit few, the many live. There lies the lie of royalty. A presumption of excellence attends the notion of royalty, a presumption of majesty, materialized by the trappings of its public performance (the pomp, the circumstances, the coronations, the rituals, the court, the sumptuary rules, etcetera). But death exposes this fiction, this lie; the king

himself, the one for whom many live, fit as he is, must also die. Yet, when he dies, does the king die as a king or as a man? The answer to this question will vary in the theatre; but for sure, a king, like a commoner, is a mere body that dies. What he speaks, however, may be uncommon, even regal, but the reality of death knows not to recognize the majesty of an individual's death. Only witnesses do. In this light, death once more is for the living. Let us listen to what *The Craft* says on the matter:

Then there shall be told unto him plainly the peril that he should fall in, though he should and would be greatly a-feared thereof. It is better and more rightful that he be compunctious and repentant, with wholesome fear and dread, and so be saved, than he be damned with flattering and false dissimulation; for it is too inconvenient and contrary to Christian religion, and too devil-like, that the peril or death and the soul – for any vain dread of a man, lest he were anything distroubled thereby - shall be hid from any Christian man or woman that should die (*The Craft*, 36).

Don't lie to dying men; do not let dying men lie. I take Auden to partly mean this when he writes in his poem *In Memory of W. B. Yeats*:

The death of the poet was kept from his poems.  
...  
The words of a dead man  
Are modified in the guts of the living.

In other words, the plays have not been told about their authors' death and King John still has to die tomorrow night somewhere under the lights. King John is but dust now, and yet *King John* must die. King John is dead, long live *King John*. That is why I believe the plays can become powerful instruments for the apprenticeship of death, outwitting *The Craft*. We keep enlarging their meanings, or we elucidate their cryptic messages, only to stumble upon new-minted ones. We build new lies upon these fictions, pace Roland Barthes who announced *the death of the author*. Critics expose the fictions of earlier critics. Reading is an act of creation. Can reading *The Craft* be also an act of creation?



*The Craft*, we well know, has been devised by anonymous authors who did not know what dying entails, what it means to experientially die: they too are dealing in fictions. Packs of lies that may meet agreement, and whose agreement may keep changing. The same goes for the plays. Our consciousness keeps foraging these texts and, wrought into our language, they emerge in our “living guts” with renewed semantic strengths and revived functionalities. In this spirit (that of Barthes’), Jan Kott is still right: Shakespeare is still our contemporary since King Lear has to die tonight on some stage in India; and so is Marlowe, since Doctor Faustus must bargain for a few extra years tomorrow night on some stage. This fact does not preclude the necessity of historicizing their work and the conditions of their creation.

These gentlemen wrote plays, ludic instruments of make-believe, packs of lies that speak their truth; not critiques of imperialism, only plays; not disquisitions on the elasticity of sexual mores in the early modern period, but plays. They were practitioners of an art form in the full bloom of professionalization. They depended on the response of their audiences, on the willingness of their audiences to “believe,” as many prologues and epilogues keep reminding us. That, I think, we can state hard as stone. Which by no means refute all that the plays have become under the lens of discerning theorists or how they came to be “understood to be not simply reflections of a world picture, but the primary cultural artifacts illuminating, or even producing that picture” (Marshall, 6). Thus, I do not contend that Shakespeare, Marlowe, or their contemporaries aimed to show us how to die, or how not to die. I simply say they can and perhaps must. A gentle reminder, I shall call this small digression. Michael Neill has already stated that “literary endings are conventionally organized to gratify the human desire for a sense of aesthetic

completeness, but in the process, as Frank Kermode observes, they are always liable to become unsettling figures for *our* own ends” (45, emphases mine). Neill, again I believe, is dead right. But what is the death of a king to us? Should Charles I be right, should king and subject indeed be “clean different things,” must the representation of their respective deaths differ in a theatre that casts them both? Can we infer so far that there is a royal way of dying? *King John* seems to say no. Obviously both king and subject are mortal.<sup>61</sup> The immanence of death is never in cause.

George Herbert captures ever so succinctly the concept of immanence, the way only poetry can, when he writes about the rose in his poem *Vertue* (1633): “Thy root is ever in its grave and thou must die.” To face death because of its imminence, or to live in its immanence: those are different stances. The progress of the *ars moriendi* tradition seems to trace the journey between these two visions: the earlier treatises target the preparation for death because illness had declared itself; the latter devotional manuals veer towards considerations of immanence, or of holy living. But the theatre provokes an inevitable conflation. In historical plays specifically, in plays where the king is

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<sup>61</sup> Neill convincingly demonstrates how *the Dance of Death* motif, how its most important feature in fact, Death’s indiscriminate reach, inscribes itself in the writing of the plays of the period. In his thorough discussion of its didactic import upon the theatre, he explains that

“The ostensible lesson [of the Dance of Death] ... is threefold: Death is an impartial leveler who spares no condition or estate; the moment of his arrest is sudden, arbitrary, and unpredictable; and the shock of his summons will be unbearable to those who have not spent their lives preparing for it” (62).

In his description of the iconographical features of the popular paintings, Neill observes that death is often represented as a skeleton that borrows elements of clothing of the summoned individual: the skeleton that invites the cardinal in the fatal dance wears a similar miter, the jester is summoned by a skeleton wearing a fool’s cap, the king is arrested by a crowned death. True to form, Charles I will be executed by those who now wear the crown, not literally obviously, but at least those who are in possession of its attributes of political power. Neill, whose project is to undress death and expose it as a cultural construct, juxtaposes the dance of death motif to reach a far richer conclusion, one that interpolates at once both theatre practice and the *ars moriendi* tradition: the invitation to dance by “a mocking partner whose costume almost exactly mimics” that of the summoned individual underlies “a notion of death as not merely imminent ... but *immanent*, as an ending implicit in every beginning, and constantly present in every middle” (73).

“historically” dead but nonetheless walks on the boards, in plays with titles such as *The Massacre at Paris*, death is always an immanent figure even though the characters about to be performed know nothing of the imminence of their death.

*The Massacre at Paris* (c. 1592) has for understandable reasons proved a poor cousin of criticism: Sara Munson Keats, one of its persuasive defenders, deplors this state of affairs; if *The Massacre at Paris* is too-often ignored or dismissed as “a blatant piece of Protestant propaganda,” she supports a more recent group of scholars who interpret “the drama as a satire on the treachery or weakness of monarchs, and the use of religion as a cloak for Machiavellian policy, as well as a critique of religious violence” (201). And because the play seeps an obvious vitriol for the Catholic atrocities perpetrated upon French Protestants, it may serve as a good textual occasion to examine tropes 5 and 7 of my classification, and put in place the doctrinal controversies that create otherness, an otherness that is always suspicious, and presumed to be “caught in lies.” What’s more, in our current “historical period wracked with religious terrorism [the play] with its brutal depiction of sectarian violence ... seems painfully contemporary” (Keats, 204). Marlowe’s *The Massacre at Paris*, in its theatricalization of multiple deaths, shows how the events of death can become or expose a theatre of lies. The play also posits the issue of the value of death, when death visits one of us, one of ours, or the other, the enemy. Both tropes animate this text and are activated in it.

The play – virtually never performed – presents many difficulties, first attributed to its narrative form; its dramatic fluidity suffers indeed from a capricious act-free structure: it hosts scenes of puzzling relevance and length, written in dissonant registers that weigh down the dramatic flight of its plot. Those deficiencies should not obfuscate

its other merits: its elegant ironic symmetries, and for my purpose, its many insights on issues of death, and more pertinently on that of kings.

The play highlights Marlowe's desire to counter the conventional expectations of both audiences and theatre writing. The prologues of both *Tamburlaine I* and *Doctor Faustus* state unequivocally Marlowe's intentional attempts against the grain of convention. And so it goes with the representation of death on stage. Theodore Spencer advanced long ago that Marlowe "first discovered how to use death dramatically, for he realized that the manner in which a character acts at the moment of death throws emotional light on his personality which can be obtained in no other way," a critical view that has assuredly not lost all its teeth (223).

If *The Massacre at Paris* experiments with genres, it mostly experiments with the representation of death; the vigorous articulation of the arbitrariness and immediacy of death makes little doubt as to what Marlowe intends as an insistent theme of his play and its relevance at the time of its creation.<sup>62</sup> In *The Massacre at Paris*, death lurks everywhere, spies upon the proceedings; it plays Master of Revels, punctuating with its presence almost every scene either in actuality or in premeditation. The play opens with a wedding, the staple resolution of many comedies in the period, and in the very first scene Catherine of Medici, the Catholic Queen Mother, makes clear to the audience (in an aside) that they are not attending a happy occasion.

The Protestant faction led by the Prince of Navarre has concluded through marriage an alliance with the Catholics (unsurprisingly, Marlowe for its Protestant audiences, established them from the get-go as the villains of the play) that should

<sup>62</sup> As Romany and Lindsey justly remark in their notes, "the play must postdate the assassination of Henri III (2 August 1589) [...] and "is recorded in Philip Henslowe's diary" as having had its first performance, under the title *The Tragedy of the Guise* at the Rose in January 1593 (*The Complete Plays*, 664).



The actor playing Catherine decides how well Navarre is loved from the very beginning – there is plenty to play here and she may even get a laugh. Yet Catherine is planning, we might even say “crafting” the deaths of these Huguenots assembled for the wedding festivities. Their impending deaths are of little value to her, as they only exist as “the others,” or the faithless. But Charles’ subsequent line touches the true nerve of the play (and of the period): “Let that rest,” he intones. From the appropriate wish of his first speech, we pass to the futile wishful thinking of the second. As religious matters will not rest, not then, and not now; we watch every night newscasts that repeat how religious matters remain in the night of History, notorious insomniacs. Charles continues:

CHARLES	And now, my lords, the marriage-rites performed, We think it good to go and consummate The rest with hearing of a holy mass. Sister, I think yourself will bear us company. ... The rest that will not go my lords, may stay. Come, mother, let us go to honour this solemnity. Which I’ll dissolve with blood and cruelty (1.18-25)
CATHERINE [ <i>aside</i> ]	

On that, they leave for mass. Marlowe, with great dexterity and verbal economy, has opened Pandora’s box. He explains nothing, he simply sets in motion highly contentious issues as if letting loose some feral animals: a denomination-discordant couple, a diplomatic imbroglio as to who should attend the Mass and take sides upon the divisive doctrine of the Eucharist. Marlowe even provides elements of possible comedy: Charles using the word “consummate” (as in “consummate the marriage” or having sex) may procure a little laughter if the actor pauses lightly at the end of the enjambment the line procures as if they should all walk to the marital bed and watch the couple do the deed. I, for one, cannot resist these Marlovian quips. The stage left to the Protestant faction, Navarre and his men proceed to a post-mortem of the wedding ceremony:

ADMIRAL                      My lord, but did you mark the Cardinal  
 ...  
 The Guise's brother, and the Duke Dumaine,  
 How they storm at these your nuptial rites  
 ...

NAVARRE                      And that's the cause that Guise so frowns at us,  
 And beat his brains to catch us in his trap,  
 ...  
 Come, my lords, let's go to the church, and pray,  
 That God may still defend the right of France  
 And make His Gospel flourish in this land.  
 (1. 51-57)

With this, Marlowe exposes the discontentment of the ecclesiastic hierarchy of the kingdom of France, and introduces, if by name, the figure of Guise, the Catholic archenemy.<sup>65</sup> Guise will conduct this symphonic massacre. In the same breath, Marlowe presents the Protestant faction as church-going individuals, sincerely invested in prayer and he plants at the forefront of his play an important trope of Protestant theology: the authority of the Scriptures in all religious affairs (*Sola Scriptura*), and specifically their preeminence over the theatrics of the mass. Important vectors of religious controversy are well in place.

In his first soliloquy, the nefarious want-to-be king Guise addresses the thorny question of sacred kinship, its contestability, its made-of-lies constitution; this demystification is accomplished in various modes: narratively, his desire to himself be king bespeaks his obvious disregard for godly appointment. Next, as he plots the killing of Queen Margaret of Navarre, mother of the groom, he undermines the assumed sanctity of a royal person. Then, he bemoans the recent alliance of both kingdoms founded on a marriage made of individuals with irreconcilable faiths, and sanctioned by the reigning Charles, whom he describes as:

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<sup>65</sup> Guise's name in both French and English means 'appearance by means of concealment.'

GUISE

The gentle king whose pleasure uncontrolled  
Weak'neth his body and will waste his realm,  
If I repair not what he ruins –  
(2.70-72).

The monarch's poor governance of his own body disrupts that of the entire realm. The body natural and the body politic are once again made doctrinal. Marlowe closes his third scene with the murder of the Protestant Queen Mother Margaret, killed with poisoned gloves commissioned by the Duke of Guise.<sup>66</sup>

GUISE

Where are those perfumed gloves which I sent  
To be poisoned? Hast thou done them? Speak!  
Will every savour breed a pang of death?  
(2.13-15).

These gloves perfumed with death are powerful metaphors for the task of Marlowe's authorial hands: to dramatize death as a living agent, to stage deaths that breed both poetic imagery and theatrical excitement, to make a theatre where death is as alive as any of the actors attempting to play its victims. Once she has accepted the gloves:

OLD QUEEN

Help, son Navarre, I am poisoned!  
...  
the fatal poison  
Works within my head; my brain-pan breaks,  
My heart doth faint, I die!

*She dies.* (3.20-22)

This is an instance where the writing seems to accomplish little more than an expository function, and yet Margaret's ever-so-brief death speech informs about at least this much: first, the death process awakes a bodily conscience; with impressive speed, the pains of death verbalize themselves. They resort to the metaphorical: the poison "works within

<sup>66</sup> The gloves episode gives me an opportunity to make a point on the genesis of *The Craft*. Even in Marlowe's play, it may have more than a symbolic function. As stated in chapter I, historians have often viewed *The Craft* as a by-product of the Great Plague. We have to bear in mind that the administration of the last rights was a very hands-down affair. The priests had to touch the body in various parts (the forehead, the mouth, the hands, and the feet to apply the saint-crème. We may understand that priests were possibly unwilling to attend to plague-ridden houses, and therefore the need for how-to-manuals may find an explanation in this possible priestly absenteeism.



[her] head”; the brain-pan (the cranium that hosts the brain) breaks, which in all likeliness should make her discourse incoherent and yet, she speaks how “her heart faints.”

What are we to do with the contentious “I die” that raises a set of important questions? King John told us he was dead. How may this queen know that she dies? A convention of the theatre requires that once a statement is uttered [as in “welcome to Athens” or “it is raining”], the statement establishes reality. But “it is raining” does not carry the currency of “it will soon rain;” the former supports a reality, the latter an expectation that may not be fulfilled. In matters of death, in our own lives, must death always be an “it will soon rain” statement? Must it always be the promised end? When or where do we recognize that we “immanently” die? May I suggest again: while sitting in the theatre. It may be that our imaginations are, as Ernst Becker would have it, deniers of our impending deaths, and playwrights make a living showing how wrong we are. There is a strange paradox animated here: Becker believes we make art as a denial of our death; simultaneously we pay for the best seats to watch a queen die, and if she does in spectacular pain or fashion, even better. Do we learn something watching fake deaths? When the queen says she is dying, does that not mean that she already knows something of death, of what it might feel like when it comes? Has she herself seen a play where such a scene took place? Or better yet, has she prepared herself to death’s assaults by a repeated practice of imaginings? Matthew Greenfield has argued how “in their death’s speeches, [Marlowe’s] characters conduct their own autopsies” (233). It is a provoking statement and Greenfield makes it to advance a far more daring point:

These moments of corporeal insight combine two ordinarily incompatible types of knowledge: first, the knowledge of what it is like to be embodied, second, the knowledge of what it is like to dissect someone else’s body. The first form of

knowledge is a tumult of sensations, difficult to interpret or describe. The second form of knowledge is proto-scientific (242).

In letting imagination meddle, even in contradiction of the biological mechanism of the body, in reconciling these “two incompatible types of knowledge,” Marlowe would be inviting us to ask ourselves the following questions: “can we expand the perimeter of the self until it annexes the hidden, alien regions deep inside the body? Can we incorporate external representation of our anatomies into the subjective experience of the self?” (242). Greenfield does not go as far as answering yes, but he believes that attempting such experiments may habilitate us to approach philosophically an expanded structure of the self, a self that supersedes biology where in pain, “the self [always] diminishes, losing its dominion over parts of the body. Marlowe’s characters’ self-dissections suggest” that the theatre can be such a school of philosophical inquiry (242). I concur. Greenfield’s insights employ themselves to demonstrate the pervasive effect the scientific advancements of anatomy had on the construction of the self in the period. He does that with aplomb, but his conclusion does not aim to warrant that Marlowe’s experiments (and how he invites us to assess them) “grope towards the deepening psychological interiority often associated with Shakespeare” (241). Rather he speaks refreshingly of “characters that have become mysterious to themselves” (242). I rather admire the courage of that: the scholar does not aim at demystification but at “more mystery.” As if the theatre would not propose an obdurate didacticism, but rather a stance of inquiry, one of introspection. In this, if Greenfield is right, the theatre’s debt to *The Craft* is paid off; the doctrinal obduracy of *The Craft* melts into a shoreless sea of interrogations.

Greenfield’s argument is unsettling because it opens up possibilities of interpretation. For my argument, I take the scholar’s “two types of knowledge” as a novel

iteration of theory and practice, or thought and action, or better, death and dying. In my scheme, *The Craft* is theory, the plays are practice; they offer two types of knowledge.

To me, these speeches convey the terrorizing supremacy of the physical experience of dying over any intellectual consideration of death. As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, writing about death does not spare one from its terrors; it may in fact amplify them. And yet imagining death is not dying, and that is this chasm that poetry may prove best suited at investing. As it is formulated in Donne's Holy Sonnet X, death as the end of things is a lie according to *The Craft*; it is a lie in performance. But leaving the theatre that has rehearsed dying, the spectator has reified for herself the inevitability that her death may be painful, filled by terrors, alienating to her loved ones, heartbreaking; she leaves the theatre with that truth delivered in a gorgeously assembled pack of lies.

In her short death speech, the queen's "I die" emblemizes this problematic issue of experience and knowledge. If her line does not import the sophistry of the impossible "Horatio, I'm dead," (5.2. 280) uttered by Hamlet halfway through his final speech, it nonetheless grapples for significance somewhere in the chasm; its use of the present tense at least suggests a process, which in performance can be illuminated gesturally. If "I am dead" is antithetical, "I die" in turn, generates theses a plenty. What does "I die" mean when it is me who dies? Death comes incrementally (you have cancer), or suddenly (the car runs you over), in intermittent or spontaneous bouts of knowledge; we learn about Death's devastating invasions in this internal theatre of failing bodily functions, our bodies, we learn its infliction of physical and mental pain. In the theatre this learning is virtual, or by proxy.

In *The Massacre at Paris*, the marriage that opens the play proves in fact the ritualized preparation, the subterfuge for all the deaths to come: the marriage that opens the play is thus a theatre of lies itself, and it prepares the deaths of *the other*, the death of the foreign and of the religiously discordant. But this craft of dying, orchestrated by Catherine and Guise has nonetheless a theological justification: it must fail theologically to send these irreligious Huguenots to the hell where they belong. The Catholic villainy though well posited by Marlowe does not preclude the theological sincerity of these murderers; he never puts their sincerity in doubt. This is one of the many human achievements of the play. When Catherine loses one of hers, her son, she witnesses a son, a king, who confesses that his poisoning is in fact well deserved:

CHARLES:	I have deserved a scourge, I must confess; Yet is their patience of another sort Than to misdo the welfare of their king. O hold me up, my sight begins to fail, My sinews shrink, my brains turn upside down, My heart doth break, I faint and die.
	<i>He dies.</i>
CATHERINE	What art thou dead? Sweet son, speak to thy mother! O no, his soul is fled from out his breast, And he nor hears nor sees us what we do (13.9-18)

Charles speaks anatomically and Catherine, perhaps unconsciously (or Marlowe, perhaps sloppily) negates Catholic tenets. In Catholic parlance, our dialogue with the dead never ceases, but Catherine in her disarray seems to have forgotten this important piece of theology that distances her from her enemies. Greenfield adds that in *The Massacre at Paris* specifically “most of [its characters] narrate the process of their deaths, using a strangely specific anatomical language” (236). Death brings knowledge of the inward motions of the body but as Greenfield suggests it may also provoke us into

knowledge upon conceptions of our own selves. This provocation into knowledge becomes the topic of this chapter's last section, and the stepping-stone to examine the *ars moriendi* motifs in *King Lear* and specifically, how this play appropriates the invisible theatre of the five temptations presented in *The Craft*.

### *The temptations of KING LEAR*

As his five-act long agony ends, what has the self-deposed Lear learned and what may his death teach? It is by any standards, a bad, a terrible, and a terrifying death. So bad in fact, that Nahum Tate produced a revised version in 1681 where Lear lives into serene old age while Cordelia, having escaped death, ends up marrying Edgar; this happy ending was shown on stage till 1834 when the catastrophic ending we know (and love) is restored. Yet, if Frank Kermode justly posits that in this play "everything tends toward a conclusion that does not occur [and where] even personal death, for Lear, is terribly delayed," how can we, as audience members, and virtual attendants to his deathbed, assess the theology of Lear's end? Kermode suggests that "beyond the apparent worst there is a worse suffering, and when the end comes it is not only more appalling than anybody expected, but a mere image of that horror, not the thing itself" (82). Is Edgar right then, when he tells the audience in an aside that "the worst is not, so long as we can say, this is the worst?" (4.1.27-28). Are we to believe that there is worse than the death of Lear? That there is worse to come? That this nightmare was but an image of the promised end?

KENT  
EDGAR

Is this the promised end?  
Or image of that horror? (5.3.262-263)

I read *King Lear* as its own idiosyncratic *Craft of Dying*, the dramatization of an apprenticeship of death where each act becomes itself a devilish textual force that tempts us, the audience attending the play, into giving into our own crisis of faith, our own despair, our own impatience, our own spiritual pride, and our own contemplation of the impossible demands made upon us when asked to let go of our terrestrial attachments. But unlike the tantalizing devils of *The Craft*, the devils of *King Lear* are on stage for all to see in the shape of men and women. And Lear is not about to give in to their assaults.

Marjorie Garber's contention that "*King Lear* is a play about the acceptance of death" strikes me as dramaturgically untenable (2005, 691). I rarely find faults in this critic's luminous and prolific contributions to our field.<sup>67</sup> Acceptance and resignation (prominent aims of *The Craft*) are un-dramatic and Shakespeare knows that all too well. Garber is right to intuit that an apprenticeship of death, an inchoate *ars moriendi*, does indeed unfold, but acceptance is hardly one of its dominating tropes. I argue on the contrary that Lear resists all; such can be the march of kings.

From the very opening of *King Lear*, Shakespeare hints at the vermicular teleology of the body, as his eponymous hero addresses, if obliquely, the indiscriminate destruction that threatens kings and commoners alike. Lear, the tyrannical father, the king about to self-depose himself, coerces his daughters into a childish joust of "who-loves-me-best;" the results of this "play" shall determine who should get the best morsel of his kingdom, whose governance, he readily admits, has come to hinder his old age. The second

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<sup>67</sup> To wit, a look at the bibliography at the end of this study, will show how many of her books were put to use in the elaboration of this project.

childishness, the very one Jaques had prophesied, presides over these proceedings.<sup>68</sup> The latter child's tantrums are at proximity; the senescent child is about to crawl anew:

KING LEAR                      Meantime we shall express our darker purpose.

(1.1.34)

“Darker” befits the balkanization about to unfold: from the brief exposition of the opening scene, we assume the characters have gathered at court for the announcement of a impending marriage (a happy event), but Lear ruins the reunion with his petulant and erratic behavior. The character has been on stage for less than a minute when he speaks, surprising all, of his decision to abandon the throne; nothing will dissuade him of this new-minted folly. The *king* in this respect has already died; Lear shirks his *raison d'être*: by disembodiment his kingdom, he corrupts its integrality (the premier duty of a prince), defaulting on his own legitimacy. Here the osmotic link between the king's two bodies is once again made obvious. The ailing mind of Lear fractures not only his ossified power but also that of the realm. The storm in his mind mirrors and provokes the cataclysmic arc of the narrative. For the next three hours he will literally crawl into self-abasement and destruction, shedding in scene after scene, like as many skins, the accouterments of power, then those of civility, and then those of civilization itself; only to become a vaguely Christic figure without a cross, a Giacometti-like assemblage of lines fainting into oblivion, in the shaming reductions of the self. But Man, in this play, is not only crawling toward vermiculation, he is the worm itself, the one who feeds on the other's misery and suffering. Gloucester will even pronounce:

GLOUCESTER:            I'th' last night's storm I such a fellow saw,  
   Which made me think a man a worm (4.1. 33-34)

<sup>68</sup> *As You Like It* (c. 1598-1600, 2.7.)

I see through the play's distinctive handling of agony, at its purest etymological value, a struggle (an agon), but as *The Craft* suggests, a struggle against the temptations to give in to certain received ideas: the play's "darker purpose," its revelatory motifs are to propel Lear's rebellion against, rather than into, the "dying of the light." Lear's vociferations make up, I would suggest, an energetic, kinetic joust about the significance of the human condition; only then, I propose, only when the meaning, or meaninglessness of that condition is put to test, can *King Lear* raise its theatrical stakes and efficaciously unfold its drama. Lear's lesson in "how to die" takes roots in iconoclastic defiance rather than orthodoxy, in baroque chaos rather than orderly resignation. *King Lear* hints at theological Grand-Guignol where gods behave as sadists. Lear will not accept yet cannot escape his condition; but he will resist the tantalizing demons that he himself has bred and set free.

I explained in chapter I that in *The Craft*, in its climactic moment in fact (and in what is the longest chapter), devils visible only to the moriens assemble around the deathbed and deploy with a perfected strategy five temptations susceptible to gain them the soul of the dying. We will remember that they initially test the dying individual's faith, then they try to induce despair. If this fails, they tantalize with issues of impatience (particularly, inviting a revolt against the painful medical treatment of the period, the repellent concoctions one must ingurgitate, the bleedings, the leeches, the cupping therapies). If this fails too, the devils then flatter the dying's resilience and salute his resistance to earlier temptations; should this not do the trick, they use the most powerful part of their arsenal: they brandish the terrestrial and human attachments and make them so alluring to the moriens that he will prove unable to relinquish them. While the devils



congratulate the moriens for his fortitude in their cunning fourth assault, the woodcuts are quite explicit as to what takes place around the bed: the devils offer crowns to the dying, or the chance for the individual to be “king of his castle” again. In the final assault, the devils invite the dying to hold on to terrestrial affairs, and give in to the desire,

that tempteth and grieveth most carnal and secular men, that be in overmuch occupation, and business outward about temporal things; that is their wives, their children, their carnal friends, and their worldly riches, and other things that they have loved inordinately before (19).

What we observe in the opening of *King Lear* rather looks like a resistance to this temptation; the play opens with the foolish act of Lear relinquishing his mystical body by fracturing the country in three equal parts, so that soon, in his own words, “we unburdened crawl toward death” (1.1.239). The king wants to divest himself of responsibilities, “both of rule, interest of territory, cares of state” (1.1.47-48). But in the king’s mind, a link with the numinous remains, he is still king. Remarkably in the opening scene, Lear uses the royal “we” and “our” sixteen times before the “I” appears, and it does appear only after Cordelia has spoken her “nothing” from which “nothing will come” (1.1.84-89). In his death scene, the “we” entirely vanishes; it does not exist: Lear has become “I.”

If *The Craft* is about ritualizing, ordering, assuaging the chaos susceptible to arise at death’s door, then *King Lear*, also a dramatization of an apprenticeship of dying, is its reversed emblem; Shakespeare orders his ritual to better deliver chaos. Lear will be subjected to the very worst of suffering as both man and king, his mortal body and his body politic fractured from the very opening of the play. But this is his own doing; what is worse, he makes a catastrophic mistake: he has turned love into a commodity; love, the one redemptive agent that might have prevented his apocalyptic fall has been turned into

a transaction akin to a purchase of indulgences. In other words, he provokes the temptations of *The Craft* into being, as if to better resist them; unbeknownst to him the dare will be costly beyond all imagination.

In the opening scene, Lear invites the devils he does not know yet, to partake in his debasement. We may want to think of the first act as an assault on our conception of attachment while Lear willfully divests himself of the responsibilities of kingship. The second act shows Lear holding on to the vainglorious trappings of kingship, only to relinquish them and take off in the wilderness: his own quarters, his retinue of men, the respect of servants, his daughters' devotion, he loses them all; and yet, he resists. He slams the door on them all. The third act unleashes his rage as he wanders unto the heath under a violent storm he foolishly believes he can order around. And yet he resists, stoically perhaps, though his resilience costs him his sanity. The fourth act witnesses the suicidal despair of blinded Gloucester, that Lear assuages by acknowledging his own mortality and the weeping that must attend the human condition. In the fifth act, we meet Lear twice; on his way to prison and reunited with Cordelia, Lear retrieves his faith as he declares that "upon such sacrifices, my Cordelia, the gods themselves throw incense" (5.3. 20-21); in his penultimate appearance on stage the man on the rack, on the wheel of fire, miraculously believes again. But all dissipates in his last scene, his death scene. As he enters carrying his dead daughter in his arms, he summons the five temptations all at once, that is, he himself becomes their embodiment, as all the devils are already dead. He is faithless, despairing, furious, vain (he boasts of having killed a man), and finally, he proves resolutely attached to the things of this world, even dead ones:

LEAR: Cordelia, Cordelia! Stay a little. Ha! (5.3.270)

This is too heavy a burden for a four-score-old human body. Which brings us back to the theology of his death and the question of human suffering before death.

Few plays address the issues of the body's fragility and the preparation for death, with more poignancy than *King Lear*. But in this instance, the preparation for what, one may ask? To be in God's good standing and prepare for his welcoming embrace? At face value, God, be he a sum of Pagan deities or a Christian trinity, is hard to locate in Shakespeare's play, his absence felt conspicuously. Richard McCoy has located his nominal presence or "his spies" in a penetrating discussion of the play that restores touch (physical contact) as a competing trope over the traditional reading of the play as a meditation on sight (the essay, granted, accomplishes far more than that).<sup>69</sup> The play, I would argue, accuses the vacuity, the vanity of the *ars moriendi* tradition. It deconstructs it. This is a text where death stands feral, and the domestication offered by *The Craft* can be of little help, though *The Craft*'s specter looms large. George Steiner reads correctly a play that "not only states that the gods (God) treat men and women with infantile sadism ... but where the justified questioning of human beings in agony ... is doomed to remain unanswered" (35). And that is the point, is it not? Shakespeare, who

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<sup>69</sup> "Look upon me, Sir": Relationships in *King Lear* in *Representations*, Vol. 81, No.1 (Winter 2003) (pp. 46-60). In his essay, McCoy summons the views of various critics to ultimately rally to that of Paul Alpers and impress upon his reader the importance of touch (rather than sight) in the play. McCoy highlights the primacy of the actors' bodies for the incarnation of the issues/meanings of the text. For an actor who came to scholarship late, his essay has as vindicating as refreshing an effect [as does his recent *Faith in Shakespeare* (2014)]; it oxygenates an often dry critical debate over this text, stale with an intellectualism more concerned with what the play does not or cannot accomplish. To his credit, McCoy enters a stale-aired critical shop [my qualifying, not his, he prudently calls it *narrow*] with great respect and without breaking their rhetorical china; but he thinks few people will drink from these cups. To his inspired discussion of the Eucharist controversy (Catholic Transubstantiation versus Protestant Memorialization), this most contentious point of theological division during the Reformations, McCoy juxtaposes the theatrical debate (fiction versus meta-theatrics) that in his hands becomes the Eucharist's controversy's doppelganger. Lear's agony like that of Christ aims at echoing cosmically; in repeated pathetic fallacies that I for one cherish, the play shows Lear's delusive passions and their unleashing effects on the natural, political, theological worlds of the play. But every audience member soon or later will discover that the storm battering the heath cares little about an old naked man ordering it about; yet, that Lear thinks it does, is precisely what makes for good drama.

hates unresolved plots, who loves to tidy up the mess, risks here an aporetic gesture. He has written a play that thrives on “nothing,” and he will not answer the questions his play so courageously asks. Steiner subscribes to the view that “a persistent theme of Elizabethan and Jacobean drama was the dread of personal annihilation after death, the fear that might indeed be a tale told by an idiot signifying nothing” (Thomas, 233). I have already mentioned the importance of Robert N. Watson’s study on this theme.<sup>70</sup> In *King Lear*, Watson observes a thwarted instance of the common practice of the theatre in the period (that of denying the finality of death by bringing characters briefly back to life), when Lear thinks his dead daughter about to speak (39).<sup>71</sup> This is a novel temptation, but worse, it is torture. As Lear himself has confirmed that no such hope can exist: “She’s gone forever! I know when one is dead, and when one lives; she’s dead as earth” (5.3. 258-260). Shakespeare is tempting us, at this late hour in the play, to believe that Cordelia might still be alive.

Some critics have [even] suggested that Lear dies believing that Cordelia is alive after all; he is asking the by-standers to look on her lips which he believes are moving with breath, and so dies in a final delusion to crown all his others. I believe this is the wrong interpretation. Lear is simply asking us to look, to contemplate a piece of humanity, a piece of earth (Fiddes, 64-65).

I could not agree more. But of course, it would be very “tempting” to embrace such comforts. We are asked instead to resist this temptation, and to witness a body in unimaginable physical and psychic pain that knows it will die, but that asks, as if this mortal knowledge was not hard enough to behold, why must dying be so painful? What is the theodicy behind such physical and psychic suffering?

<sup>70</sup> *The Rest is Silence* (1994) is discussed in Chapter I.

<sup>71</sup> I investigate this practice at length in the next chapter.

Gillian Woods writes that “the play’s meditation on humanity is only partly realized through ... rhetorical means; it is crucially performed at the level of the body” (149). I agree with this but it sounds vaguely tautological to my actor’s ears. The actor lends his body to words, and fortifies, concretizes, aggrandizes, illuminates, or reduces their tragic charge, a given of our practice. However the superseding word in Woods’ comment is “crucially” as in crux, as in cross. The body on the cross, the *Imitatio Christi* that *The Craft* insists we must embrace is at play here. But it is not explicit. As Stanley Cavell concedes “*King Lear* is not illustrated theology (anyway, which theology is thought to be illustrated, what understanding of atonement, redemption, etc., is thought to be figured?), and nature and Lear are not touched, but run out.”<sup>72</sup> If Cavell is right, if we cannot illustrate a theological point, but try nonetheless, our attempts at expressing the ineffable, speak more eloquently of us than of what we are trying to describe. We are tempted by, wired for redemption; the play offers none, I would argue.

It may be this insistence on the aging, dying body that has given *King Lear* such relevance for our times as we have witnessed in the Anglosphere an abundance of productions these last few years. In his Presentist analysis, Michael Bristol, looking to disengage the reading of *King Lear* from historicist fetters, points to the very end of the play and writes that *King Lear* “doesn’t quite end with Lear’s death – there is a little more to say, though often the closing lines do not get much attention” (62). The death of the play itself, in other words, needs critical investment. And as Frank Kermode’s important insight commands that the end of any literary work organizes the whole, I must close my discussion of the death of kings with thoughts that re-order this chapter. To accomplish this, I look at *King Lear*’s last lines.

<sup>72</sup> *Disowning Knowledge in seven plays of Shakespeare*. 2003. (Kindle Locations 1613-1615).

The play ends with Albany in (Q1), or with Edgar (in F and the conflated text), Gloucester's son, each in turn, the sole survivor of their sad family tale, who, as he (either of them) looks upon the dead Lear, speaks:

The weight of this sad time we must obey;  
Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say.  
The oldest hath born most; we that are young  
Shall never see so much, nor live so long.<sup>73</sup>

In its handling of the *ars moriendi* tradition that, as I contend, *King Lear* deconstructs and disavows, the line “speak what we feel, not what we ought to say” might strike as Shakespeare's invitation for us today, to singularize our reactions, our approaches to death and dying, to “speak what we feel” rather than resort to the homiletic (“what we ought to say). In other words, is Shakespeare inviting us to be sovereign over our own ends? In *The Craft* the words never change even though the dying is the first to attend his end. The textual instability as to who should speak the last lines of *King Lear* also suggests this idea of individualized, differentiated responses. If Albany (who is older) speaks them, he may be saying he does not wish to live that long. If Edgar speaks them,

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<sup>73</sup> Lear's exceptionality captured in the closing words of the play has lost much of its sting, and contradicts our current experience of longevity in industrialized societies. Lear's end in fact has become, a model rather than an exception: I see Lears on the streets of New York on a daily basis, fallen and homeless kings, once loved, once touched, held, shouting in the storm of a well-dressed humanity late for work. We live longer lives, have more time to tackle the finite nature of existence, more time to lose our capacities, and most importantly, more time to chronicle how illness defies and chips at our bodies. We invent new temporal templates, convenient chronological mythologies like “fifty is the new forty” or “you are as young as your heart.” Thus our protean longevity gives us the opportunity to author individualized narratives of aging and dying i.e. if we only would. Medical science, in its attempt to keep us alive at all costs – and writing in America, I would add ‘pun intended’ - brings us back to the “cookie-cutter approaches” of the Medieval period, if of a different kind and born of different imperatives. This is a great paradox brought on by medical progress: “heroic measures” may save the body from the horrors of pain and the insufficiencies of certain organic functions, but in many instances they also kill the hero, they silence the heroic dying voice. This is what Diana Fuss interpolates when she discusses a new surge of the elegiac genre brought upon the literary scene by the AIDS epidemic as she writes:

Modernity's chronic illness elegies thus announce the latest shift in mortality's cultural landscape, as end-stage patients increasingly choose to forgo consciousness-numbing drugs in order to participate, once again, in the deathbed's most time-honored rites (35).

he might be in awe of a life so rich in adventures and pain. Who should speak the line? Does it matter? We will not know. We are not meant to know.

What seems clear is that *King Lear* refuses any all-encompassing redemptive narrative and rejects the salvific. It is a play where “as flies to wanton boys are [men] to the gods; they kill [them] for their sport” (4.1.37-8). Even the fictions of the theatre will not help. Unlike Charles I, Lear need not ask for a second shirt; he walks to his “good block” ragingly, grotesquely, without much decorum, in the willful, the shocking nakedness of his brutalized body. The walk towards death is here undisciplined, erratic but it is always an act of resistance. The golden crown becomes in the space of a few hours, a crown of weed, and wild flowers, inevitably bringing to mind the crown of thorns worn by the savior of men, who is nowhere to be found in this theatre of human cruelty, and tantalizing devils.

I take Lear’s agony then to begin with his abdication scene and end with his mystifying last words “look there, look there.”<sup>74</sup> He dies in character, that is, giving orders, as a king should. That Lear’s last words should be ones of command conjure an incontrovertible pathos to his death as a king. But the commander is impotent as no one can actually obey this king even when they would, as what Lear sees remains inscrutable to others.

For years I thought (that is the contrarian in me) that Lear was asking his audience to look elsewhere as he dies. Dying is a private affair, I thought. I thought the play, by situating itself in a pre-Christian society, was responding to the false comforts of

<sup>74</sup> It has certainly been staged in this spirit: in Jonathan Miller’s 2004 production at Lincoln Center, Lear (played by Christopher Plummer) has a memory lapse on his very first line, as he says “Attend the lords of France and [*he fumbles*] euh...Burgundy, Gloucester” not remembering who Burgundy is, he must be prompted, alerting the audience at the top of the play of an unspecified but highly recognizable degenerative illness. The moment was brutally efficacious.

Christianity, to what Philip Larkin calls in his poem *Aubade*: “that vast moth-eaten musical brocade created to pretend we never die” (208). Look there! Look there! Where? Lear was asking his audience, I thought, to look *elsewhere* as if he were ashamed of needing love as Stanley Cavell convincingly contends the old king is.

Lastly I must speak of the role of the doctor in *King Lear*: the physician has five lines, (in the Quarto, and the conflated text) but he has, as far my discussion is concerned, a capital one, and maybe, in my attempt to reclaim for our times the dying experience through the theatrical experiment, the most important line of the play. As Cordelia approaches the unconscious Lear, sitting in a chair on the threshold of life, the doctor, having exhausted his medical resources, turns to an unseen character, a musician, we must assume, and says to him:

DOCTOR     Please you, draw near. Louder the music there! (4.7.25)

Ultimately, for his patient between life and death, his patient in the chasm of I will die/ I die, for “this child-changed father,” what the physician prescribes is music, what he prescribes is Art. Who knows, there may truly be room for Art in the art of medicine as these kings of fiction who die for us every night teach us; their regal fakery reminds us of the sovereignty of our own death. Richard McCoy closes his discussion of “the real presence” in *Alterations of State* with a provoking thought:

The enduring power of “sad stories of the death of kings” by Shakespeare and his contemporaries can help *us* understand *our* abiding distress at “the cease of majesty.” Moreover, they provide *us* with something more substantive than a real or royal presence. In the words of William Hazlitt, the great works of Skelton and Shakespeare, Milton and Marvell all allow *us* a relation to a reality as vivid and “as real as *our* own thoughts” (156, emphases mine).

I could not put it better. We are all kings and queens about to die. “Us, our, us, us, and our”, these imperious includers all appear in McCoy’s final statement: We, we who must



die. In French, the English “we” makes the same sound as yes: Oui, a locution of acquiescence toward our common destiny. We shall not be getting out of this we-wood any time soon. Why would we? Why should we? How could we?

CHAPTER III  
Female Swan Songs and their Size of Sorrow:  
*Constructions of Feminine Death*

How strange! The spasms of pain have ceased:  
A strange vigour has brought me to life!  
Ah! I shall live - Oh, joy!

*(Violetta falls down, senseless, upon the sofa.)*

*La Traviata,*

Libretto by Francesco Maria Pave

Every day a little death  
In the parlor, in the bed,  
On the lips and in the eyes,  
In the curtains, in the silver,  
In the murmurs, in the pauses,  
In the buttons, in the bread.  
In the gestures, in the sighs.  
Every day a little sting  
Every day a little dies  
In the heart and in the head.  
In the looks and in the lies.  
Every move and every breath,  
(And you hardly feel a thing)  
Brings a perfect little death.

Stephen Sondheim, *A Little Night Music*.

In this one life I die ten thousand deaths.

*A Woman Killed with Kindness*, XIII, 129.

But what use is art if it can't help us look death in the face?

Julia Kristeva, *Possessions*, p. 9.

In matters of theatrical representation what the realist may be quick to denounce as ridiculous or outrageous, the aesthete will re-brand as sublime. Thus in the final act of his Opera *La Traviata* (1853), Giuseppe Verdi gives his heroine Violetta the task of singing mellifluous high C's while succumbing to tuberculosis, a respiratory disease seemingly incompatible with the physical exigencies of *Bel Canto*. In the annals of medicine this accomplishment would prove miraculous or prompt ardent research; in those of the theatre it simply is a miracle. No questions asked.

Early Modern English plays that made dying a privileged object of their dramatic experiments did more than accommodate such miracles; they insisted, and thrived on their ubiquity and furnished their stage with Verdi-like unapologetic flairs of implausibility, reappropriating the Christian good death as *object d'art*. This chapter examines such instances in the art of dying of women in two specific plays of the period. Though I address other texts, I concentrate on the inexhaustible meanings of feminine death scenes in Shakespeare's *Othello* (1603-04) and Thomas Heywood's *A Woman Killed with Kindness* (1603), to ask how/if gender shapes the female craft of dying and/or may condition its preparation.<sup>75</sup> With such a wealth of plays showcasing the death of women, my choice is forcibly arbitrary; it is also calibrated to my argument.

What makes these texts more relevant than others for my discussion? First, as we will see, they deploy the tropes of *The Craft* as expounded in the previous chapters in the frankest of manners by appropriating its most important prop: the bed. This allows the playwrights to liberally bring on stage that conspicuous item, and with it, its multifarious employments: the bed as space of conception, as place of birth, as locale of dream, as theatre of love, as sexual laboratory, as retreat for convalescence and repentance and finally, as life last station. The centrality of the marital bed in both these works makes of an intensely private space, a theatrical, titillating, and public one. Second, they show women who not only die but who are also shown to prepare themselves to die. In these texts, the female protagonists both apprentice their end. Heywood's Protestant heroine, Anne Frankford, the wife *killed with kindness*, readies herself with a rather unorthodox idea of what constitutes the *good death*. The Catholic Desdemona is caught unaware in

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<sup>75</sup> In the from-stage-to-the-page logic I have used all along, I mention the dates of their first projected performance, rather than of publication.

her marital bed; unprepared, she begs for a stay of execution in order to actualize her *good death*, the requirements of which seem well-known to her. While Anne's death is in appearance soft (or kind), Desdemona's is unambiguously violent; paradoxically, her violent end fosters a moment of inexpressible human kindness and insight, while that of Anne foments an unqualified yet tacit violence. Third, both plays place enormous importance on the presence of music, a theme that informs this entire chapter and that I will address shortly.

Yet my focus on *Othello* and *A Woman Killed with Kindness* [from now on, referred to as *AWKWK*] is motivated by what I would argue is an even more significant feature both plays have in common: the contemporaneity they share with the defining historical moment that hosts, and I will argue, fashions their composition, i.e. the end of Elizabeth's long reign. I propose that the disquiet surrounding an heirless queen's death inevitably inscribes itself in the motifs of both plays and their theatrical manipulation of female death. Thus before reading the death music and the art of dying in both plays, I use reports of Elizabeth's death to contextualize and historicize my analysis and examine how the death of an heirless monarch, a woman who reigns for more than four decades, tints the fabric of these scores for actors. Observed through their moment of composition, both play-texts emerge as *Fin-de-Siècle* documents, evoking by their narratives a foretelling of change in conceptions of femininity that puts the issue of female agency and self-rule at their hearts. I read in both plays an inchoate chafing with theological issues surrounding the praxis of dying, which may have been brought about by the death of Elizabeth. Richard McCoy has aptly observed that from "any change of regime could arise acute anxieties because, throughout the English Reformation, political change often

entailed religious changes” (2002, xi). I argue that these anxieties inform the sensibilities of both these texts. But I am getting ahead of myself. Before exploring how the events of Elizabeth’s death affect the composition of these plays, and how musical motifs seep through them, I must ask larger questions about the death of women in general and its theatrical representation in particular.

Does Death, this seemingly equal-opportunity employer, operate in sexist ways? Or rather, should we find it does, how do these playwrights gender the agony of female characters? The questions get vexingly more complex in view of early modern theatrical praxis in England. In the all-male mimesis that prevails then in the staging of plays, femininity occurs as an imitative construct rather than a reality, an aggregate of conventions, a stage idiom made of stereotypical signs. And as I am examining the swan songs of women, inevitably I must consider their emotional pitch, “pitched” as they are by male sensibilities. Are feminine swan songs sung at a different pitch? (A major, a minor key?) How do we tonally assess these dying songs when performed by male actors (boys, adolescents, young men)?

Before examining the representation of female death itself, let us tackle a simpler issue: that of crying. We might approach this issue with a counter-intuitive strategy: for the stereotypes that construct stage femininity are not only visible through the gimmickry of male performance; they appear just as much in the deportment of male characters, who often denounce male emotionalism as a sign of female weakness. Take for instance *All is True* (1613), Shakespeare’s late collaboration with John Fletcher. The play presents us with a resilient stereotype, one that has hardly left us: women are emotional and cry

easily. When Cardinal Wolsey, a *de casibus* figure, learns of his fall, he weeps openly and yet feels the need to couch his emotion in theatrical terms:

CARDINAL WOLSEY      [*weeping*] I did not think to shed a tear  
 In all my miseries, but thou hast forced me,  
 Out of thy honest truth, to play the woman.  
 (4.1.429-31, emphases mine)

No one believes for a moment that the mature playwright and his collaborator fifteen years his junior adhere to Wolsey's reductive view on tears as a female prerogative, or that men will only cry if "forced" into it by "honest truth." But the authors seem eager to establish that tears, as dramatic currency, carry a distinct value in men. Wolsey may plausibly think so, some members of the audience may too, but Wolsey's resorting to the trope of performance is telling; he is reduced "to play the woman," not be one. *All Is True*, a play that according to its witty epilogue, "can never please all, ... [is] expected good ... only in [its] merciful construction of good women," (5.5.1-9).<sup>76</sup> *Merciful* and *construction* wax a little condescending, do they not? In this scheme then, Wolsey's comment on his own tears bespeaks not solely his conception of femininity, but also of femininity in performance.<sup>77</sup> Shakespeare's works of course do not verify Wolsey's clichés. An exchange from *Macbeth* (1606) makes this very case: Ross tells the fugitive Macduff that his family has been massacred on Macbeth's orders, but declines to elaborate on the gruesomeness of what he has witnessed:

<sup>76</sup> In this play, male tears abound: King Henry VIII gains trust in Cranmer when he sees the archbishop cry, "Look, the good man weeps. He's honest on my honour" (5.1.153-54). At a thorny point of the plot later on, the "sectary" Cranmer reconciles with the hardcore Catholic Gardiner; Henry, upon seeing Cranmer weep so, speaks: "Good man, those joyful tears show thy true heart" (5.3.207). The tears of men in *All Is True* propel the plot.

<sup>77</sup> Martha A. Kurtz observes "that tears were feminine – and, consequently a sign of weakness, both physical and mental – was a commonplace in Shakespeare's time, as it often is today" (164). This might be true of Shakespeare's time, but it is certainly not in Shakespeare's works.

ROSS ...  
 To relate the manner  
 Were on the quarry of these murdered deer  
 To add the death of [Macduff, the aggrieved father]:

MALCOLM What, man, ne'er pull your hat upon your brows.  
 Give sorrow words. The grief that does not speak  
 Whispers the o'erfraught heart and bids it break.

...  
 MACDUFF He has no children. All my pretty ones?  
 Did you say all? O hell-kite! All?

...  
 MALCOLM Dispute it like a man.

MACDUFF I shall do so,  
 But I must also feel it as a man.

...  
 O, I could play the woman with mine eyes,  
 And braggart with my tongue! But gentle heavens  
 Cut short all intermission. [...]

MALCOLM This tune goes manly. (4.3. 206-37)

The tune moves indeed from a recognizable female grief, to a more markedly martial and masculine tone. But as Shakespeare makes clear, to feel it “as” a man is not to do so “in the manner of” a male, or “manly” as Malcolm would have it. A nod at emotive universalism is hinted at here, as grief will be grief.<sup>78</sup> If early modern English plays gender this most basic of human functions (crying), may they also emotively compartmentalize by gender the biologically universal issue of dying?

No doubt, the plays do not shy at equalizing the circumstances of death across gender; like their male counterparts, the women of early modern plays act in turn as victims or agents of their ends: they commit suicide, are poisoned, brutalized to death, stabbed, executed, smothered while they sleep; some may die in more mysterious circumstances, as suggested of Lady Constance in *King John*, possibly of sorrow such as

<sup>78</sup> Yet in this theatre, male tears may also masquerade: Richard III admits he “can wet [his] cheeks with artificial tears, and frame [his] face to all occasions” (3 *Henry VI*, 3.2.184-185). And Lennox questions Macbeth’s tears over Duncan’s murder (3.63-4).

Falstaff. Shakespeare's Cleopatra, awaiting news of Antony's death, which must decree her own, refuses any tempering of grief from her exclusively female entourage:

CHARMIAN CLEOPATRA	Be comforted, dear madam. No, I will not. All strange and terrible events are welcome, But comforts we despise. Our size of sorrow, Proportioned to our cause, must be as great As that which makes it. (4.16.2-6)
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From the mouth of a character who so often speaks in the self-consciousness of the play in which she appears (i.e. metatheatrically), these lines revive the controversies inherent to the representation of female emotiveness in the early modern period: since “as that which makes” women’s sorrow, “that which” gives it amplitude, “that which” allows its very expression, relies on a male authorship and its all-male mimetic production; those lines are metatheatrically self-accusing: male intent will even dictate the “size of sorrow” of the women oppressed by its very gaze. Is even the grief of oppression prescribed or oppressed then? Whatever the case, a survey of female death scenes inevitably conveys a conception of female grief, of its “size of sorrow” before the act of dying as very large indeed. Their deaths, like those of men, often bathe in operatic grandeur. And as I write of women, of their labor of death, the word operatic is fortuitous beyond its etymology.<sup>79</sup>

I opened these pages with an operatic allusion (to Verdi's *Traviata*) because music informs this chapter in three specific ways: first, while examining the agonies of women one is struck by a recurrent borrowing from *the musical lexicon* for its representation: songs, broken musical instruments and musical metaphors repeatedly furnish both the action and diction of such scenes. Ophelia sings before she drowns,

<sup>79</sup> In the O.E.D. Opera ... 1639 in sense ‘composition in which poetry, dance, and music are combined’, ... classical Latin opera activity, effort, labour, work.... Compare French opéra ... (1659 in sense ‘excellent thing’)



Desdemona does too before she is smothered; heroines have their heart's "string crackt," Emilia will "play the swan and die in music" and Calantha as she dies requests the performance of her funeral dirge, "the [very] song [she] fitted for her end."<sup>80</sup> In the theatricalization of female agony the swan song leitmotiv will simply not relent. The swan song motif, in its attempts to aestheticize the pains of agony, perhaps sublimates the fear of death, but surely to effect the beautiful out of one's envoi becomes a secular substitute for the theological *good death*, in other words, an objet d'art.

Second, my experience as a professional actor shapes the reading of any theatre script: I inevitably read them as scores for actors, and the music of words, their rhythm, the multiple playabilities they invite, their *lentos*, their *molto agitados*, cannot but weigh heavily on my analysis. At the most basic level, actors look in these scores for actions, not mere states of being...that's acting for beginners; one cannot play sad, but one can brush one's teeth in sadness. One cannot play happy, but one can walk with a merry gait. In theatrical practice I would advance that the same goes for dying. When an actor represents a character in the throes of agony, dying becomes an action, something we do, when enduring is also an action.<sup>81</sup> In the theatre then, dying is always a task, a labor to accomplish, again an iteration of the first trope of *The Craft*. Death may be happening to the character, but the actor must play its action. I am speaking about acting, of course, but inevitably, this simple insight raises the more philosophical question: what if we were to approach our finitude with an actor's mind, as a task to fulfill, an action to complete as

<sup>80</sup> These characters appear in *The English Traveler* (Heywood, 1633) *Hamlet* (1602), *Othello* (1603), and *The Broken Heart* (Ford, 1629).

<sup>81</sup> Michael Cameron Andrews has written a study called *This Action of Our Death: The Performance of Death in English Renaissance Drama*, (cited in earlier chapters). In his dispirited and scathing review of Andrews' book, Michael Neill, whose contributions to the death representations in the early modern period I can only revere and envy, reduces Andrews' ambition to a catalogue of death-speeches that chronicles its Whiggish tale of the rise and decline of the death speech, culminating with, who else, Shakespeare.

the late medieval manual requires we do?<sup>82</sup> I use what I know of the acting praxis to crack the code of the many *artes moriendi* of the texts; I pluralize by design: as in my earlier chapters, I am searching for both the residual presence of *The Craft* and the intimations of an art of dying for our times in which death can have meaning for both the world of the play and its audience in any period. I trust my reading of Desdemona's and Anne's swan songs will accomplish that.

John Barton, in his celebrated but no less disputed *Playing Shakespeare* television broadcasts (also published in book form), insists on actors considering the verse as music; he suggests that "because Shakespeare is a great poet, an audience has as much right to expect us to be faithful to his text as they would to hear the right notes at the right time" (45). Barton intuits the text as a musical encoding, a polysemous score in need of actors as its interpretative instrumentalists.

About the difficulty for actors to do justice to the music of the verse, John Gielgud writes in *Stage Directions* (1963):

Of course acting is pretense, but it is also an art, or perhaps more correctly speaking a craft. ... A good actor should be skilful [sic] enough. ... Many modern actors, I believe, are inclined to think that Shakespeare must be spoken naturalistically at all costs. But when Shakespeare wants to be naturalistic he writes: 'Pray you, undo this button' [in Lear's death scene, if you remember]. ... I try to study the sound, shape and length of words, ...I experiment with [the verse] for modulation, tone and pace (4-8).

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<sup>82</sup> Actors – I can only speak of actors today - are by hybridity undeclared literary critics; their acting choices editorialize; their *interpretations* inevitably bespeak a "take" on the part, bringing light to embedded and less than obvious meanings, sometimes going against the semantic grain of the lines, privileging any given aspect of the role, unchartered at times, in other words, 'theorizing' the role through the lens of their craft. If we may speak of actors as theorists, then they are "theorists of the plausible". This critical ability has of course limits. No more than a legitimate critic can an actor claim playing the full interpretative field offered by some of these intricate scores; thus 'definitive interpretations', a trope of enthusiasm for theatre reviewing, are little more than hyperboles inviting constant disproof. Another way to say that these texts, forever unstable, Queer by their protean nature, can be sung to any tune (they certainly have been): with a flick of the hand, the wink of an eye, an actor can even make "yes, I do" mean "no, I don't."

More than thirty years later, Richard Eyre, then director of Great Britain's National theatre writes:

Verse-speaking should be like jazz: never on the beat, but before, after, or across it. The life of plays is in the language, not alongside it, on underneath it. Feelings and thoughts are released at the moment of the speech. An Elizabethan audience would have responded to the pulse, the rhythms, the shapes, sounds, and above all meanings, within the consistent ten-syllable, five-stress, lines of blank verse. They were an audience who listened (1994, 163).

Bernard Shaw wrote in a letter to Ellen Terry: “play on the lines, within the lines. *Never* in between the lines.”<sup>83</sup> In all these views, whether Gielgud's and Shaw's more traditional approach, or Eyre's more playful conception, the text is considered a musical score. Yet it is in his description of death scenes (in verse) that John Barton makes the most telling observation; his comment will prove useful for my discussion as it introduces the third reason why I suggest we must weigh the swan songs as musical objects. About the death of Hotspur and Ophelia, Barton explains:

I think we have stumbled on our old problem of [speeches] which [are] partly *choric*. [The character] in part stands outside [his/her] own dying. ... Clearly the *choric* function is dominant in the sense that the thing described matters rather more than the feelings of the speaker (136-137, emphases mine).

Barton points to a tension: he suggests that in death scenes the actor speaks for his character, but also has a “dominant” *choric* function. *Choric* is an apt word to situate a discussion of music in the death of women. As a woman dies, she speaks for herself, but also as a chorus of women. I am not entirely convinced Barton is right in his use of the word “dominant” but he certainly is right in his approach to death scenes as *choric* across gender. The character dies but speaks for all who died, or will, i.e. for all of us. But facts

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<sup>83</sup> Ellen Terry was a famous actress, celebrated for her Shakespearian performances. She also was John Gielgud's aunt. Quoted in Gielgud (8).

are stubborn and even characters refuse to become mouthpieces; they want individuation. Let us remember the metaphorical tenor of Hamlet's reproach (in prose) to his college friends ordered to spy on him:

HAMLET	Look you now, how unworthy a thing you make of me! You would play upon me; you would seem to know my stops; you would pluck out the heart of my mystery; you would sound me from my lowest note to the top of my compass; and there is much music, excellent voice, in this little organ, yet cannot you make it speak. 'Sblood, do you think I am easier to be play'd on than a pipe? Call me what instrument you will, though you can fret me, you cannot play upon me. <span style="float: right;">(3.2.334-341)</span>
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Hamlet refuses to be played upon; he claims to be his own instrument; better yet, he claims to be his own music. There is much wisdom to be distilled mixing both *Hamlet* and Barton's comments for any actor about to approach a death scene: the dying moment is couched in verse; it is stylized, unnatural, poeticized. It is personal and universal. As I intend to show, in the musical textuality of their deaths, both Desdemona and Anne Frankford emerge as enlightened artists of death, as women who die artfully in their own name, but also as symbols for all women, and by extension for all humans. But as Gielgud reminds us, acting is pretense; the actor pretends to die. And many religions pretend we do not (really die).

At least the theatre does not apologize for being fake; the death scenes themselves even bear an additional burden as we know the actors are heading to the pub after the blood is shed; yet this notion of the "choric" must remain. It stands at the heart of *The Craft* where all die in the same idiom, as a chorus of angels-to-be set to the same music (if all goes well).

In their assessment of both *Othello* and *AWKWK* many critics have pointed to their embedded proto-feminism, perceived diachronically as latent or strident. I want to distance myself from this view. If I may suggest the following heresy: in the artfulness, the aestheticizing of their theatre deaths, women make themselves heard as all humanity: the all-male mimesis may participate in effecting this transcendence. Let us suppose (for the sake of these pages) that the all-male mimesis totalizes human representation, and even — here's the heresy — is an attempt at transcending gender. This is, I concede, a slippery road. The reach at transcendence by oppressive means is perverse and yet, in these contentious scenes I will call it “flirting with the operatic.”<sup>84</sup> These death scenes are grand, unrealistic, unnatural, and operatic; they feature women played by men; they showcase female sensibilities dictated by male authorship. This “flirting mode” has its risks: it may well fall in what New Historicist and Feminist criticisms more than legitimately recognize as a reification of female subjection. Catherine Clément, a brilliant feminist critic, contends that Opera as an art form simultaneously fetishizes women and congratulates a patriarchy that aestheticizes their subjection and martyrdom. Clément affirms that Opera kills its female characters to better enshrine their limited agency and does so for the esthetic pleasure of men:

Opera concerns women. No, there is no feminist version; no, there is no liberation. Quite the contrary: they suffer, they cry, they die. Singing and wasting your breath can be the same thing. Glowing with tears, their décolletés cut to the

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<sup>84</sup> 1607 is often offered as the year that marks the birth of Opera as a genre (Monteverdi's *Orpheo*, in fact), and no demonstration need be done to show what precious sources the composers and librettists of the operatic canon have found in Late Elizabethan and Jacobean plays. Gary Wills relates that besides *Falstaff*, *Othello* and *Macbett*, Verdi had considered composing Operas using *a Tempest*, *Hamlet* and *Romeo and Juliet* and that “he came near to creating, an opera from his favorite play, *King Lear*.” Wills relates that the Oxford Companion to Shakespeare speaks of nearly 300 hundred operatic works inspired by Shakespeare or using parallel sources (*The New York Review of Books*, November 24, 2011). For just that reason, accusing the dramatists of flirting with the operatic seems to me, if by prolepsis, an apt observation.

heart, they expose themselves to the gaze of those who come to take pleasure in their pretend agonies (11).

With eloquence, Clément makes a legitimate case; yet, the endlessly problematic issue she raises extends beyond gender itself: taking pleasure in the pain of others or as Aristotle defines in his *Poetics*, “look[ing] to tragedy for its own pleasure, not just any pleasure” (3.2). Though he never spells it out, in his endlessly cryptic treatise Aristotle hints at the heuristics of dying, an oxymoron that can only exist in devising death scenes for performance. We are dealing with the paradox that the misery, the messiness of death, and the sublimity that may emerge from its tragic representation, not only have the power to instruct and sober us, and through Aristotle’s medical metaphor (catharsis) even “heal” us, but also more vexingly, guiltily perhaps, that those gory spectacles may in fact even entertain us.

The oppression of women and the pains of death are of course more than mere aesthetic tropes and the *ars moriendi* manuals have traditionally attributed moral value to physical agony across gender. If I use “flirting with the operatic” as a transcending metaphor to interrogate the “size of sorrow” in the death of women, I do not want to forget the physical realities of female oppression, or be glib about the abject violence such plays may sublimate and misrepresent by design. As Ernest Becker contends, art, by virtue of its death-denying function, domesticates the terrors of death. These women die each night, have died night after night on stage for four hundreds years and through their deaths, the outrageousness of their deaths, the outrageousness of their performance by male actors, their miraculous beauty too, I argue that each time, somewhat, some construct of femininity dies a little or may be born a little. So for now, with an ear for

music, an actor's taste for textual enigmas, an eye on the choric, I touch on the deathbed of women. If my reader smells heresy, it might be entirely by design.

\* \* \*

Let us now consider the singular historical moment of the plays' composition and their thematic bonds. Written more or less at the time of Elizabeth's death, *Othello* and *A Woman Killed With Kindness* make odd twins; distinct in tone and locale, they share thematic bonds: adultery and the fear of cuckoldry fuel their narrative energies. The plays seem equally concerned with testing the compatibility of human passions with issues of salvation; no one knows the results of such explorations as the plays leave their casualties' salvation unresolved. And both works dramatize in surprising frankness the domestic protocols of early modern marriage, unapologetically laying bare their masculinist visions of female containment.

Elizabeth's reign can hardly be made synonymous with a period of advancement for women. Elizabeth's own agency in the laborious curating of her public image, a sui generis theatrical production if ever there was one, reminds us of the perilous balancing act of being both a woman and a ruler. In *Gloriana's Face* (1992), S. P. Cerasano and Marion Wynne-Davies make eloquent use of Elizabeth's portraiture history as a metaphor to discuss "the oppression and the resistance of women in the English Renaissance" (3). Emulating their strategy, I suggest we regard the dissident reports of Elizabeth's death as an interpretative trope that, like her portraits, "reveal[s] the crucial possibilities for the women of [her] time and beyond to enact both their real and their fictive selves" (18). The contradicting reports of Elizabeth's death conjure a complex being, a choric being. The playwrights give their heroines complex personalities and,

with them, deaths equally labored, pregnant with polysemy within the theatrical cosmologies they create. The death of Elizabeth may have kindled at once the capacious chorus of women she appears to contain and that her seventy-year long life had accommodated. Anne Boleyn's daughter had filled the roles of a multitude of women: she is, in turn, bastard, heretic, survivalist, amazon, Fairie Queen, eternal virgin, lecherous courtesan, scholar, religious zealot, toleration proponent, skilled diplomat, musician, murderous cousin, protector of the arts, Armada crusher, Cynthia/Artemis/Gloriana during sojourns at Richmond or Hampton Court; those personas hardly fit a single woman. Yet, the performance that was her long reign allowed the percolation of this seemingly irreconcilable sum of parts. The plays of the period duplicate such complexities, and those written in the crepuscular light of Elizabeth's reign, I suggest, reverberate the sovereign's death, and with it a woman who, by virtue of her position and the exceptional length of her rule, exploded a masculinist model of femininity.

Thomas Dekker's hyperbolic relating of Elizabeth's death in *The Wonderful Yeare* (1603) reports an apocalyptic hour spoiling the felicity of spring as Death impregnates Elizabeth's realm. In Dekker's vision, to bury its Virgin Queen, the earth must enter a labor that gives birth to the infant sickness,

a pale, meagry [*sic*], weake child ... [and] this starueling being come to his full growth, ... (Death made him his Herauld: attirde him like a Courtier, and (in his name) chargde him to goe into the Priuie Chamber of the English Queene, to sommon her to appeare in the Star-chamber of heauen. (sig. B1v)

Like the drama of the period, Dekker's baroque excess displays a certain operatic flair: "the report of her death ... was able to kill thousands; it took away hearts of millions."

Whether true or not, Dekker's metaphor makes an argument for amplitude, for "an over-



size of sorrow;” it is at least as true as Verdi’s Violetta climbing to the forbidden heights of the Soprano tessitura while dying of consumption. Such conventions of excess serve a need; they brave the aporia, the anguishing immeasurability that death forces upon all. Thus the anxieties the Queen’s death raises, the myths it nurtures, the chapter of cultural and religious history it punctuates, resonate in the plays of Heywood and Shakespeare. They even borrow some of its tropes. Othello, the converted African “attired like a courtier,” enters “the privy chamber” of Desdemona during the stormy night like the “Death’s herald” Dekker imagines. In *Conversations with Drummond* (1619), described by Frances Teague as “a packet of London gossip,” Ben Jonson highlights the vanity of the dead sovereign by reporting that “Queen Elizabeth never saw herself after she became old in a true glass” (63); the playwright’s claim finds, however, a telling amendment in Elizabeth Southwell’s relating of her mistress’ death:

Her Majesty ... saw one night in her bed her body exceeding lean and fearful in a light of fire. For the which, the next she desired to see a true looking glass (which in twenty years before she had not seen but only such a one which of purpose was made to deceive her sight), which glass being brought her, she fell presently exclaiming at all those which had so much commended her and took it so offensively that all those which had before flattered her durst not come in her sight (in Miola, 525)

In the telling of a male playwright who makes a living from flights of fancy, the Queen dies in a never-altered state of vanity; in that of a female first-hand witness, the dying Queen wants the truth. In Southwell’s version, Elizabeth refuses food, forbids the presence of religious men around her, declines to go to bed until two days before her death, and on one occasion stands for fifteen hours. Reading Southwell leaves the impression that Elizabeth, the woman who happens to be Queen, wishes to die standing

up.<sup>85</sup> In Robert Carey's memoirs, and in clear contradiction of Southwell's account, the Queen welcomes the presence of old Archbishop Whitgift and her attending chaplains; in a clear application of the *ars moriendi* tradition, the religious men inquire on the state of her soul by interrogating her and pray with her till she dies.

While Queen Elizabeth refuses all food (or not) at Richmond Palace, on the other side of London Anne Frankford, or rather the adolescent boy preparing to play the adulteress of Heywood's play, is learning his lines; the streets are full of the noise of the dying queen and the young actor tries to make sense of words and situations foreign to his experience; does he try to imagine what it may feel like to die of hunger? Imagining how one dies is what he's been asked to do.

ANNE            So now unto my coach, then to my home,  
                       So to my deathbed, for from this sad hour  
                       I never will nor eat, nor drink, nor taste,  
                       Of any cates that may preserve my life.  
                       I never will nor smile, nor sleep, nor rest,  
                       But when my tears have washed my black soul white,  
                       Sweet Savior, to thy hands I yield my sprite. (Sc. XXVI. 104-10)

Somewhere else around the city, another young man reads his words and the cues from his stage partners' lines; there is a song to be learned, he half-knows the popular ballad "Willow, willow," but his last scene perplexes him. From what he can make out from the cues, the scene stages the awful death of the young Venetian girl he will defend. He reads accusations of adulterous sex made against his (but her) character, her requests for prayer time and then, there's that handkerchief business, yet again. While Desdemona is dying, the young actor ponders, does she forgive Othello? "Commend me to my kind lord. O,

<sup>85</sup> Southwell's version of events proves no less contested, as it turns the scene of the Queen's deathbed into a late-hour embrace of Catholicism; the young attendant describes the dying Elizabeth bellowing accusations of atheism at the face of the Archbishop of Canterbury. Worse even, the Queen's corpse ferments and explodes in its casket whose cover is broken. Even a dead Elizabeth will not be contained.

farewell!” That is the last line he has to learn. Done. But why does the line sound so familiar? Why does it haunt him so? Ah well, it will be all be revealed at the end, he supposes. Tragedy, in Michael Neill’s sharp observation, is “a profoundly teleological form whose full meaning will be uncovered in the revelation of its end” (45). The young actor knows this, if inchoately. We know this, as scholars, and yet we return to the plays because their “full meaning” is diachronically unstable and can only emerge through a long frequentation.

*Othello* showcases a theatrical turn repeatedly used in the period, when the apparently dead comes back to life for an unexpected utterance that may complicate the plot. Robert N. Watson reads in this practice an encouragement “to spectators to deny the simple finality of death” (39). It might also simply be that Desdemona’s death needs this extra beat, to give the full measure of her character. Desdemona’s stage life ends in double time; an audience new to *Othello* would think that the young Venetian does indeed die twice. At a purely narrative level, one might argue that her first death, she endures with little agency; death is something that happens to her, smothered as she is in the illusory safety of her marital bed, displaced to Cyprus. She tries to prevent this nightmarish end by mollifying her husband, bargaining for time, appealing to his Christian charity and ultimately, by opposing physical resistance to his assault. One matter can be settled at once: she does not want to die even though her song in her penultimate scene (the Willow Song, alluded to, but omitted in Q1) may lead the audience to cast Desdemona as inchoately prescient of her impending doom. That Willow song Emilia will quote as she dies and refer to it as her swan song, making of this ancient and enduring metaphor an obdurate reality of the play.

EMILIA

What did thy song bode, lady?  
 Hark, canst thou hear me? I will play the swan,  
 And die in music. [*Sings*] 'Willow, willow,  
 willow'  
 (5.2.253-55)

Emilia intimates at the prophetic nature of her mistress' song. Indeed, what did Desdemona's song bode? Did it foretell a vast canon of operatic works where women die while singing?<sup>86</sup> "An old thing 'twas, but it expressed her fortune, and she died singing it," Desdemona says, speaking of this air learnt from an unfortunate servant in her childhood household (4.3.28-9). "She died singing it" is an arresting statement: some people do die while singing then? Why would Shakespeare bring this swan song motif in such a tautological manner (showing and telling)? It is too insistent to be of little import. Is he aware that such precedents exist?<sup>87</sup> We know his *King John* explicitly presents the king's death as a swan song. In his works, the poet uses the famed myth of dying birds only sparingly.<sup>88</sup> The myth appears most famously in Plato's *Phaedo*.<sup>89</sup> Socrates, about to drink the hemlock, disabuses his disciples about the myth's meaning:

Will you not allow that I have as much of the spirit of *prophecy* in me as the swans? For they, when they perceive that they must die, having sung all their life long, do then sing more *lustily* than ever, rejoicing in the thought that they are about to go away to the god whose ministers they are. But men, because they are themselves afraid of death, *slanderously* affirm of the swans that they sing a lament at the last, not considering that no bird sings when cold, or hungry, or in pain, ... I do not believe this. ... Because they are sacred to Apollo, they have the gift of *prophecy*, and anticipate the good things of another world; wherefore

<sup>86</sup> In Rossini's *Otello* (1816), the death scene is repatriated to Venice, and the Willow Song is prompted by Desdemona hearing a gondolier singing a sad song while passing under her window; in the gondolier's truncated song, Rossini's invention or his librettist's, Francesco Maria Berio di Salsi, we recognize the words of Francesca Di Rimini from Canto V of Dante's *Inferno*: "Nessun maggior dolore cher ricordarsi del tempo felice ne la miseria" (121-123) or "there is no greater woe than looking back on happiness in days of misery" (translation by Michael Palma). If this sounds digressive it is not; as I intend to show, Shakespeare too, makes a troubling use of intertextuality in Desdemona's last speech.

<sup>87</sup> For an excellent exposé on cases of women dying while singing, see Robert Nosow, *Song and the Art of Dying* in *The Musical Quarterly*, Vol. 82, no. 3/4 (pp. 537-550). In this essay, Nosow relates the case of Suor Orsola, an Italian nun, who died singing in a late fifteenth century convent.

<sup>88</sup> The metaphor of dying swans appears only three more times in his works, in *King John* (5.7. 21), in *The Rape of Lucrece* (line 1662) and in *The Phoenix and the Turtle* (line 15).

<sup>89</sup> For a more elaborate discussion of the myth, see Appendix 1.

they sing and rejoice in that day more than ever they did before (147, emphases mine)

Lust, slander, and prophecy: these are not only operative concepts but richly significant themes in *Othello*.<sup>90</sup> The swans of Socrates then do not die in lament, but in joyful contemplation of “the good things of another world.” I contend, we may read Desdemona’s last words in the disabusing light of her swan song; it is not joy, as Socrates would have, but lucidity that prompts her final words.

In *Shakespeare’s Noise* (2001), Kenneth Gross interpolates G. Wilson Knight’s famed coinage, “the Othello music”; “by this [Knight] means the formal eloquence, the jewel-like precision of language in the play, and, by extension, the exacting, dance-like interaction of the ... characters and their distinct voices” (120).<sup>91</sup> Gross apposes to Wilson Knight’s view the contrasting “chousing” of what he calls “the *Othello* noise, or the *Othello* babble” that he recognizes in the “furious blankness of meaning that gathers around certain words and utterances in the play;” for instance, he cites the word “honest” and its capacious polysemy (120). I concur and would add that the last two scenes in which Desdemona appears present us with a “blankness of meaning” that by design invites both misreading and misplaying.

<sup>90</sup> The word “lust” appears six times in the play and always in the speeches of male characters; “slander” appears three times in the speeches of those defending Desdemona’s character; and if “prophetic” figures but only once, the word is nonetheless used to describe the handkerchief, and therefore bears enormous symbolic weight.

<sup>91</sup> For a great summation of the reactions Knight’s coinage “*Othello*’s music” has provoked see Erin Minear’s essay “We have Nonesuch” from *Reverberating Song in Shakespeare and Milton*, Ashgate, (2011). In this essay, Minear underlines the polysemy that attends the word music as many critics use the word to discuss rather different matters. He mentions G. Wilson Knight who “memorably remarked that ‘the beauties of the *Othello* world are not finally disintegrated; they make ‘a swan-like end, fading in music” (56). To such orthodox views, Minear opposed the more recent voices of Lisa Hopkins and Kenneth Gross where Hopkins wonders “why the critic ignores the actual music sung by the play’s women”(56). As for Gross, he views the Willow Song “as a corrective response to Othello’s madness” (56).

As in *The Craft*, in *Othello* everything happens through language and, as one of the last lines of the play signals, “all that is spoke is marred” (5.2.367); even death materializes through the misappropriation of words from verbal exchanges (the art form’s sap) that in turn create reality.<sup>92</sup> We know for instance that, save his private request that Desdemona win her husband’s good grace back, nothing scabrous takes place between Cassio and Desdemona. In Iago’s improvised algebra, “nothing” becomes “something.” Something scabrous took place between them:

IAGO            Ha! I like not that.  
 OTHELLO        What dost thou say?  
 IAGO            Nothing my lord, or if, I know not what. (3.3.33-5)

Iago says “nothing” but means otherwise. As W.H. Auden could have posited, this is a play where “poetry makes nothing happen.”<sup>93</sup> Let us keep this Audenesque trope close at heart; it will be useful in the epilogue of this study when death occurs as “nothingness.” Thus, Iago is the poet of the play, he makes “nothing happen,” and prompted by his inventions, his prey, caught in his verbal web, must learn to speak its idiom to survive. In her death scene, Desdemona will show how well she fared in her instruction. Maybe she becomes a poet too. Yet to fully grasp the holistic consequentiality of her death scene upon her character, we must examine what leads to it.

<sup>92</sup> Some critics might posit that this can be said about any play; they would be only partly right. Samuel Beckett, to give but one example, eloquently demonstrates that great drama can be accomplished without words, for instance in his plays *Acts Without Words I* (1956), *Acts Without Words II* (1956), *Ghosts Trio* (1975), *But the Clouds* (1976) *Nacht and Traüme* (1983). As an actor, I am the first to recognize language as the sap of the art form; what I mean by “happens through language” is that nothing “real” happens but by the use of language we indicate that something that we know did not happen, is said to have happened. In *Macbeth*, Duncan is really killed in his bedroom; the language that tells the audience this happened is therefore a relating of what took place in reality. The same cannot be said of *Othello*, a play that thrives on the power of innuendoes and the spreading of rumors.

<sup>93</sup> The sentence is purposely ambiguous; as iterated in his elegy *In Memory of W. B. Yeats* (1939), Auden’s verbal turn manages to both highlight the potential agency of poetry and its uselessness at accomplishing anything in the realm of politics. Auden is known to have held both views (see the poem and his interview in *The Partisan Review* (1939).

As we observe, mere “speaking” breeds havoc in this play: it creates hell on earth. Banalities, pleasantries, gestures, even handkerchiefs run the risk of acquiring totemic valence. Often derided by critics for its centrality to the plot, the “prophetic” handkerchief itself, as Huston Diehl makes clear, is “in the context of the Reformation controversy over images” a false relic (94).<sup>94</sup> “According to the reformers, these images [these ocular proofs] were dangerous because they tempted people to put their trust in visible objects instead of an invisible God” (94-5). For its supposed reformed audiences, the play thus exposes Catholic residuality (its characters are after all Venetian Catholics, and Othello a convert to that faith) but operates nonetheless on a dual economy of visible and invisible currencies. When he thinks his wife unfaithful, Othello complains of “a pain over his forehead” (3.3.288); a modern audience may interpret this as a sign of mental exhaustion, as a line that is not particularly important. But of course, it is. An early modern audience understands that Othello feels under his scalp the growing pains of a cuckold’s horns.

DESDEMONA	Faith, that’s with watching. ’Twill away again. Let me bind it hard, within this hour It will be well.
OTHELLO	Your napkin is too little. <i>[He puts the napkin from him. It drops]</i>

And these peccadilloes are the makings of a human death. Mortality, like God I suppose, is in the details. Desdemona’s use of the word “watching” is equally slippery: its blankness of meaning appalls in this situation. “State worries assail you; you have stayed up late for too many nights,” an actress will make this mean; “have you been kept awake by visions of Cassio and me in our delicious bed?” he probably hears. Immateriality

<sup>94</sup> In 1693, Thomas Rymer reduces the play to “[a] tragedy of the handkerchief”.

materially felt, like feeling the pains of imaginary horns growing on one's forehead. This attention to the details of the text, and what is not there, or perhaps present only as a mere intimation, becomes crucial in Desdemona's death scene.<sup>95</sup>

The placement of *The Willow Song scene* in Act IV, so capital to both Rossini's and Verdi's retellings of the play in operatic form, might smack of sentimentality in the play, and in some productions I have attended, I have certainly felt the scene as a lulling of the play's tragic unraveling.<sup>96</sup> It need not be. The moment does wonders for Desdemona's character as it creates an essential counterpoint to her suffering and her impending death: the song aestheticizes both and that aestheticizing is a form of domestication that is intrinsically part of *The Craft's* historical function; unbeknownst to

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<sup>95</sup> This is a salient aspect of the Shakespearian praxis in *Othello*, made evident in this particular passage: the peccadilloes of the text, the seemingly insignificant details – some arbitrarily cut in modern productions that dispense with an average of 500 to 700 lines of verse – have an organic theatrical function. Most critics cite *Hamlet* as Shakespeare's frank meditation on the nature of his craft, and for good reasons: the play directly posits the theatre as a potent agent of revelation, interpolates the meta-theatrics of court, the many plays within the play, its joust of appearances, of feigned behaviors. Significantly to me, Hamlet as he receives the players, remembers out of thin air lines from a speech "he heard once" from a play he deemed good, but in an odd neo-classical proleptic twist, was "caviar to the general"; the prince then proceed to recite verbatim a sonnet-long excerpt from that speech; it is a death scene of course, or by virtue of the decorum of the play mentioned, a description of death vaguely Senecan in tone. *Othello* more perversely perhaps, makes a demonstration of such theatrical potencies: the dangers of this world abound, but nowhere more potently than in words. Words are deadly; their music kills. Kenneth Gross is right, Desdemona dies both from and with "a furious blankness of meaning" where one word slips into polysemy; as he puts it, "Othello's disgust [with his wife] becomes ... hallucinatory, because it is so bound to what is not there, to what is absent and impossible, to something at once unthinkable and stolen away by thought" (p.112). To death itself, I might add. What Gross describes might well apply to what I have referred to in earlier chapters as "imaginings of death" in the play. The horrors of death, any death, owe much to our imaginative faculties.

<sup>96</sup> For nearly two centuries lingered the practice of cutting most of Act IV. In the introduction of his edition of the play (2006), Michael Neill deems this omission surprising "since the nostalgic sentiment of the Willow Song episode might seem perfectly calculated to appeal to popular taste in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries" (101). Neil points to the "subversive proto-feminism" of the scene that hosts the song (Emilia's attack on husbands and the erotic gloss she projects upon Lodovico) as the possible cause of this "excision"; this word Neil uses in its purest sense, but we know how it has come to mean something else: the controversial practice in fundamentalist Muslim cultures of excising the clitoris to interfere/annul the sexual pleasure in women and thus curb its pursuit. The night scene thanks to Emilia is indeed rich in female bawdiness, and cutting it deprives its potential audience of an important part of Desdemona's ambiguity, and mainly of its resonance in the final scene; the cut in other words excises Desdemona in more than a figurative way. Neil invokes decorum, and "the conservation of the self-sacrificial saintliness attributed to the heroine" as the more probable culprit. This "conservation of the self-sacrificial saintliness," a perennial trope of *Othello* criticism, [the *whore/saint* binary that makes Catherine Clément write her inspired book on Opera], is nonetheless an invitation for debunking; something queerer is at play.



her, she is preparing her body for more than a little death. The sheets, the clothes are ready. And even when dead, as we are made to see when Othello ultimately kisses her, her cadaver remains a sexualized object. There is a little death after death. But for now, the song conjures an image for both Desdemona and the audience “that [on this night] will not go from [both their] mind” (4.3.29-30).

DESDEMONA [*sings*]

The poor soul sat sighing by a Sycamore tree,  
Sing all a green willow.  
Her hand on her bosom, her head on her knee,  
Sing willow, willow, willow,  
The fresh streams ran by her and murmured her  
moans,  
Sing willow, willow, willow.  
Her salt tears fell from her and softened the stones,  
Sing willow –  
Lay by these.-

‘willow, willow’

Prithee, hie thee. He’ll come anon.  
‘Sing all a green willow must be my garland.  
Let nobody blame him, his scorn I approve’ -  
Nay, that’s not next. Hark, who is it that knocks?  
(4.3.38-51).

Desdemona interrupts her singing; she has seemingly jumped ahead, misspoken the verse. In the verbal wasteland of the play, might she, for once, long for precise language? Or else, may she be foreseeing all too clearly what awaits her, as “he’ll come anon”? If so, then an actress could make “Nay, that’s not next” sound like “can it be? Is this what love was promising”? The wind blows, the breath of the girl makes song, and Othello, any minute now, will knock. Has he just not? No, that was the wind. Would Othello knock at the door of his own bedroom? The answer comes in the awful guise of the last scene of the play.

“Blankness of meaning” notwithstanding, the song serves more than a mere premonitory function and demands scrutiny: if it sings a tale of sorrow to better herald the worst that is to come, it also deploys an aporia only resolved by Desdemona’s death. Phillipa Berry’s strategy of reading the text “with a heightened attention [actors do the same] to textual detail in order to question the presumed finality and fixity of these cultural versions of the ending” serves best my purpose (4). Berry aptly posits that

the song functions as an act both of remembrance and of prosopopoeia, in which three female identities – the deserted woman of the song, the dead Barbary and Desdemona – are curiously confused, but nature itself also appears to participate ... The implicit association between the song and a chain of female deaths is confirmed two scenes later [through Desdemona’s and Emilia’s deaths] (56).

In Berry’s scheme then, it is not Desdemona alone who sings, but many women.

A poor girl (more proleptically in the play’s context, her “soul,” i.e. what remains after death) scorned by her lover sits at the foot of a tree (a sycamore), and yet sings of a different one (a willow): a sycamore tree is not a willow.<sup>97</sup> The pair is mismatched, of distinct allure; it seems too odd a juxtaposition in the verbal economy of a song, any song, to put such distinct items and not want to make a point of it. Does Desdemona perceive the sycamore, a sturdy upright kind of tree, as a weeping willow? Is she realizing she is of another species, that Othello is not the kind for her? That the “handsome” Lodovico would have made a better match? Is she, as Auden posits, “a romantic girl [gone] slumming” her way to marriage (203)? Or as Michael Neill suggests, “the embodiment of female changefulness that Iago make[s] of her” (169)? Whatever the case, the song’s first pathetic fallacy is in place; the sycamore partakes in her sorrow and bends like a willow does; then the natural realm conspires with her grief: the brook

<sup>97</sup> Phillipa Berry makes much of situating the last act in Cyprus, an aural equivalent to Cypress, the funereal tree often associated with cemeteries (*Feminine Endings*, 100-1).

echoes her moans that themselves in turn mollify the rocks. The insistence on the word willow (repeated fourteen times in the scene) plants (!) the image of a tree and at its feet, a soul assessing its “size of sorrow.”<sup>98</sup> Let us remember where she is when she sings the Willow song: next to, or on what may very well be “the first physical representation of a bed in English theatre [and that] subsequently becomes a scaffold and the theatre [becomes] a place of public execution” (Cummings, 157-8).<sup>99</sup> Othello enters the bedroom, a widower-in-the-making, visiting his wife’s tomb; he steals a kiss while she sleeps.

Desdemona’s death reverberates both implicitly and explicitly with the *The Craft* tradition. “Implicit” means “*implied though not clearly expressed*”; and there’s the rub in this play, is it not? Implicitness smirches its blood upon the play. In its obsolete form (the period of the play’s creation), the word *implicit* also means: “entangled, entwined, folded or twisted together.” It can also be said “of persons having some implied quality”; John Donne makes such use in his polemical prose tract *Pseudo-Martyr* (1610): “one may bee

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<sup>98</sup> To this reader, the image suggests the contemplation of suicide, and hanging from the sycamore, the “strange fruit” of an entirely different song from an entirely different era. *Strange Fruit*, written initially as a poem (*Bitter Fruit*) by Abel Meeropol in 1937, was put to music by the author and popularized by the singer Billie Holiday who recorded it in 1939. Racially charged, it depicts in exquisite poetry the horrors of lynchings in the segregated American South. Look at its second verse:

“Pastoral scene of the gallant South  
The bulgin’ eyes and the twisted mouth  
Scent of magnolias sweet and fresh  
Then the sudden smell of burnin’ flesh”

Desdemona’s twisted mouth, her bulging eyes, her sweet smell inevitably come to my mind. Is this because the *Strange Fruit* seems to aurally replicate Gratiano’s line when he learns that Othello has killed a wife he still believes to be guilty: “’Tis a strange truth” (5.2.196)? Or is it a black man entering in the night the bedroom where a white woman sleeps that conjures the idea of lynching? Or because Othello raises the figure anew when he speaks “It must needs wither: I’ll smell it on the tree” (5.2.18).

<sup>99</sup> Cummings forgets the bed of *2 Henry VI*, where Cardinal Beaufort dies; the critic is right however in claiming that it might be the first “marital” bed to appear on the English stage.

an implicate Martyre, though he know not why he died” (v. 155). This will be useful in a moment.

The Willow Song was well known enough, existing in textual and musical variants, so Shakespeare’s audiences would have been familiar with its themes, and its melody; adding to its potential currency, it could be sung by both men and women by simply changing the pronouns, [if/should/ they choose/have to, my Queer angel intones]. Again, “an old thing ’twas, but it expressed her fortune and she died singing it” (4.3.28-9). This is a significant detail. Barbary, her mother’s servant, died singing.<sup>100</sup> Is that even possible? And if the song “expressing her fortune” foreshadows her death, does Desdemona know something? We do not know how the servant Barbary died, but we know that she died singing a song, a proto-operatic gesture.<sup>101</sup>

As Othello leaves her, Desdemona prepares for bed. “He says he will return incontinent” (4.3.11). To a modern ear, the word might induce laughter; but it never does. Does she pray in the interval (like Verdi shows his Desdemona to do)? We will not know. But she sings, notices an itch bothering her eyes; the right sheets are on for some little death, and there is the wind, the air, the breath.

DESDEMONA                      All’s one. Good faith, how foolish are our minds!  
If I do die before thee, prithee shroud me  
In one these same sheets (4.3. 21-23).

Desdemona then is not prepared to die, nor has she prepared for it. When she awakes, informed of Othello’s intentions, she will protest the “unnaturalness” of her impending

<sup>100</sup> As is perennially observed in criticism of the play, the servant’s name reminds the audience of Othello’s native shores, and brings back to its consciousness Iago’s obscene comments in the opening scene of the play.

<sup>101</sup> It is the perfectly organic presence of the song in the text that makes me believe, that if it doesn’t figure in Q1 it is most probably because the actor (the boy-actor, the adolescent with a broken voice) could not sing it, and then Q1 as it often described, is a document of performance, rather than the achieved manner of its playwright.

death (5.2.45). She will counter-argue in vain. Othello will dismiss any denial of her sinful behavior as the professing of her innocence, even “with oath cannot remove or choke the strong conception that [he does] groan withal.” “Thou art to die,” he tells his wife (5.2. 59-61). The pregnancy metaphor reanimated, the labor of death cannot be stopped.<sup>102</sup> The scene weaves together the tropes of *The Craft* and the concerns of an artful representation of dying.

In her study *Rooted Sorrow* (1994), Betty Anne Doebler devotes an entire chapter to *Othello*'s last scene; she attempts to distinguish the tropes and dynamics of the *ars moriendi* tradition as she recognizes its “allusive” topicality in the scene. She is quick to recognize the centrality of the bed as an emblem of the tradition (in the woodcuts certainly) and her argument mainly focuses on Shakespeare's ironical use of the temptations (mainly the despair inflicted by the devil standby Iago, upon the Moor's soul) to “intensify the tragic fall of Othello” (142). She explains that Gratiano's line upon discovering Desdemona's corpse is an “explicit reference to *The Craft*”:

GRATIANO Poor Desdemona, I am glad thy father's dead.  
Thy match was mortal to him, and pure grief,  
Shore his old thread in twain. Did he live now  
This sight would make him do a desperate turn,  
Yea, curse the better angel from his side,  
And fall to reprobance.

OTHELLO: 'Tis pitiful. (5.2.211-17)

<sup>102</sup> These metaphors of biological reproduction occur earlier in Iago's discourse; the motif appears first as Iago tells Roderigo that “there are many events in the womb of time, which will be delivered”(1.3. 358-9), then in the rich couplet that closes both his second soliloquy and Act I: as he appreciates the finesse of his stratagem

“I ha't. It is engendered. Hell and night  
must bring this monstrous birth to the world's light” (1.3.385-6).

When Othello finally uses the imagery, the contamination of his mind by Iago's lies seems achieved.

Indeed. But one may wonder what Othello exactly means as he interrupts his interlocutor.<sup>103</sup> Which is pitiful, Desdemona smothered among the sheets or Gratiano's comment that never addresses the "poor" woman's plight? That Doeblner should focus on Brabantio's death rather than Desdemona's corpse to animate the presence of the *ars moriendi* tradition in this scene is an odd critical choice. Doeblner aptly recognizes an "explicit" element of the *ars* tradition: the tug of war for the soul of the dying between angels and devils, but to make her point, the critic locates its evidence in the death of Desdemona's father that took place offstage. Gratiano relates that, had Brabantio seen his daughter laying dead, he would have given in to the devils of despair and committed suicide; in the name of his salvation, then, Desdemona's father is lucky to have been spared this sight. What about Desdemona's salvation? Gratiano's reaction is pitiful, outrageous in fact. If to his defense he has not witnessed what just took place, his summation veers nonetheless towards libel as it accessorizes Desdemona's death: Desdemona's choice of a husband would have broken her father's heart, in fact killed him. This patriarchal shortsightedness waxes "pitiful" indeed and Othello might want to make that point clear: in another poignant irony, a murdering husband must defend his wife and victim.

But much more escapes Doeblner's essay: she reads Desdemona's death as a "good theological death" while Othello's would exemplify the "bad one," with its sure passage to damnation via suicide, "the unforgivably sinful act of despair" (Cohen, 2168). This seems reductive. Doeblner makes more room for Othello's death than his wife's in her essay, (her critical prerogative entirely) and yet concedes that "in some measure,

<sup>103</sup> As one of many tacit stage directions embedded in the text, a shared verse generally alerts the actor to an interruption or a picking up of the cue. So contends John Barton in *Playing Shakespeare*.

Desdemona remains the central figure evoking *The Craft* simply because she remains in the posture of the moriens (and finally the dead) on the bed” (148).<sup>104</sup> Her essay remains deaf to more than allusions to the *ars* tradition, in fact to virtual quoting from *The Craft*.

I mentioned Desdemona’s two-timed death and that must be further investigated. I will start at the very end. Her second death takes place after a brief interval during which we are made to believe she has already died; Othello has made sure she is:

OTHELLO    What noise is this? Not dead? Not yet quite dead?  
                  I that am cruel am yet merciful.  
                  I would not have thee linger in pain.  
                  So. So. (5.2.95-98)

This transition period between the moment when a moriens loses the ability to verbalize, and the moment of death was called in the *ars moriendi* manuals the *transitio*; the historian Robert Dinn defines this liminal state “a world without boundaries” (Nosow, 539). It was believed to be a threshold of intense moral fragility because the moriens’ state of mind, its expression muted by the pains of death, became unreadable to those attending the deathbed and thus an easy prey for the invisible devils assembled around it. What happens in Desdemona’s mind in this short interval, “a world without boundaries,” is unclear, but I would argue that the entire key to her apprenticeship of death lies here. I have been arguing all along that despite the prescribed “cookie-cutter” approach of *The Craft*, death may become a moment of supreme individuation. It will be true of Anne Frankford later in these pages, and it remains so for Desdemona.

Desdemona has but a minute to fashion her end, and proves somewhat better versed at the exercise; she crafts her final speech with an ambiguity that both becomes this ambiguous character and belies the reductive critical assessments Desdemona has

<sup>104</sup> See woodcut 11 in Annex II.

received. But she also borrows ironically or inadvertently from the *ars moriendi* manuals themselves. I write “she crafts” and “she borrows” but obviously this crafty death is the doing of an experienced and yet still experimenting playwright; it is the unnatural and interruptive brutality he injects in her death scene that paradoxically gives her an achieved form. As John Russell makes clear: “this is the only time that Shakespeare required a woman to be deliberately and gradually killed on stage” (110).<sup>105</sup> Elizabeth Bronfen insightfully reads the scene as a theatrical instance where her

death emerges as that moment...where [Desdemona’s] individuality and absolute rarity [can] finally be attained, in a singular and unique severment from common or collective affiliation. One of the most poignant paradoxes of the [early] modern period is that death, as that which most threatens individuality, should also be its supreme confirmation. The elaboration of strategies to occult death call [*sic*] forth an equally elaborate staging of it (77).<sup>106</sup>

Bronfen describes here the ironic completeness of good, even great writing: Desdemona cannot live longer than she does because her death is more than a plot necessity; if her stage life proves “just brief enough” for its tragic purposes, it is her death that allows her to fully bloom as a character. Her unjust death becomes her poetic justice. The tautology that lurks here forces a philosophical turn to this argument: death is not per se an accomplishment but the momentous interruption of the biological progress that must lead to it; we are mortal not just at the end of life, but at any given moment of an aliveness conditioned by its mortality. And yet, both in the ethos of the *ars moriendi* tradition where for salvific purposes the “good death” must prevail, and in the writing of death

<sup>105</sup> This is significant enough for Russell Brown to make the very same point again on page 152 in his *Studying Shakespeare in Performance* (2011) where he writes that “Desdemona is given words to speak when Shakespeare for the first and only time directs that a woman should be slowly killed on stage.”

<sup>106</sup> In her chapter “Deathbed Scenes” in *Over Her Dead Body* (1992), Bronfen scrutinizes Enlightenment texts, specifically Samuel Richardson’s *Clarissa, or the History of a Young Lady* (1748) and Rousseau’s *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, (1761). I would assert that her insights remain perfectly applicable to early modern English plays.



scenes that must be “theatrically good,” we cannot ignore the notion of “human achievements.” Plays are imitative of life, but so is their praxis.

As Tiffany Stern aptly conveys in *Documents of Performance in Early Modern England* (2009), the making of a play in the early modern period looked very much like life itself: a “patchy” business where the playwright, hardly an omniscient author, is little more than a “play-patcher” and “a cobbler of poeetrie” as Thomas Dekker calls him in *News from Hell* (1606). Reading Stern’s invaluable contribution to the study of how plays were made, we can almost hear the playwrights and actors shouting: “we need a prologue, a song there, a dumb show, a pageant, and maybe a little scene here to allow my change of costume!” If we think of *Othello* as a unified object, we forget that this or that published text may be little more than the seamless obituary of a tortuous process made of messy textual and performance experiences, made of trials and cuts, of improvisations and necessities that, like life itself, may only find a totalizing meaning *a posteriori*.

When the early modern actor that was to play Desdemona received his part written on a scroll [i.e. the sum of his lines and cues], if we are to believe both the rehearsals dramatized in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, and Stern’s valuable insights, what might he have thought of this character’s lifespan measured in words? He had but the piccolo lines in the symphony’s score. How may he have understood Desdemona’s last lines in relation to all that came before? What can he make of this patchy map? This is he what he received according to Stern:

CUE	Out strumpet! Weep’s thou for him to my face?
DESDEMONA	O, banish me, my lord, but kill me not.
CUE	[ <i>attacking her</i> ] Down, Strumpet!
DESDEMONA	Kill me tomorrow; let me live tonight.

CUE	Nay, an you strive –
DESDEMONA	But half an hour.
CUE	Being done, there is no pause
DESDEMONA	But while I say one prayer.
CUE	It is too late.
	<i>He smothers her</i>
DESDEMONA	O Lord, Lord, Lord!
[...]	
CUE	...And sweet vengeance that grows harsh.
DESDEMONA	O, falsely, falsely murdered!
[...]	
CUE	...Sweet Desdemona, O sweet mistress, speak!
DESDEMONA	A guiltless death I die.
CUE	...O, who hath done this deed?
DESDEMONA	Nobody, I myself. Farewell.
	Commend me to my kind lord. O, farewell.
	<i>She dies</i>

Her last words bespeak both the issues of allegiance and obedience, topoi as important in the play as in conventions of female deportment in the period. But this time, Desdemona will comply with very different rules, rules she transgresses (again, I decline to use “subvert”). Earlier in the play, Desdemona has stood as a principled figure of disobedience. Let us remember that she first appears in the aural landscape of the play as a nameless entity, as a mere possessive pronoun, as in “her father,” “her father’s house” then as “your daughter” when Roderigo and Iago awake Senator Brabantio in the middle of the night to alert him that as they speak, “a black ram is tugging [his] white ewe” (1.1.88-9). Nameless, her reputation is no less dragged in the mud of this vulgar exchange where she becomes in turn choric, a multitude of female personae: a robbed object, a rape victim, an eloping debauchee or a bewitched figure. She is both possessed and a toy of the possessive mode. When Desdemona’s name finally lands in Othello’s speech a scene later, it is as the object of his love. She appears in the flesh to answer a question filled with assumptions: “where most you owe obedience?” asks her father (1.3. 179). This is

how Shakespeare introduces her, as a crucible for experiments on obedience and slander. She disobeyed to obey anew, but perhaps, we may imagine, to terms she has possibly half-devised. She has married Othello and now wants to follow him to war. In her first appearance, she surprises everyone by announcing that she intends to follow her husband during his military campaign against the Turks. Speaking to the Venetian senate conveyed hurriedly in the middle of the night, Desdemona refuses to be a “moth of peace:”

DESDEMONA            So that, dear lords, if I be left behind,  
                                 A moth of peace, and he go to the war,  
                                 The rites for why I love him are bereft me,  
                                 And I a heavy interim shall support,  
                                 By his dear absence. Let me go with him. (1.3.254-58)

Is she in fact the moth she declines to be in a play that begins and ends in nighttime: what light would she fly to? During her swan song announcing the “dying of the light” (in Dylan Thomas’ eternal coinage) she asks her servant Emilia to unpin her. Hard not to think of those collectible butterflies trapped under glass, when she answers Emilia’s wish that her mistress should never have met Othello:

DESDEMONA:            So would not I. My love doth so approve him  
                                 That even his stubbornness, his checks, his frowns –  
                                 Prithee unpin me – have grace and favour in them.  
                                 (4.318-20)

There lies a beautiful piece of acting as this act of unpinning, a pause in the sentence, a moment of decision that may be a lie of the mind, turns Othello’s chiding into an object of admiration. After being slapped in public, Desdemona has asked Emilia for the wedding sheets she brought to Cyprus and has seemingly not used yet.<sup>107</sup> Who goes to war with their wedding apparel? Maybe she knows something we don’t in the way of

<sup>107</sup> The wedding sheets were sometimes used as the winding sheet in the period (*Issues of Death*, 165).

men. For all the lies he weaves, Iago may be honest in his belief (expressed in a soliloquy) that Desdemona is indeed able “to make, unmake, and do as she list” (2.3.320). Her last words concretize such potencies.

Her swan song is one she fashions. We have already seen the use of the Willow Song as both prophetic motif and emblem of multiple oppressions. We also discover that music always foretells trouble in this play.<sup>108</sup> Desdemona dies in words of acquiescence, and like Heywood’s adulteress will in *AWKWK*, this falsely accused woman dies committing a sin: she exculpates her husband. For love, she compromises her salvation. This is a traditional and workable reading and one that rings operatic enough. But does she in fact forgive him? In the early modern conception of matrimony does she not rather appropriate a power she is not entitled to possess?

For the actor today preparing to play Desdemona, her “two deaths” are further complicated by questions of textual emendations and additions in the texts.<sup>109</sup> According to the composite version (from the Norton edition, served above as a *cues and lines* iteration), while Othello either strangles or uses a pillow to smother his wife, her last words (from the Quarto) are this triple “O Lord,” omitted in the Folio. The Quarto thus showcases the superficial ambiguity that Desdemona might be imploring her husband to stop, as she has called him “my lord” repeatedly in the play.<sup>110</sup> Those words could also be

<sup>108</sup> The drinking song of Act II heralds Cassio’s disgrace. Later in Act III, Cassio assembles musicians to muster his redemption; the clown who asks them, in a richly allusive turn - (as far as the play’s theme of hearing what is not heard), if they “have any music that may not not heard”.

<sup>109</sup> Two authoritative versions survive, the Quarto of 1622 and obviously the Folio “hypothesized to be Shakespeare’s own revision” (Cohen, 2098). The following version is that of the Quarto “that adds roughly 160 lines from F not found in Q, and it usually prefers F to Q in the over one thousand places where the text differs” (Cohen, 2098).

<sup>110</sup> The Catholic tradition attached to matrimony might murk things even further for an early modern audience, making of a secular “lord” a godly one through the sacramental agency of matrimony. Though the earliest version of *The Book of Common Prayer* (1549) does not dispel the sacramental aspect of matrimony as clearly as does the 1662 version, that nominally makes of it a *solemnization* rather than a

taken to simply follow the logic of her penultimate line where she begs for a moment of further devotion, making of her last line a truncated prayer. The Folio, as mentioned, dispenses with her last line; in the 1623 version she thus dies asking to pray. In the folio scheme, then, the heroine maintains the good Catholic's agenda before death: her last thoughts seem aimed at insuring her salvation. But, of course, Desdemona does not go without a fight. The invisible devils of the *ars moriendi* tradition are in attendance around her deathbed, though this time embodied differently, borrowing the shape of her husband who self-describes himself in the scene as being already "in hell."<sup>111</sup>

Hellish or in hell, Othello's entrance brings to mind the five traditional demons of the *ars* tradition, as he is now in turn faithless in his wife's fidelity, full of despair, angry, vainglorious, and disrespectful of all materiality. In the often-noted marmorealizing motif of the opening soliloquy, Othello builds in words a tomb from the alabaster of his wife's skin that he, iconoclastically, soon destroys. Embedded in this score for actors are clear stage directions: to motivate Othello's "down, strumpet" and his "if you strive," Desdemona must fight back. Theatrically the Quarto seems savvier as what echoes Desdemona's (first) last words is Emilia's verbatim response. Othello's murderous fury is thus punctuated by these cries of "lord, lord" fusing from both the bed and the door, instructing his frenzy that his wife might still be speaking them; he must finish her off: "So, so" or so-so. But Shakespeare, quite clearly, wants no ambiguity here: the audience must believe she is dead. Emilia enters and informs Othello that Roderigo

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sacrament, the woman must still answer 'I will' to the question "wilt thou obey hym, and serve him, love, honour, and kepe him, in sycknes and in health?"(1559); the question appears in the same formulation in the 1662 with modernized spelling. In all three BCM, obedience to their husbands remains (at least nominally) a duty of wives.

<sup>111</sup> In the famous soliloquy that inaugurates the death scene, Othello makes a strange comment as he observes the sleeping Desdemona: explaining to himself "the cause" of what he is about to do he declares that "she must die, else she'll betray more men" (5.2.6). This has always struck me as puzzling: "more men"? Why not "she'll betray me again"? Has he written himself off? Has he already figured out his end?

has been killed and that Cassio, who should have died on his orders, is still alive. Learning of this, Othello will employ a musical metaphor; the operatic violence modulates.

OTHELLO: Not Cassio killed? Then murder's out of tune ...  
(5.2.124)

Against all expectations, Desdemona's voice emerges from behind the curtains of the bed and interrupts this exchange:

EMILIA Out, and alas, that was my lady's voice!  
[*She opens the bed-curtains*]  
Help! Help, ho, help! O lady, speak again!  
Sweet Desdemona, O sweet mistress, speak!

DESDEMONA A guiltless death I die.

EMILIA O, who hath done this deed?

DESDEMONA Nobody, I myself. Farewell.  
Commend me to my kind lord. O, farewell! *She dies*

Edward Pechter has described the enduring critical view of Desdemona as a passive doormat as “a perverse interpretative tradition”; the critic rightly contends that such interpretations are endlessly contradicted in performance.<sup>112</sup> These orthodoxies present a “Desdemona [who] begins with a powerful voice ... [that seems] to dwindle away during the course of the play, and ‘Nobody. I, myself’ in her final speech is an act of self-erasure, an accession to nullity” (373). I beg to differ. It may on the contrary justify the operatic grandeur it has inspired in both Verdi and Rossini.

Desdemona speaks to Emilia while Othello is still in attendance; in productions I have seen, he even stands in her field of vision while she does. Then her “nobody” may be taken to condemn Othello as a non-person, making a racial slur, not a particularly nice turn, and somewhat out of character for Desdemona. Or, we may read it as an act of

<sup>112</sup> “Too Much Violence”: Murdering Wives in *Othello*, in *Women, Violence and English Renaissance Literature*, ed. Linda Woodbridge and Sharon Beehler, 2003.

Christian forgiveness that erases blame, an idealization of romantic love as her refusal to name her murderer spells the infinity of feelings she bears for Othello. But to the simple question Emilia asks, she answers simply: she did *that* to herself. As if she had discovered what “the cause,” the very one Othello refuses to name, is. Has Desdemona gathered knowledge during her non-verbal *transitio*, to arrive to a more self-reflexive conclusion: “nobody, I myself” she now appreciates, “I,” who is “nobody” in this men’s scheme, I have let this be done to me, “myself.” In such tonalities, Desdemona composes the score of change that responsabilizes the self. That the moment should hold so much, that it should allow its “blankness of meaning” to serve for once, rather than obfuscate so oblique an interpretation, is part of the “human achievement” of the play, a totalizing instance that singularizes through poetry this rendition, this mimesis of mortality. Her last line crowns this achievement with operatic irony, as implausible as it is perverse: in the *ars moriendi* tradition, the *transitio* invites the deathbed attendants to pray, or sing prayers, when the moriens can no longer speak. As we saw in Chapter I, some manuals suggest that those around the bed intone “in manus tuas, Domine, commendo spiritum meum” (Into thy hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit). The prayer (often sung) quotes Christ’s last words on the cross in the *Gospel of Luke* (23:46). In *The Craft*’s woodcuts, Christ appears only at the eleventh hour, literally, in the eleventh and last image of the manual as the moriens has died. The *Imitatio Christi* seems partially achieved as Desdemona’s words ring almost verbatim. The woman speaks the words in front of her husband whose two hands had just unperfected her death. That would be ironic enough. That the irony should further spur its symbolism seems vertiginously inventive: in the

very fact that Desdemona does not need attendants to speak for her, the mimesis, not the imitation of Christ, speaks louder than he could. She dies ventriloquizing Christ.

For good reasons this crucifixion motif cannot hold for long, yielding as it must to the weight of Othello's apothecic end. Othello erects but in words a funereal monumentality to Desdemona in the soliloquy (5.2.1-22), which he concretizes by committing suicide and dying "upon a kiss," creating the overpowering *mise-en-scène* whose intent endures in a legible parody of matrimony: "till death do us unite." The operatic strength of such an image proved irresistible to both Verdi's and Rossini's treatments of the Shakespearian text; its implausibility conquers all.

In Rossini: OTHELLO What anguish! –  
 CHORUS What Joy!  
 RODERIGO Receive in thy heart  
 The public love  
 And my friendship.  
 ELMIRO The hand of my daughter –  
 OTHELLO The hand of thy daughter! (confounded)  
 Yes – I must be united to her –  
 Behold! – (opens the curtains)  
 ELMIRO What do I see! –  
 OTHELLO I thus punish myself! – (he kills himself).  
 All Ah!  
*End.*<sup>113</sup>

In Verdi:

OTHELLO Before I killed thee, wife, I kissed thee thus.  
 Now dying...in the shadow where I lie...  
 A kiss...another kiss...  
 Ah! ...another kiss...  
 (*dies*).<sup>114</sup>

<sup>113</sup> *Othello*: A Tragic Opera in two acts, by Gioacchino Rossini, Francesco Maria Berio (Marchese di Salza). New York: E. M. Murden. 1826 [in this bilingual version published for the American premiere, the translator's name is not provided. The translation remains loyal to the original; the Italian *Otello* returns to the Shakespearian spelling in the text translated from the Italian libretto].

<sup>114</sup> Libretto translated by Avril Bardoni, 1978, Decca Music.



The female translator of Boito's libretto makes a strategic choice that may be prompted by the forces at work in the sources of Verdi's Opera. To Boito's "nell'ombra in cui mi giaccio" that could translate ("in the shadow where I lay down," or "where I rest," *giacere*: to lay down, to repose, to lie down) she chooses the acceptable, yet charged, "to lie." It may be the punning "lie" of epitaphic inscriptions as in "here lies"; Christian doctrine promises the deceased has moved on to a better (or worse) place, and so the person is not really there.<sup>115</sup> But Bardoni makes an argument since, for this portion of her translation, she prefers the ambiguity of "to lie" to the pedestrian "to lay down." How do we know she does? She tells us herself, perhaps accidentally: for the love aria of act I, the love duet whose music Verdi returns in solo form at the opera's end, she translates Othello's emotive overflow "Ah! la gioia m'innonda si fieramente che ansante mi giaccio...Un bacio..." with "Ah! Joy floods my breast so piercingly, that I must *lay me down* and pant for breath...A kiss..." (emphases mine).

Shakespeare's version seems the least entombing of Desdemona's will. Lest we allow it, Othello would eternally mute her with his last gesture; except Shakespeare makes clear his Moor cannot. Othello's *mise-en-scène* may materialize a *gisant* of sorts, a "tableau vivant" on half its strength, where Desdemona's and Othello's bodies, soon abolishing the irreversibility of these proceedings, become effigies of eternal love, an "object [that] poisons sight." That "dying upon a kiss" in no small measure flatters across the ages, and across gender, a discomforted longing to see the falsely parted lovers finally

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<sup>115</sup> Scott L. Newstock contends that "offstage, an epitaph is a tombstone presumed to be sincere; on stage it becomes a plot device (even if only a mere word)" (161). In the translation of Bardoni, this "plot device" is the prerogative of a reader, as the opera, sung in Italian, does not host such irony in that moment. Still, Bardi, it seems, intends to pun. Tiffany Stern addresses this issue of irony for the sole pleasure of the reader, in her discussion of *Hamlet*'s dumb show and its textual variants in the both Quartos and Folio (In *Doing Shakespeare*, 2012).

reunited (5.2.374). Lodovico has the last words of the play and he speaks them in the sobriety they demand: “Myself will straight aboard, and to the state this heavy act with heavy heart relate” (5.2. 380-1). The heaviness points to the “tragic load” of these two recumbent figures that rigor mortis slowly marmorealizes. We may know better. The Moor and his Venetian, Death and his maiden, prophesize the slant reading that the poet Philip Larkin makes of such “stone fidelities” in the last strophe of his *An Arundel Tomb* (1956):

Time has transfigured them into  
Untruth. The stone fidelity  
They hardly meant has come to be  
Their final blazon, and to prove  
Our almost-instinct almost true:  
What will survive of us is love (111).

In this poem Larkin posits that the “stone fidelity” of the subjects of a medieval gisant he encounters in Chichester Cathedral “would not think to lie for so long.” The Earl of Arundel holds his wife’s hand in this representation, a detail Larkin discovers with “a sharp tender shock.” Likewise, Shakespeare’s last emblem bears all these qualities. But this is Othello’s production, the doings of the last man standing; Desdemona has no say in the matter. Thus Othello’s attempt at reparation tells but half the story. Not everyone is duped, surely. One woman, or hopefully one man attending the play at the Globe or the Blackfriars, might have acknowledged that Desdemona would not have agreed to this sharp, tender, shocking *photo opp*.

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For convenience, the next reading will be brief and though the operatic motif remains my concern, my analysis directs itself towards issues of didacticism where in embracing an important trope of *The Craft*, death is a lesson. Thomas Heywood’s *A*

*Woman Killed with Kindness* offers a provoking template for the educating virtues of playgoing; the death scene that closes his most enduring work instructs greatly on the *ars* tradition. For his treatment of Anne Frankford's death, Heywood's contribution to the representation of female agony cannot be minimized.

Heywood's relevance needs little defense these days: in the recent critical turn that scrutinizes the collaborative nature of playwriting in the early modern period in England, Heywood's longevity in the theatrical business - he appears on the scene in the 1590's and writes till his death in 1641- makes him a capital player and witness.<sup>116</sup> If the playwright sounds boastful when he writes of having had "a hand or at least a finger in no less than 220 plays," he rarely misses a chance to put the dramatic value of his work in question (Howard, 2012, 120). In prefatory statements to his published works, Heywood repeatedly admits to the limitations of his talent as a playwright – which might be the strategy of a false modesty, or the courtly posturing of a playmaker, or simply true. But for sure, he never lets his discreet iconoclastic strain show its head, as he'd rather work undercover. When he does declare his authorial intent, the playwright invariably states his wish to devise "diverting and pleasing dramaturgy" (Kawamami, 29). In *An Apology for Actors* (1612), his articulate response to anti-theatricalist assaults, Heywood champions both the didactic function of drama and the dignity of actors. Jonathan Dollimore has called Heywood's pamphlet a "didactic justification explicitly ideological," a rare contribution in the period (2004, 71). The frontispiece of his published play even bears the words of Horace, in a slightly modified fashion: "Poets desire at once to amuse and benefit." Heywood clearly hears the Horatian exhortation to

<sup>116</sup> For discussion of this topic, see *Shakespeare and Contemporary Dramatists*, Ton Hoenselaars ed. (2012); Stanley Wells, *Shakespeare & Co.* London: Penguin Books. 2007.

delightful instruction. Jean Howard recognizes this thinking playwright to engineer a theatre that wants to be a

force for social good: it provides instructions to the princes; it warns audiences against vice and distracts them from political mischief; it helps to improve a nation's language; it teaches the unlettered the history of their country; and it provides necessary recreation for weary minds (122).

To this list, I would add that Heywood, in this most unpleasant and discomforting theatrical experiment, proposes a subtly dignified and unorthodox model for the craft of dying.

The frankly didactic playwright has a lesson in mind and an odd one it is. His play dramatizes the marriage of John and Anne Frankford, a well-to-do couple, whose marital harmony is disrupted by Anne's adulterous affair with a younger man. This nominally happily married woman succumbs reluctantly, but nonetheless very consciously, to the irrepressible erotic pull of Wendoll, the live-in guest at the Frankfords' country estate. One night deep into the affair, Master Frankford discovers Anne in bed with her lover, and elects to kill his wife with a "kindness" that gives the play its title and needs qualifying: instead of killing her, he banishes his adulterous wife to a distant house on his property, where she will never be allowed to see or speak to him or her children.<sup>117</sup> The wounded husband in fact erases all traces of his wife's past in his household. Like the gentleman doctor of *King Lear*, Heywood "prescribes" a lot of music for the conduct of his tale, and then, suddenly has Anne, an accomplished musician, ordering her lute to be broken upon the wheels of her wagon. To expiate her sinful behavior, Anne starves herself to death. Or so the tales goes. But in fact what Anne Frankford does may be read

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<sup>117</sup> Though the Rump Parliament would impose the death penalty for such offenses only in May 1650 (through the *Adultery Act*), we may conclude from *Othello's* rhetoric on the issue, that though the measure comes late in relation to the plays examined here, it reflected attitudes that had brewed long enough in English mentalities, long before the Interregnum legislates on the matter.

quite differently: she dictates the terms of her own death, she creates her own theological contract, in short, she invents an art of dying that culminates in an operatic scene she directs and that Catherine Clément might possibly be forced to recognize as anti-Verdi.<sup>118</sup>

The death scene espouses, case-book-like, the circumstantial template of the art of dying as prescribed by the tradition. Anne will have prepared herself to die, will do so in her bed, surrounded by neighbors, friends and family, with no priest in attendance.<sup>119</sup> The scene considers both aspects of Anne's disposition to death and its preparation as advocated by William Perkins' *A Salve for a Sicke Man* (1595) discussed earlier, a familiar book that "was reprinted for the fifth time in 1603," the year Heywood's play was first produced (Mayhew, 2007, 72). The play does not in any direct fashion allude to this specific text, but Anne's death scene can be read in relation to the many books on dying well that had traction at the time.

My inquiry lies as to how Anne comes to her own doctrine, as the sequestered victim of her husband's kindness. What does she read during these weeks of isolation? How does the "female scholar" (as she is described by Sir Charles) school herself unto death, and what does lurch in Heywood's mind to fashion an overtly didactic play that brings us so close to his subject (Anne)?<sup>120</sup> If he stages a final scene pointedly

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<sup>118</sup> One may wonder what Verdi would have made of Thomas Heywood's play. Would he have given the adulterous Anne Frankford, a death aria to sing her appetite for the virtuous life she had so miserably failed at maintaining? In Verdi's pursuit of sublimity, such an aria for a starved woman would be fitting. Yet, what the composer may have most resonated with, is Heywood's groundbreaking gesture of turning marital domesticity into material for tragedy; his *Traviata* follows suit, as Violetta, weary of her courtesan ways, tragically fails at pastoral domesticity when she falls in love with a man above her station. Long before Verdi then, Heywood had for his tragic designs traded the castle for the country manor, and like Verdi would, he makes the death of his heroine the dramatic culmination of his play.

<sup>119</sup> These people, Heywood only suggests, may have Puritan sympathies and therefore this last scene through the gaze of its attending crowd grants a privileged view of a more radically Protestant good death; here I use "good" with no less irony than Heywood uses "kind" in his title.

<sup>120</sup> In the opening scene, Sir Charles congratulates the newlywed; he speaks "There's equality in this fair combination: you are both scholars. ... There's music in this sympathy. (1.67-70).

reminiscent of the *ars moriendi* setting, he simultaneously transgresses its traditional doctrinal charge under the shocking approving gaze of those attending her deathbed.

It seems important to discuss what anchors and heightens her death's dramatic efficacy: Heywood's human achievement at dramatizing the psychology of desire, a desire veering pathological, that in turn highlights the commonplace nexus of sexuality and death that the play so vibrantly hosts. Anne Frankford cuts a unique profile and shares little of the female victim's accouterments encountered in lesser plays of the period; no fragile ingénue, she proposes a complex, even enigmatic composition; like Desdemona, like the recently dead Elizabeth, her femininity is prismatic; she too stands as a choric figure. Though at one juncture of the play, she aims at it, she shows little talent for what Deanne Williams coins "the misogynist ideal of female silence."<sup>121</sup> Anne talks. Married with children, she recognizes in real time the wrong of her infidelities and yet she cannot put an end to this passion that proves addictive to both parties. It is a part full of holes, starved for elucidation, begging an actor's instrumentation to illuminate its darkness of meaning. Let us have a quick look at how Heywood introduces her.

In the prologue Heywood alerts his audience as to what not to expect: "Look for no glorious state, our muse is bent, upon a barren subject, a bare scene." Martin Corder observes: "the prologue paradoxically proclaims the play's rustic simplicity in sonnet form" as if Heywood felt the need of a heightened vessel to apologize for the pedestrian story he is about to tell (xiv). Heywood, famous for his apologies, is being disingenuous here as he purposely tricks his audience: the opening scene proves nothing but pregnant with the makings of tragedy. After the prologue, Heywood plants, seed-like, such

<sup>121</sup> Williams coins that phrase in her study of Marina from Shakespeare's *Pericles, Prince of Tyre* (1606-07).

elements that will flourish at the end of the play for which he saves the grand operatic gesture. But first he plunges his audience in medias res, in the aftermath of the marriage ceremony of John and Anne Frankford and the play opens with a want for music:

SIR FRANCIS	Some music there! None lead the bride a dance?
SIR CHARLES	Yes, would she dance 'The Shaking of the Sheets'
	But that's the dance her husband means to lead her!
WENDOLL	That's not the dance that every man must dance,
	According to the ballad.
SIR FRANCIS	Music, ho! (1.1.1-5)

Michel Grivelet describes this opening scene in these terms: “the play opens in an atmosphere of music and jubilation [...]. Their union [Frankford and Anne] is a perfectly harmonious relationship and Frankford is the happiest of men” [my translation] (196). Grivelet is not reading the same play as I am. Where Grivelet finds joy and levity, I cannot help but see a depressed and repressed crowd laboring into a merriment that weddings ordain. Grivelet then reads the play without considering both the actions of opening scene and the enriching uranium that performance injects into the text. In this opening exchange alone, innocuous in appearance, even *jubilatory* as Grivelet conceives of it, Heywood in a remarkable economy of means masterfully introduces most of the themes of his drama. The first scene opens the same way the death scene will: with an absentee husband. There should be music when there is none. Someone should be leading the bride into a dance since her husband obviously will not. “Some Music there! None lead the bride a dance?” There is genius in that simple line: on her wedding day, the bride is deserted, in what may be a mortifying moment for her, her husband dragging his feet, none willing to lead her into a dance. And yet the question quickly finds an answer in the words of Sir Charles, a character who, as the subplot later reveals, has not much of a moral compass:

SIR CHARLES

Yes, would she dance ‘The Shaking of the Sheets.’  
But that’s the dance her husband means to lead her.

Sir Charles flaunts his scabrous humor, hinting that the husband would rather be in bed with his new wife (to shake the sheets) than celebrate with the wedding guests. But Charles is mistaken; the ballad does not allude to the promised thrills of connubial sexuality, though obliquely and in light of the play’s resolution, Charles’ comment is more than appropriate, brilliantly ironic in fact. Wendoll, the bride’s soon-to-be-lover, corrects Charles, and enlightens him as to the topic of the song.

In *The Shaking of the Sheets*, a traditional ballad and a folkloric dance from the North Country (Norfolk), death itself boasts of its inevitability, its universal reach, and its capricious timetable. Not exactly fare for wedding night entertainment.<sup>122</sup> “Actually most references in the Elizabethan and Jacobean drama to [that ballad] are of a bawdy nature, though they exploit only the salacious possibilities of the title” (Friedman, 238).<sup>123</sup> Heywood does much more with it than this critic acknowledges; in fact he uses this song of death as a wedding crasher, setting up a network of ambiguities. On the one hand it may show that these bourgeois characters are not prudes, reminded as they often were by their pastors of the “duty to desire” inherent to the marital contract. On the other hand, in *AWKWK*, the song waxes prophetic: it announces that sexuality and death will be inextricably knotted into these proceedings. The lyrics’ kinetic diction, as does the play, makes a juggling of dance, music, sex and death, all at once:

<sup>122</sup> If in order to muster ironic symbolism in the scene, Heywood makes this specific choice of song; he will remain vague (or cleverly cryptic as we will see) as to what Anne plays upon her lute before she orders the instrument smashed on the wheel of her coach.

<sup>123</sup> Mentions of the ballad appear in a great number of plays, among others, Dekker’s *Shoemaker’s Holiday* (1599), Cook’s *How a Man May Choose a Good Wife from a Bad* (1602), Marston’s *The Insatiate Countess* (1610), Fletcher’s *The Mad Lover* (1617), Shirley’s *The School of Compliment* (1625), and Massinger’s *The City Madam* (1632). From such proficiency, we may conclude that the song held enough currency in the collective imaginary for its ironical use here not to be lost on audiences.



*Dance, dance the shaking of the sheets,  
 Dance, dance when you hear the piper playing,  
 Everyone must dance  
 The Shaking of the Sheets with me.  
 Bring away the beggar, bring away the king,  
 And every man in his degree.  
 Bring away the oldest and the youngest thing,  
 Come to death and follow me.*

Through the ballad's intended audience, death sings its invitation to dance, and should it be heard, plants *the Dance of Death* motif in the middle of wedding festivities. Here too, Desdemona's sheets will find takers. In a mere three lines we are presented with a void to be filled, a woman in need of a lead, an ill-chosen dance and ultimately, no one dances in this scene. Has Anne only had a say in the preparation of her wedding? All the pieces well in place, the play may begin. Before Anne Frankford speaks for herself, she is introduced in a series of compliments to her husband:

SIR CHARLES

...

You have a wife so qualified and with such ornaments,  
 Both of mind and body.

...

Her own tongue speaks all tongues, and her own hand  
 Can teach all strings to speak in their best grace,  
 From the shrill treble to the hoarsest bass.  
 She's Beauty and Perfection's eldest daughter,  
 Only found by yours, though many a heart hath sought her.

(1. 14-25)

Anne, before uttering a word, seems a paragon of male-gazed femininity: we learn that she speaks eloquently (she has not yet), she is a scholar (never demonstrated, though her aptitudes for casuistry in the argument of her death will be put to test), she plays the lute with grace (that remains to be seen and will); significantly, prior to Frankford's courtship, many men had sought her, an obvious indication of erotic appeal. "Though many a heart hath sought her." It is a small detail, dropped inadvertently perhaps, a spot on the white wedding dress, a hair in the soup served at the post-nuptials banquet. To such

unwarranted praise, Anne promptly responds as if prescient of the unsustainability of such male-conceived standards:

ANNE

I would your praise could find a fitter theme  
Than my imperfect beauty to speak on.  
Such as they be, if they my husband please,  
They suffice me now I am married.  
His sweet content is like a flattering glass,  
To make my face seem fairer to mine eye;  
But the least wrinkle from his stormy brow  
Will blast the roses in my cheeks that grow.<sup>124</sup>  
A perfect wife already, meek and patient.

SIR FRANCIS

...  
Godamercies, brother, wrought her to it already?  
(1.29-43)

As she dismisses this praise, her first words are musical in diction. Pliant (“wrought,” Sir Francis says), humble, a mere reflection of her husband’s contentment, Anne is an icon of virtue, a trophy wife, but one, of her own recognizance, who is set to fail. Significantly, Anne’s lines here almost duplicate, if by inversion, those of Desdemona in Shakespeare’s *Othello*, a play that, like Heywood’s, eagerly excavates the female psyche and its dealings with issues of mortality.<sup>125</sup> Anne Frankford finds who she is in the mirror of her husband’s approval (the flattering glass) – or so she conveniently says before an assembly of men. Are there no women attending this wedding? Where are the women?

What comes next is all too foreseeable: Wendoll, her husband’s protégé and permanent guest of the estate, will seduce his host’s wife. Anne undergoes her husband’s chastisement framed by the paradigm of marital obedience that made wives the wards of their husbands in the period. And she is obviously the victim of Heywood’s treatment of Frankford as a God-like figure, he who expels his wife from the Eden of his household.

<sup>124</sup> My reader should remember that her first intervention alludes to the effect her husband has on the rosininess of her cheeks. The beginning of the death scene riffs beautifully on this fact.

<sup>125</sup> (See *Othello*, 4.3.17-20)

But for now she enters the stage as an accomplished, educated woman, speaking many tongues – to make her a polyglot is a brilliant literal/metaphorical move on the dramatist’s part – and so to keep music, a symbol of harmony, as a centerpiece of his play, Heywood posits her excellent musicianship: she “can teach all strings to speak in their best grace.” But her exceptionality seems by any standards overstated.<sup>126</sup> Alive, she stands as dead Elizabeth, an idealization, a choric composite of irreconcilable personalities. She is from the beginning a construct.

SIR CHARLES

This lady is no clog, as many are.  
 She doth become you like a well-made suit  
 In which the tailor hath used all his art,  
 ...  
 There’s equality  
 In this fair combination; you are both scholars,  
 Both young, both being descended nobly;  
 There’s music in this sympathy (1.58-69).

There is music indeed, as long as the score is male-composed. As a nominally equal partner, Anne enjoys an autonomy that comes at a high price: only disobedience and death will buy her one-way ticket to an autonomous self. She is assuredly the brightest and most sensible character on stage (next to her, Susan Mountford may timidly stand). Intelligence in this play seems a woman’s prerogative. Then, one may ask, why should such a figure “wrought” into marital bliss give in to adultery? Asking this question immediately strikes a problem of motivation, or an *interpretative occasion* for the actor, that complicates any staging of the play: the actor defending the part must explain the violence, the befuddling precipitateness of Anne’s fall into an adulterous passion that as

<sup>126</sup> As a playwright, Heywood has a tendency to overplay his hand. The card game scene in the middle of the play, where he makes an inconsiderate amount of wordplay borrowed from the card-playing catalogue of expressions, is a prime example of a metaphor, florid with sexual innuendos, that is through overkill beaten to death. I cannot help hearing the impatient audience sighing: ‘yes, we got it, thank you!’

rapidly as it hits, schools her into an apprenticeship of death.<sup>127</sup> Should I direct the play, Anne would have a wandering eye from the start. T.S. Eliot, hardly a Heywood enthusiast, finds “the seduction . . . extremely plausible: what is perhaps *clumsy* is the beginning superfluously by a scene directly after the marriage of the Frankfords, instead of by a scene marking the happiness of the pair up to the moment of Wendoll’s declaration” (103, emphases mine).<sup>128</sup>

If I agree with Eliot’s first statement, I think he misreads an important aspect of the play: this first scene he so readily deplores is what precisely precludes that a scene depicting marital bliss should exist, as the opening of the play shows a marriage literally dead on arrival. In fact, Death has crashed the party. For Anne, the play is purgatorial from the beginning, hell well in sight, then raging in full flames at the height of her adulterous passion; heaven, she will have to seek elsewhere. Eliot’s penetrating commentary is not in cause, but because he compares Heywood with his contemporaries – every critic has and somewhat must – he misses an important piece of Heywood’s experiment: his flirting with the operatic. As any good Opera composer would, Heywood inaugurates the play with a motif, this figure of loneliness, this island of a woman, who will emerge in the death scene, a republic, independent, foreign. Heywood has a plan in mind, a mathematic of theatricality, and for the sake of his lesson’s effectiveness, (showing that one can die on one’s own terms), the opening scene makes perfect organic sense with the end of the play. He preaches by example.

<sup>127</sup> Though the expression “to defend a part” is a Gallicism (*défendre un rôle* is an idiomatic expression of the French theater trade) I use it because I rather like this warrior metaphor; it suits my practice as an actor before going on stage.

<sup>128</sup> Eliot calls Heywood “one of the dimmest figures” of Elizabethan drama. He also deems, wrongly I propose, the dramatist devoid of “imaginative humour”(104).

Our scenes afford thee store of men to shape your lives by, who be frugal, who be loving, gentle, trusty, without soothing, and in all things temperate. Women likewise, that are chaste are by us extolled and encouraged in their virtues . . . [t]he unchaste are by us shown their errors . . . (*Apology for Actors*, 57).

Informed by his servant, John Frankford decides to set his wife up; he pretends to leave on business. Later in a scene that anticipates the boulevardier Feydeau, he surprises his wife and her lover peacefully in bed, embraced in sleep, as he purposely yet reluctantly returns home in the middle of the night. Frankford, like Othello, would rather not have known. Yet the servant saw right. Despite Anne's sincere contrition, John Frankford "kindly" takes the children away from her, and exiles the adulteress to a solitary house seven miles away on his vast lands where cut off from the world, expelled from Eden, she will starve herself to death. But Heywood packs his Master Frankford's "kindness" with more than irony; his benevolence/his cruelty take in fact many shapes: though inclined to kill them when he finds his guest and his wife peacefully in bed after their *little death* rounded by a sleep, he, in a reversed version of Hamlet's hesitation to kill Claudius in prayer, speaks thus:

FRANKFORD	O me unhappy! I have found them lying, Close in each other's arms, and fast asleep. But I would not damn two precious souls Bought with my Saviour's blood, and them laden With all their scarlet sins upon their backs Unto a fearful judgment, their two lives Had met upon my rapier. (13.40-46)
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Frankford speaks of his legitimate right to be judge and executioner, but more intriguingly of his reticence to act on that right, pointing once again, in a rather un-Puritan turn, to the enduring belief that the state of the soul at the instant of dying has agency in matters of salvation. In his study of Puritanism, Bremer comments that "given that Puritans believed that nothing they did could influence whether they would spend

eternity with God, in heaven or damned in hell, it is extraordinary that they devoted the attention they did to behaving in a godly fashion” (48). In view of Frankford’s speech then, one must recognize that the unorthodox articulation of this issue goes both ways; Anne is not alone in meddling in idiosyncratic theologizing. His wife’s death is not his business. Instead he banishes her and Anne is left with a new-found role to play: that of the novel Eve; she has tasted the forbidden fruit, now she will starve herself, and while Eve is promised the pains of childbirth in return for her offense, Heywood sterilizes her, de-mothers her. “In her characteristically Puritan thought, she takes full responsibility for the mischief, the sin: she ‘sees the justice of her punishment’” (Kinney, 486). She is dead to her husband, deemed a contaminating agent, forever forbidden to consort with the family she has betrayed.

MASTER FRANKFORD      But, as thou hopest for heaven, as thou believest,  
    Thy name’s recorded in the book of life,  
    I charge thee never after this sad day  
    To see me, or to meet me, or to send  
    By word, or writing, gift or otherwise  
    To move me, by thyself, of by thy friends,  
    Nor challenge any part in my two children.  
    So farewell, Nan, for we will henceforth be  
    As we have never seen, ne’er more shall see.  
    (16.173-181).

Here one must not only weigh Frankford’s kindness, but also Heywood’s kinder gesture steeped in the period’s legalism, for the dramatist leaves the door open to further developments or even further changes of heart. On this issue, Arthur Kinney comments further

[Frankford] chooses the common legal recourse of ground for divorce . . . a judicial separation from bed and board [that] nevertheless [does] not mean the dissolution of the marriage. This was meant - by early modern law and practice - to allow a possible reconciliation; it denied the right of either partner to remarry (485).

By this gesture, we may appreciate Frankford's hope, unconscious or not, to rekindle his relationship with Anne. We will have to wait for the deathbed scene to witness their reconciliation in the presence of a puzzlingly approving entourage. This is at least one way, and a rather patriarchal one, of reading the play.

I suggest another. I intuit a fair measure of Ibsen's Nora from his *A Doll's House* (1879) in Anne Frankford; she does not know (until she does) what a poor hand women have been dealt at the game of domesticity. And the discovery scene, the night scene, turns suddenly into a moment of light and clarity for her. I think the actor playing Anne must show that she discovers at once that those domestic dice had been loaded from the start. Though well-broken to the exercise of humiliation, acquainted with the tune "everyday a little death" offered as an epigram in this chapter, Anne is caught in a sexual passion she has agonized over but nonetheless consents to; she more than admits her fault, but she foregoes it entirely: "Anne's realization is of greater consequence, because her repentance comes before rather than after punishment" (Lieblein, 193).

*Enter Anne in her smock, nightgown and night attire*

ANNE FRANKFORD      O by what word, what title, or what name  
 Shall I entreat your pardon? Pardon! O  
 I am as from hoping such sweet grace  
 As Lucifer from heaven. To call you husband!  
 O me most wretched, I have lost that name;  
 I am no more your wife (13.79-84).

At this Anne faints. Heywood might as well write *she feints*. Anne agrees in advance. She knows the drill. When told she is about to receive her sentence, she claims: "Tis welcome, be it death." Principled, she expects capital punishment. But this is not what takes place. Frankford, who earlier in the play has proved a poor card player, a sore loser,

creates new rules for novel games. What may infuriate, baffle, or even sober Anne's character, is the discovery that men not only make the rules but can as well bend them, that in the name of "kindness" they can devise novel chastisements. This simply will not do; this has to change. Separated from her children, punished kindly by period standards – that is, without the public humiliation, as adulterers were often made to parade in the streets – she rebels before the cruelty of her husband's kindness, and chooses to give herself the kind gift of death. What will arrest any reader of the play is the gradual sense of joy in Anne returning through her apprenticeship of death, a joy in fact we never witness in the character before the end. It is worth remembering that, earlier in the play, Anne's acquiescence to adultery is joyless, Phaedra-like, deadly, in fact, akin to a fatal illness. The same goes for Wendoll, who realizes the faults of his ways:

WENDOLL

I am a villain if I apprehend  
 But such a thought; then, to attempt the deed –  
 Slave, thou art damned without redemption.  
 I'll drive away this passion with a song.  
 A song! Ha, Ha! A song as if, fond man,  
 Thy eyes could swim in laughter when thy soul  
 Lies drenched and drowned in red tears of the blood  
 (6.1-5).

Heywood suggests here that singing, that music, can drive away passion. Though Anne agonizes over her repeated infidelities, she would not resist the rapturous carnality of a love affair her husband almost orchestrates, if by carelessness. Right before she spirals into acquiescence, Anne expresses the full measure of her predicament with an implacable Aristotelian tragic diction, that of pity and fear:

ANNE

You move me, sir, to passion and to pity.  
 ...  
 What shall I say?  
 My soul is wandering, and hath lost its way.  
 O Master Wendoll, O.



WENDOLL                                   Sigh not, sweet saint,  
 For every sigh you breathe draws from my heart  
 A drop of blood.

ANNE:  
 I ne'er offended yet.  
 My fault, I fear, will in my brow be writ.

...  
 This maze I am in  
 I fear will prove a labyrinth of sin.  
 The path of pleasure, and the gate to bliss,  
 Which on your lips I knock at with a kiss.  
 [*Kisses Anne*].  
 Your husband is from home, your bed's no blab –  
 Nay, look not down and blush.             (6.139-164).

Once again, the redness of the cheeks is in cause. The playwright is at work: he prepares his death scene. But despite what Wendoll believes, this is a theatre where beds somewhat do speak, enough at least for their presence on stage to conjure a whole set of anxieties that skilled playwrights are fast to exploit.

In this last passage, however, it is that “I ne'er offended yet” I find moving, as would any actor about to play the part, for it points not only to possible prior contemplations of sexual indiscretions, but to the issue of choice and agency. Jennifer Panek contends that “throughout the play, Heywood refuses to provide Anne with any truly clear motivation for her adultery” and goes on to explain that he does so because the playwright by supplying a motive “would condone Anne's transgression, something Heywood would never do;” I remain unconvinced by this reading.<sup>129</sup> “By largely

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<sup>129</sup> By eschewing the question of motivation (a most basic principle of the craft of acting and an actor's prerogative), Panek forces us to face a commonplace problem of drama criticism; for all its percussive insights, its inspired turns, such criticism is of no help to the actor [granted, that is not its function]. The same issue can be raised considering the brilliance of Coleridge when he speaks of the “motive-hunting of motiveless malignity” of Iago in *Othello*; the phrase is assured and inspired, magnificently so in fact, but it sheds very little light on how to approach the role, for, simply put, his richly provocative *bon mot* is unplayable. An actor cannot play motivelessness. But Coleridge at least gives a bone to the actor; the actor who knows how to read will jump on “hunting” in Coleridge's coinage. That may turn Coleridge into some acting coach. Playwrights obviously do not have to explain the motivations of their creations (ask Samuel Beckett at your own risks!) but actors, directors – that is their craft – inevitably must; tailors work with fabric and actors with texts and motivations for scissors. The actor playing Anne must choose why she

avoiding the question of motivation,” Panek pursues, “Heywood presents the act of adultery in its simplest form . . . so that we may focus . . . on Anne’s repentance and Frankford’s ‘kindness’” (367). But Professor Panek, what kindness, pray tell?

ANNE FRANFORD            In this one life, I die ten thousand deaths.

Anne speaks these cryptic words even before hearing judgment. Ten thousand deaths, some number. What are these? I think the answer lays beyond the play, in the audience’s choric mind perhaps, those of women mostly. Anne’s death scene will be the last breath in a play that dilates her agony, a journey from Eden to Gethsemane but where Eden was, to begin with, never more than a male fiction.

For now, Anne is a woman with few servants and a coach full of remnants of her former life. Panek “believe[s] that if the play is an exemplum, it is an exemplum of how not to treat a repentant adulteress” (363). On this point, I concur with this critic who recognizes Heywood’s didacticism. So does Anne Frankford. “A mild sentence,” she replies when she learns that she is to be dispossessed of her rank as a wife, disfranchised from motherhood. She speaks this with immense dignity. Or irony. Or defiance. Or anger. Or bitter laughter. The actor will have to choose. With little less than her life, she leaves the premises taking with her anything that may remind her husband that she ever did exist. But she has her death; that alone belongs to her. She has to die; that is her task. And it is in Anne’s penultimate stage appearance that the designs of her self-fashioned (there, I’ve said it) *good death* take shape. Five miles into her journey to her dying house Anne pauses, asking:

Bid my coach stay. Why should I ride in state?  
Being hurled so low down by the hand of fate?

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gives in to Wendoll’s seduction. And I think the opening scene gives enough clues, and clues that could lead to varied performances.

A seat like to my fortunes let me have,  
 Earth for my chair, and for my bed a grave.  
 (16.1-4)

The inconsolable Anne stops the progress of her exile. Nick, the servant who exposed the truth, brings her something she had left behind: her lute, now injurious to her husband's eyes.

FRANKFORD                      Her lute! O God, upon this instrument  
    Her fingers have run quick division,  
    Sweeter than that which now divides our hearts.  
    (16.13-15)

And later when the servant catches up with the convoy at rest:

NICK                                      There!  
 ANNE FRANKFORD                      I know the lute. Oft I have sung to thee;  
    We are both out of tune, both out of time.

Cecile Williamson Carey in her discussion of that scene speaks of the symbolism of the lute scene as “a culmination of a series of references to music” (111). She deems the lute a symbol of *musica humana*, the music meant to “involve . . . the use of reason to put society and the individual in tune with heavenly accord” according to a division of music devised by Boethius.<sup>130</sup> She explains that “out of tune, out of time” line of Anne's thus:

Her lute is out of tune because its player is. In letting her reason be overmastered by passion, Anne has created discord within herself. Since she has lost the *musica humana*, she is out of tune with the music of the spheres; . . . in other words, she thinks that the proper relationship between her human music and the heavenly harmony cannot be re-established without a renewal of concord in the marriage (113).

In Carey's view, only marital reconciliation would grant the return of the *musica humana* in Anne's life. Anne knows she will never be reunited with Frankford since he has sworn

<sup>130</sup> For a complete explanation of Boethius' division of music, see her article: “Go Breake this lute”: Music in Heywood's “A Woman Killed with Kindness”. *Huntington Library Quaterly*. Vol. 37. No. 2. (Feb. 1974) pp.111-122.

to never see her again. And according to Carey, Anne must renounce to the return of harmony between the music of her life and that of heaven.

But Anne herself undoes Carey's argument with a simple stage action: she plays the instrument. The effect of the piece she has chosen to play speaks for itself: it mollifies all, even Nick the servant, who had until then been her harshest judge. Being given the instrument by the servant Nick, she answers:

ANNE FRANKFORD      I thank him. He is kind and ever was.  
 All you that have true feelings in my grief,  
 That know my loss, and have relenting hearts  
 Gird me about, and help me with your tears  
 To wash my spotted sins. My lute shall groan;  
 It cannot weep, but shall lament my moan.  
(16. 27-32)

*[She plays].*

She plays indeed. It seems dramaturgically odd at this moment of the play to have Anne perform a musical piece - but the implausibility of the musical interlude is its force. This implausibility flirts with the operatic. Heywood does not specify what she plays. Wendoll, the abandoned lover, enters and listens to her. Carey writes: "though his pity has been aroused by her playing, his feelings progress through despair to hardness of heart, not to repentance" (115). I read this in a very different light. What he hears, in fact, arouses him; how else can we explain his reaction to a song that Anne expects will elicit enough tears to wash away her sins?

WENDOLL      *[aside]* I cannot weep; my heart is all on fire.  
 Cursed be the fruits of my unchaste desire.  
(16.73-74).

He may hate it, but her pain, her suffering, excites him. Catherine Clément might say, "Oh, Wendoll goes to the Opera." What she actually sings might then be of great

significance. What might be this requiem song that Anne plays and that prepares us for her death? Without falling into a parlor game – the “what book does Hamlet read?” kind - in performance, the issue has serious consequence. What is her lute’s swan song since Anne will soon order it broken on the wheel of her coach? She exhorts Nick, her husband’s servant and her enemy in this affair, to report that should he “return unto [his] master, say – though not from me ... that you have seen me weep, wish my self dead” (16.62-5). Heywood, I believe is giving us a clue here.

NICK                      I’ll say you wept.<sup>131</sup> I’ll swear you made me sad.  
                                     Why how now, eyes? What now? What’s here to  
                                     do? I am gone, or I shall straight turn baby too.  
                                     ...  
                                     If I can for crying (16.70-79).

Since Heywood does not tell us, *I saw my Lady weepe* would seem an enlightened musical choice; John Dowland published his popular lute song in 1600; its lyric fits the proceedings as it eroticizes the melancholy of its subject. It would make of this an operatic scene, as Clément conceives of them, one in which Anne’s suffering gives pleasure and succor. While Wendoll is aroused, Nick rallies to her cause. Anne has then the lute broken into pieces; so much for the *musica humana*, since the instrument to achieve it has been destroyed. She will renounce the pleasures of this earth just as much as she renounces the music of male design. What she could not accomplish in life (the control of her life, of her passions, of public opinion) she will devise in death.<sup>132</sup> She prepares. Does she read? We will not know. But her death seems to conform to the godly

<sup>131</sup> “I’ll say I saw my Lady weep” we may paraphrase.

<sup>132</sup> In her anachronistic and insightful apposition of anorexia and Anne’s death, Allison P. Hobgood makes sense in at least that regard: Anne starving herself is definitely a rebellious act of control, and self-legislation “that seals her body from suspect incorporations” (119).

books on dying. Yet for all its apparent orthodoxy, this deathbed becomes a topsy-turvy theatre of the *ars moriendi* tradition.

Anne is dying, starving herself, but adamant about what awaits her: a heaven with its doors wide open to welcome her. This Protestant believes she is an Elect. None of her neighbors, the family friends surrounding her bed, seem bothered by her slow suicide (a grievous sin by any Christian doctrine) or by the modalities of the salvific contract she has contrived: she cannot die until forgiven by her husband. “Is my husband come? My soul tarries for him, and I am fit for Heaven” (17.62-3). There is a strange confusion to this statement, a contradiction. Master Frankford, who “sentenced” her to never see him again, must visit.<sup>133</sup> And he must break his resolve. Forgiveness is for the living it seems. Who would refuse such forgiveness - in a crowded room no less – to a dying person?

*Enter FRANKFORD.*

ANNE

And is he come? Methinks, that voice I know.

FRANKFORD

How do you, woman?

ANNE

Well, Master Frankford, well; but shall be better,  
I hope within this hour. Will you vouchsafe,  
Out of your grace and your humanity,  
To take a spotted strumpet by the hand?

FRANKFORD

This hand once held my heart in faster bonds,  
Than now 't is gripp'd by me. God pardon them  
That made us first break hold! (17.74-82)

Anne appeals to his “humanity,” a word that eludes the specifics of gender, a transcendent word. She is prudent, or rehearsed, as if she knew her deathbed to be a theatre; Heywood illustrates yet again a trope of *The Craft*. Anne has her audience in mind. I do not believe she is manipulative, but in control.

Phillipe Ariès gives little space to the issue of the last moments’ impact on salvation (a mere two pages in a thousand page book). He nonetheless observes the

<sup>133</sup> See (14.154-182)

residual medieval belief that early moderns still held: the mental state of the dying has bearing on the *good death*. Ariès describes the deathbed as “an arena of drama in which the fate of the dying man was decided for the last time, in which his whole life and all his passions and attachments were called into question” (108). But as Wunderli and Broce propose, “belief in the Final Moment as a determinant for salvation runs counter to any accepted theology of salvation, either Catholic Free Will, Protestant Predestination, or any Catholic / Protestant combination on the Free Will/Predestination spectrum” (260). Anne herself seems of two minds on the issue; or is her end simply emblematic of what I called early in this chapter a chafing with theological issues? She states a Protestant belief (she will be saved) but acts in what looks like the residual intent of a medieval person (as in *The Craft*, she needs her terrestrial affairs settled).

ANNE	Faintness hath so usurped upon my knees That kneel I cannot: but on my heart's knees My prostrate soul lies thrown down at your feet To beg your gracious pardon. Pardon, O pardon me. (17.88-91)
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Though the metaphor is embarrassing in its clumsiness, forcedly baroque by its oxymoronic effect (heart's knees), the intent is unmistakable: in Anne's self-stipulated theology, her husband's pardon weighs more than that of God, whose forgiveness she is already convinced she already owns. And what of those Puritans assembled around her bed and witnessing her idiosyncratic Catechism? They are hardly naysayers. On the contrary, they applaud this reconciliation orchestrated by the dying, the suicidal, Anne.

FRANKFORD	I pardon thee. I will shed tears for thee, Pray with thee, and in mere pity
ALL	Of thy weak state I'll wish to die with thee. So do we all. (17.94-97).





## CHAPTER IV

FUNNY GETHSEMANE:  
*Queering the Art of Dying*

HANGMAN: Well, thou art even the merriest piece of man's flesh that e'er groaned at my office door.  
Thomas Kyd. *The Spanish Tragedy*.

LODOVICO: Dost laugh?

FLAMINEO: Wouldst have me die, as I was born, whining?  
John Webster. *The White Devil*.

I am a very lucky woman, a lucky woman indeed...because I have received a very unique gift...very unique gift: the ability to laugh...at the misfortune of others.  
Dame Edna Everage. *Just for Laughs Festival*, 2005.

“Dying is easy, comedy is hard” goes a popular adage of show business people. The sentence wears its queer grammar with an odd and amusing grace. Without a gloss, the statement stands vaguely quizzical. What may this aphorism actually mean? It is queer because it creates an odd binary, clashing the specificity of an action (the gerund “dying”) against (what may be considered) a variable ethos, a fluid style, a literary genre, or an emotive register. Simply put, the statement compares the degree of difficulty of accomplishing one thing over another; it can be understood along these lines: though everybody without much effort does sooner or later die, not everyone can be funny even when they try.<sup>134</sup> If spoken by a theatre professional, the statement broadens in meaning; it may be taken to ponder upon the vicissitudes of the theatrical profession to highlight the difficulties attending the performance of comedy as opposed to that of tragedy, pointing to the fragility of comic timing, and the intricacies, the mysteries even, of comedic efficacy. In this valence, the statement remains cryptically amusing, but at least it conceives of comedy as serious a business as death itself. Now let us imagine this

<sup>134</sup> In an unscientific survey, I asked colleagues, friends and family members about the possible meanings of the phrase; this is more or less the common conclusion they reached.

aphorism spoken, as it is said to have been, as the last words of a dying actor: “Dying is easy, Comedy is hard.” Suddenly a puzzling poignancy imbues the whole declaration, a poignancy I might add that invites further prodding of the aphorism itself: for, if dying is easy and comedy is hard, what are we to make of those who die making us laugh?

This chapter investigates what queering death might accomplish: I use ‘queering’ in its most catholic valence: as a practice born of Queer Theory that “exploits its productive indeterminacy as a word used to designate that which is odd, strange, aslant; ... all textuality, when subjected to close reading, can be said to be queer” (Freccero, 5). Thus I look at the queer pairing of dying and humor in scenes where playwrights resort to the comedic register to dramatize the deaths of their characters; I target death speeches where humor, I argue, engrosses the theatricalization of death with meaning and pathos. Far from sapping the pathos of final utterances, I suggest that the injection of humor in the praxis of representing dying may in fact, from a strictly dramaturgical perspective, darken and enrich the emotive function of death speeches. And I must already qualify this last statement by further suggesting that, perhaps, the playwrights do not so much inject humor as discover, unearth the inherent comedic potencies of the dying experience. The nine migratory tropes of *The Craft* animate the comedic register in fresh fashions, but I will say at the outset that the second trope, *Death is a lesson*, most saliently attends a discussion of death and comedy. To humor death will prove a form of philosophizing, and if Montaigne is right, a way to learn how to die.

For many early modern dramatists, death and dying mean not necessarily all gloom and despair; as their plays attest, the representation of agony did and still procures its audience occasions of intense jocularity. Taking these playwrights’ cue, this chapter

asks by extension what role can/should humor play in an *ars moriendi* for our times? It is quite clear that *The Craft* procures little merriment, though the woodcuts of the later and shorter edition are not entirely devoid of comedic possibilities; the cartoonish devils in these primitive drawings could assuredly provide a certain amusement to a modern eye, and may even have elicited laughter from a late medieval reader.

I examine the “hard workings” of comedy in such agonal representations and explore how the playwrights simultaneously mirror/transcend/enhance/domesticate through the comedic register, the terrors often associated with dying; the theory here being that humor, beyond what John Dryden disapprovingly calls “comic relief,” may have a powerful didactic effect, may in fact catalyze profundity, and may, again, elevate the poignancy of theatrical representations of death and dying. Comedy then may be hard in more ways than can be imagined: it crashes the party of orthodox solemnities.

As it happens, the much-quoted aphorism has been attributed, among others, to the actor Edmund Kean (1787–1833) who would have spoken the words on his deathbed.<sup>135</sup> But as with many famous last words, the attribution seems spurious; the celebrated Shakespearian actor was according to his biographers a miserable and misery-inducing man and significantly his agony, like that of Molière, began during a performance.<sup>136</sup> Like most deaths, then, Kean’s began as an unwanted performance. He most probably died in character, that is to say, miserably, and miles away from the desire to end his life with a bon mot.<sup>137</sup> Yet it makes for a good story and the high quotability of

<sup>135</sup> He also allegedly said: “Give me another horse! Howard!” (Green, 102). This, for an actor famous for his interpretation of the crooked king in *Richard III*, sounds just as plausible.

<sup>136</sup> In a well known irony of theatre history, Molière became violently sick during the closing ballet of his play *The Imaginary Invalid* (1673), where he played Argan, the hypochondriac protagonist.

<sup>137</sup> For a detailed account of Kean’s death, read “the final curtain?” in *The Cult of Kean* by Jeffery Kahan. London: Ashgate Publishing Company. 2006. *Kean* (1836), a play by Alexandre Dumas, re-written in 1953

such humorous swan songs, witty please, makes most of their users turn a blind eye as to their historicity.

Why should it be otherwise? There are abundant reasons to gulp the humorous Apocrypha of the dying and none the least, I argue here, because these last opportunities at fashioning one's memorial matter, project in their imparters an impression of control over death, a comforting sense of psychological intactness before the terrorizing unknowability of what, if anything, awaits a dying individual. "Lucid till the very end" we often hear, in what is meant to be a good thing. Let us only think of Oscar Wilde's irresistible (alleged) last words: "my wallpaper and I are fighting a duel to the death. One of us has to go." Or let us consider the final words of Walter Raleigh, who at the end of a three quarter of an hour address from the scaffold, turns to his executioner and asks to see the axe:

"I pray thee let me see it, Dost thou think that I am afraid of it?" ... He ran his finger along the edge and then, smiling, said to the sheriff, "This is sharp Medicine, but it is a Physitian for all Diseases." Then ... someone suggested that he ought to face the east, and Raleigh replied: "What matter how the head lie, so the heart be right" (Greenblatt, 1973, 20).<sup>138</sup>

In true Horatian fashion, what delights and what instructs in both these theatres of the end, is the apparent irreducibility of the self, even at the brink of oblivion. If Wilde can

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by Jean-Paul Sartre, certainly paints an actor too tortured and self-involved to make such levity of his own death.

<sup>138</sup> Stephen Greenblatt makes clear that Raleigh had well rehearsed his final performance, going as far as pillaging his earlier writings for its elaboration (Greenblatt, 1973, p.21). His use of "sharp medicine" echoes Socrates' last words in *The Phaedo*, where the philosopher urges his disciple Crito to sacrifice a cock to Asclepius, the Greek god of Healing. With this pronouncement, Socrates, condemned for 'neglecting the gods', has the last word and it is not without humor; by making an offering to the god of healing, he not only proves wrong those who accused him of religious blasphemy but also, like Raleigh, he conceives of death as a cure for all ills. Raleigh's very last words may have had a theatrical origin: addressing his executioner, he is alleged to have said "What doest thou fear? Strike, man!" Though in jail for more than 16 years, he may have heard of (or read) Marston's 1610 tragedy *The Insatiable Countess* where Isabella speaks similar lines to her executioner. Were it the case, we would have before us an instance where the theatre would have taught Raleigh how to die.

joke at the threshold of extinction, then he is not so much defeated but inconveniently interrupted by death. What amuses is the impression that death is a peccadillo, an annoyance for sure, but one that in no measure diminishes the spirit of the one about to die.

Should humor thus deployed be read as a form of Stoicism, as in Epictetus who writes that the Stoic stance allows one to be "sick and yet happy, in peril and yet happy, dying and yet happy, in exile and happy, in disgrace and happy" (Russell, 269)? Possibly, yet clowns, as the cliché goes, know the best part of sadness. To elicit laughter at the gates of death is in no way a mark of happiness, though it could prove one of fortitude, akin to the state of ataraxia predicated by Stoic tenets. Such comedic pronouncements certainly aim at taking the higher ground in the face of inevitable death, a stance, as we have seen, drastically foreign to the resigned submission to its rigors that *The Craft* prescribes. In light of *The Craft* in fact, Wilde's and Raleigh's last words would be deemed sins of defiance, articulations of pride, in other words, a giving-in to the devils invoked in the fourth temptation of vainglory: "The fourth temptacyon of theym that deye is the complacence or plasyr of theym selfe, and that is spyrituell pryde, by the whiche the deuylle assaylleth most theym" (Atkinson, 24). Unworried by what awaits them, or maybe too self-assured of a secure place in heaven, the dying in this scenario feels complacent enough to make light of the grave.

While Raleigh on the scaffold stands defiant of the terrors of death, Wilde in the squalor of his last Parisian hotel room domesticates it, appropriates it for his own end, casting death as an insolent party crasher, trivial as wallpaper, and even in death, Wilde's wit heroically supersedes, epitaph-like, the expected gloominess of the moment. Wilde,

the playwright, whose *métier* was to amuse, amuses till the very end. The moment is amusing but remains nonetheless soberly vocational. Death, in other words, becomes an accessory, a theatrical prop for a good play. “Carpe Mortem,” Wilde might as well have said. Whether he planned it or not, said it or not, in his alleged manipulation of death, Wilde occurs as a brilliant improviser who dies in character, who refuses to let death deter what makes Wilde “Wilde.”

With Falstaff, Mercutio, Volpone, and countless other brilliant improvisers of this theatrical canon, the early modern English stage made a specialty of crafting these victories of the wit before the imperiousness of death. But in the theatre as in the *ars moriendi* tradition, nothing is improvised: the script is set, the end of a character (of an individual) has been prepared, designed, and always for pragmatic effect (edification and divertissement in the theatre, the securement of salvation as far as *The Craft* is concerned). An essential skill of good acting is arguably the ability to convey an impression of “making it up” in the moment, of improvising. Could (planned) wit, then, strategically devised good humor and levity provide an alternate model of dying? Could humor prove for us a worthy civilizing agent aimed at taming the savagery, the expected ugliness of the dying experience? Might the “good death” be just as well the witty one, the mirthful one, as opposed to the solemn death, all-emotions-boxed-in, as prescribed by *The Craft* and its subsequent Catholic and Protestant iterations? Could humoring death, then, be seen as a supreme form of individuation?

I ask these questions of playwrights seemingly unembarrassed by whether dying and comedy should be made to compete. I ask it specifically of theatre artists who, bound by little more than the limits of their imagination, have insistently looked for what can be

humorous in the solemnity of death and dying. As to evaluating what is “harder” between comedy or dying, Shakespeare and his contemporaries gave themselves a far more radical task: in an up-the-ante playwriting joust, many of their plays seem to compete at proving how funny death really is. For now, let us ask what is to be gained, learned, from this apparent incongruity, this queer alloy of humor and gloom? In *Horrid Laughter* (1979), Nicholas Brooke proposes that

There is a line from Marlowe and Kyd at the beginning of Shakespeare’s career, through Marston and Tourneur and Webster, and on to Middleton and Ford just after Shakespeare’s death, of great plays that are unquestionably tragedies though they rather exploit than silence the relation of tears to laughter (4).

Brooke makes an apt but highly subjective inventory of “great plays” in which “grandeur and grotesquerie [are] simultaneously perceived, tears and laughter equally projected in;” this critic bemoans the fact that these plays are “most often mutilated by conventional expectation of hushed tragic dignity” (9). Essentially, Brooke’s excellent strategy is one of literary reportage, of identifying moments in these texts, that he labels instances where “laughter is realized as essential to their tragic form” (103).<sup>139</sup> But he leaves unexplained his provocative conclusions that amount to little more than a general claim where

Paradoxically, [horror and laughter] hardly seem to be opposed: they are so closely allied that laughter becomes the only expression of horror. ...The grotesque at this intensity is a very strange experience; it becomes a mode of perceiving, and reveals a great deal of our response to death, and indeed to life as well, that normally remains decently obscure. Revulsion and fascination meet in a very nasty joking (24).

I mean to further investigate what Brooke calls this “imaginative mode of perception” (47). To this aim, I turn to the humor found in plays where the level of grotesquerie is not so outrageously intense and where, therefore, a deeper engagement with the audience in

<sup>139</sup> Brooke does not address Shakespeare, Marlowe or Jonson in any specific fashion. The texts he has chosen to investigate are with the exception of Webster’s *The Duchess of Malfi* (1612-13), and Ford’s *’Tis a Pity She’s a Whore* (1633), dramatic oddities, extreme plays that are rarely if ever performed.

its identification with the dying is more likely to take place. The Grand Guignolesque excesses of, say, *Titus Andronicus* (1594) or *A Revenger's Tragedy* (1606) is slippery terrain as the situations such plays dramatize are by any standards so exceptional, so radical, that they may just as well compromise the affective contract with an audience through an alienation their excess may nurture. The laughter such plays may elicit is indeed, as Brooke makes clear, "horrid." But by any standards, serving one's dinner guests a dish made of their children's flesh is hardly common practice; in turn, committing suicide because of parental disapproval of one's love choices, dying alone abandoned by one's friends, seeing life cut short by a stupid accident sadly (and perhaps amusingly) are. The horrid laughter generated by the former lot is an entirely different animal; attempting to animate a *craft of dying* for our times from such excessive situations may, I reckon, prove impossible. Yet in my attempts to legitimize laughter (and its willful eliciting) as a welcome mode of individuating one's death, I must also question the neo-classical esthetic strictures that from Sidney to Dryden, i.e. for more than a century, disparaged this provoked porosity of genres.<sup>140</sup> Dryden who, while coining as an unwelcome "comic relief" the conflation of humor and horror, observes that

In all our tragedies the audience cannot forbear laughing when the actors are to die; it is the most comic part of the whole play. All passions may be lively represented on the stage; but there are many actions which can never be imitated to a height: dying especially is a thing which none but a Roman gladiator could *naturally* perform on the stage, when he did not imitate, or represent, but do it; and therefore it is better to omit the representation of it (324; emphases mine).

I invoke Dryden because his comments are instructively murky; they force us to attentively consider the grounds of his objections for the representation of death on stage.

His primal objection seems aesthetic rather than moral and derives from what he signals

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<sup>140</sup> Obviously Philip Sidney cannot be blamed for his views on comedy and tragedy: he could not anticipate plays yet to be written. That is why Dryden's take on the issue a century later demands close attention.



as a playwright's impotence at reaching "a height of imitation." There is little doubt that we look at theatrical practice today through a rather different lens. But there is more than an issue of perspective and temporality in what separates us from Dryden. Are we not reading, watching the same plays he did? Many would have agreed then, and would agree now, that there are few more affecting, heartbreaking moments than the deaths of Lear, or Cleopatra, or Marlowe's King Edward? Is he faulting the playwrights solely for staging death as a breach of decorum? Or, is he accusing their lack of aesthetic rigor because "they go too far" or disrespect generic formalism? If so, must we in turn fault Dryden for not recognizing that the "impure aesthetics" he condemns are precisely what allow the plays the great dramaturgical triumphs they achieve? Hugh Grady in *Shakespeare and Impure Aesthetics* (2009) gives a generous pass to such shortsightedness when he explains:

One way to think about 'impure aesthetics' is to understand such aesthetics to be possible only in our Postmodernist present, when the various new critical methodologies of our times have permitted us to think of the artwork as disunified, as constituted by internal clashes of discourse and by the insubordination of repressed materials (30).

If an audience laughs at Othello's suicide, at Juliet's self-stabbing, does that necessarily point to a shortcoming of the play itself? Or is it, as Dryden contends, because the playwright cannot go far enough in the rendering of "naturalness" the way his Roman gladiator obviously must?<sup>141</sup> Is Dryden thus misconstruing the praxis of theatrical representation itself or is he blaming the public for their indecorous reactions in a "pearls

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<sup>141</sup> It bears repeating how interesting it is to note that Seneca, who wrote the bloodiest of plays (whether or not his works were ever produced publically in his lifetime, or even meant to be, remains a mystery), objects to the spectacles of gladiators killing one another on the base that such renderings of violence are bound to "either [make his pupil] imitate or loathe" them (*On Crowds*, p.173). In his letter to Lucilius, he exhorts him not to attend the circus. Does Seneca understand something about the theatre that Dryden does not?

to swine” judgment? Is he, in other words, dismissing a half-century of playwriting that often made representations of death its centerpiece, on the grounds such representations elicit the “wrong” reactions from the audience, and thus are unsuitable for the stage? In his remarkably insightful work *An Essay on Laughter* (1907), James Sully discerned that a social occasion highly conducive to laughter was one “in which an unusual degree of solemnity is forced upon us.”<sup>142</sup>

What is then the right reaction to have before an individual’s death? Dryden obliquely returns us to the affective prescriptions of *The Craft* where there is but one way to die, and only one way to attend to the dying. In this light, could we not say that not wanting the representation of death on stage at all is akin to not wanting to die, or mainly not wanting to discuss the inevitable? I’d rather take solace in the statement of aesthetics that dramatist Howard Barker makes in *Death, The One and The Art of Theatre* (2005) where he declares “to ask for truth in theatre is contradictory, a repudiation of its essence. Consequently, death, a subject for which true statements are, a priori, inadmissible, is the subject most perfectly suited to the form of theatre” (4).

Barker, against Dryden’s view, deems the theatre an ideal medium for the representation of death, since the death experience, ineffable by nature, can never (obviously) be fully shared, and since its theatrical representation, by virtue that it necessarily misrepresents death, must always call upon imaginative powers. We know that the performance of death has indeed been imitated to unimpeachable heights, and better, that it has been transposed poetically, stylized (think of the operatic death aria), sublimated, and that such sublimations (often realized these days through enlightened

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<sup>142</sup> Quoted from *The Death-Humor Paradox* by Peter Narvaez in *Of Corpse, Death Humor in Folklore and Popular Culture*, 2003.

*mise en scène* and technical wizardry) can be more effective theatrically than any veristic versions bemoaned by Dryden as unachievable. Perhaps he refers to situations where, as in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the actors, called to perform a death scene, do not have the tragic wares to carry the day. But even Starveling, one the mechanicals, is of Dryden's party when comes the time to rehearse the play: "I believe we must leave the killing out, when all is done" (3.1.12). In the *Pyramus and Thisbe* episode performed at court in Act V, Bottom's unbridled amateurism (and Shakespeare's comedic experiments) butchers (by design) the tragic grandeur that he wills for his character's death:

BOTTOM:                   The pap of Pyramus  
                                   Ay, that left pap,  
                                   Where heart doth hop.  
                                   Thus die I: thus, thus, thus.                   *[He stabs himself]*

                                  Now am I dead,  
                                   Now am I fled,  
                                   My soul is in the sky.  
                                   Tongue lose thy light.  
                                   Moon, lose thy flight.                   *[Exit Moonshine]*  
                                   Now die, die, die, die, die.                   *[He dies]. (5.1.286-295)*

Though we know that Shakespeare wants little less than laughter here, it is not always easy to isolate what is particularly funny about the passage. An "against-the-grain" interpretation by a particularly gifted actor could (possibly) warrant a different outcome. Some verbal turns uncontestedly aim at tickling the audience. But no doubt, Pyramus' last speech is a pastiche of moments belonging to bona fide tragedies. For instance, the demonstrative "thus," repeated here three times, is a staple of death speeches. To wit, let us see the use of "thus" in three tragedies proper, in passages from Thomas Kyd's *The*

*Spanish Tragedy* (1592) and Shakespeare's *Othello* (1603), and then *Antony and Cleopatra* (1607):

In *The Spanish Tragedy*:

BEL-IMPERIA. Tyrant, desist soliciting vain suits;  
Relentless are mine ears to thy laments,  
As thy butcher is pitiless and base,  
Which seiz'd on my Erasto, harmless knight.  
Yet by thy power thou thinkest to command,  
And to thy power Perseda doth obey:  
But, were she able, *thus* she would revenge  
Thy treacheries on thee, ignoble prince:  
[Stabs him.  
And on herself she would be *thus* reveng'd.  
[Stabs herself.  
(4.4.59-67)

In *Othello*:

OTHELLO And say besides, that in Aleppo once,  
Where a malignant and a turban'd Turk  
Beat a Venetian and traduced the state,  
I took by the throat the circumcised dog,  
And smote him, *thus*  
[Stabs himself  
(5.2 361-365)

In *Antony and Cleopatra*:

EROS Farewell, great chief. Shall I strike now?  
MARK ANTONY Now, Eros.  
EROS Why, there then: *thus* I do escape the sorrow  
Of Antony's death.  
[Kills himself] (4.15. 93-95)  
(emphases on "thus" all mine).

The borrowing of "thus" is clearly a parody of this habit of speech in tragedies. So is the parody of physical diminishment, the loss of voice and sight; the wished elevation of one's soul towards heaven regularly appears in such scenes. As he dies, Richard II begs "mount, mount, my soul! Thy set is up on high, whilst my gross flesh sinks downward, here to die" (5.5.111-112). In *The Jew of Malta* (c. 1589), Marlowe closes Barabas' death

with words that could herald those of Bottom, as he speaks “Die, life! Fly soul! Tongue, curse thy fill, and die” (5.5.87-89). Apples and oranges, one may object, but we must remember that registers – particularly in performance - are fragile aesthetic vessels; they crack mysteriously, even at the touch of well-intentioned artists for reasons outside their control.

In his introduction to *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Mario DiGangi describes thus the comedic interlude: “To be sure, ‘Pyramus and Thisbe’ is dreadful theatre” (11). The scholar means of course that the play as produced by the mechanicals is an aesthetic flop and that the disrupting vocal critiques from the courtiers, led by Theseus, are warranted. Attending “a tedious brief scene of young Pyramus/ and his love Thisbe: very tragical mirth,” Theseus anticipates Dryden:

THESEUS: ‘Merry’ *and* ‘tragical’? ‘Tedious’ *and* brief?  
That is hot ice and wondrous strange black snow.  
How shall we find the concord in this discord? (5.1. 56-60)

We won’t; which won’t prevent us from rejoicing at what Dryden would decry. We want these execrable actors to mar the death scene with all the inappropriate bathos they can muster. But as DiGangi observes the scene may offer “more substantial insights...than its audience realizes” [the audience being here both the Athenian court attending the play-within-the-play, and us, sitting in the theatre] (11). DiGangi observes that:

Were they not so intent on impressing the Duke with their witty barbs against the actors, Lysander and Demetrius might see in the death of Pyramus and Thisbe an image of the tragic fate they themselves were fortunate enough to escape (12).

There is, I suggest, another paradox attending this moment; Shakespeare, the master tragedian, deconstructs his own artistry to amuse; he seemingly shows us well-intentioned amateurs who, following the recipe book of tragedy, miserably fail for our

amusement. In other words, Shakespeare shows us how not to do tragedy. But as a magician explains his trick, Shakespeare plays a more wondrous one on us.<sup>143</sup> He wants us to laugh at the seriousness of tragedy-making and posits for us that death can by and of itself become comedic *materia poetica*. DiGangi is too astute a scholar, too well-versed in the habit of destabilizing language that characterizes Queer theory, a critical movement to which he has made considerable contributions, not to have chosen the word “dreadful” purposely. Queer theory in its vocational disarticulation of hegemonic binaries is not about to settle for the tragedy/comedy dyad. This is where the subtitle of this chapter takes its full meaning. As DiGangi notes, the scene is dreadful, awful theater because at one level it does not ‘per se’ effect tragedy as it aims to; yet even in its comedic volition, it nonetheless remains “full of dread” if of another kind: the artistic failure of the episode is dreadful for its artisans and the assembled court, and paradoxically a triumph for us that witness this metatheatrical magic trick. And still, we have been laughing at someone who died, as we one day will.

As he may have written the lyrical *Richard II* and *Romeo and Juliet* in the same temporal breath, Shakespeare gives us in MND a little of what failure as a professional theatre artist may resemble. “Fittingly, the comedy devotes much of its last act to a parody of theatrical performance, as if its most enduring concern ... [were] the possibility of performing plays” (Greenblatt, 1997, p.809). “Dying is easy, comedy is hard,” but expounding on failed tragedy by perversely eliciting brilliant comedy points to the ignominy of theatrical failure and a desire to triumph by pre-emption. I’ll laugh at me before you do. That is a different kind of horrid laughter, more akin to that of Wilde or

<sup>143</sup> The insights DiGangi points to, concern issues of “social and gender norms in the structure of the play” as he writes that “the Fairies might be pulling off another one of their tricks” (12). I borrow his “playing trick” distinction to highlight a different aspect of the scene.

Raleigh at the gates of death. Here theatrical failure is truly dreadful, as in *full of dread, of fear, and awe* (O.E.D.). It is death as failure, as artistic failure. And the *Tragedy of Pyramus and Thisbe* is partly a Queer failure, in the sense that its failure is its own comedic triumph even though Bottom remains convinced of his excellence as an actor, which adds even more poignancy to the episode. The scene in reality articulates, *avant la lettre*, the three tenets of Judith Halberstam's argument in *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011): the play-within-the-play shows sincere theatre artists "*resisting mastery*" (obviously not as an ideological gesture, but by virtue of their artistic shortcomings); the set up of the scene "*privileges the naïve and the stupid,*" and by extension, as far as the memorialized story of *Pyramus and Thisbe* is concerned, it "*suspects memorialization*" in the sense that by defacing the received tale it refuses to contribute to a "tendency to tidy up disorderly histories" (11-15). Bottom fails at dying convincingly because the theatre has presented him with models, that he rightly or wrongly, understands as "pure aesthetics," as a received template of gestural and emotive rhetoric that even applied with the deepest sincerity proves inept. To this day, say "Shakespearian acting" and people may, Bottom-like, start gesticulating and speaking in grand tones. They hold on to an arrested idea of what Shakespearian acting – as if such a thing exists – entails. The *ars moriendi* of the theatre as it occurs in Bottom's conception of theatrical affairs leads to failure. But as he fails, he simultaneously triumphs and dies as an artist.

If that's highly amusing, it also somewhat stings. I, for one, have at times been moved to tears by this scene, for those exact reasons. In a production where the mechanicals were played as true "amateurs," people who love the theatre so much, their

pathetic efforts at tragedy were in fact heartbreaking.<sup>144</sup> They were not playing for laughs as in so many “dreadful” productions where this supposed high burlesque falls flat because the actors are hamming through it. Thus the eliciting of comedy may simultaneously hush and stir the intuition of the tragic. I would suggest the image of a double helix (tragic/comic) of the Drama DNA and of mortality itself if you will, rather than the tired metaphor of the two faces of the same coin; the double helix at least turns the solid coin into a kinetic, fluid currency where death and finitude can be held in and shaped by different and individuated hands. In this double helix metaphor, the comedy of death is inherently present, latent, not injected, only begging to be unearthed. This is what Joyce Carol Oates points to in her commentary on *Antony and Cleopatra*: “Cleopatra cannot quite rid herself of the earthbound and, in a crude sense, comic aspect of her own mortality. ... Recurring in her, even at her death, is a propensity to view matters comically” (420-424).

While the *ars moriendi* tradition instructs us on what kind of person the dying wants to die as, or should have become as she dies, comedy never fails to tell us who actually dies. Humor individuates. The failure at fitting the mold of exemplary dying in the *ars moriendi* tradition or in the case of MND, in some received aesthetics of tragic drama, becomes a declaration of selfhood, individuated, unique, and therefore an individuation whose loss in death is both hubristically tragic in its aesthetic disobedience and immensely poignant. A personality dies in personalized language, not in the homiletic reductions of the everyman of *The Craft*. The comedic death is an interruption of the pleasure (our *jouissance*, Lacan might say) that its laughter labors into being. I find

<sup>144</sup> A good example of this approach is to be found in Michael Hoffman’s film version of the play (1999); a cast of mechanicals led by Roger Rees as Quince, literally transform the high burlesque of the failed tragedy into a meditation on the precariousness of theatre-making itself.



little comfort in paradoxes and next to none in death; but there is endless wonder in such a paradoxical reading of Bottom/Pyramus' death scene, a wonder perfectly attuned to that of Bottom's dream, this vision unfathomable, insubstantial as "it had no bottom" (4.1.209). Death has no bottom and we keep digging in its bottomless abyss for the meanings of our mortality. As he awakes, Bottom wants to memorialize the evanescent vision he just had; he will commission Quince to write a ballad on its wonders, a ballad he proposes to sing at the end of the play-within-the-play, to "make [Thisbe's death scene] the more gracious" (4.2.420-421). Bottom (or more accurately, Shakespeare) may be on to something: there might indeed be grace to be found in mining the bottomless terrors of dying and find in our excavations, in the grave, a vein of gold: the inherent humor of our deaths. If Bottom is not poignant in his clumsy tragic renderings, then the actor has missed the mark. Comedy and the comedic register are particularly apt at the demonstration of turning failure into triumph, or perhaps at showing that failure may very well be its own triumph. And death as we have seen (pace Thomas Browne's *Religio Medici*) has often been perceived as the ultimate failure. Chaplin's entire opus thrives on this quest for the comedic wonder of tragic situations. Bottom fails at being a tragedian however well intentioned his desire to play his part.

QUINCE      A lover, that kills himself most gallant for love.  
 BOTTOM      That will ask some tears in the true performing of it.  
                  I will move stones (2.1.18-20)

Of course, Bottom cannot live up to such Orphic standards; this poor player wanted to move stones; somewhat he will, but only perversely so. The stones he moves are those of aesthetic orthodoxy and such disobedience exacts its price: as I have explained, in the world of the play, he dies as a theatre artist (he loses all credibility), and disappears as an

agent of the plot. He is terminated in this play (in this dream). The heaven of applause awaits the actor who defended the role, or perhaps the lukewarm purgatory of an indifferent audience, or even the hell of bad reviews in some local gazette. Bottom's only line after Pyramus' suicide ineptly interrupts the solemn death of Thisbe (as often noted, a death reminiscent of Juliet's last scene). After his failure/triumph at rendering the "very tragical mirth" of the tale, he offers, what? A mere jig, a dance. He literally becomes in Macbeth's unforgiving summation "a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage, and then is heard no more" (5.5.23-25). I played Oberon in London in 1987 but my sympathy has always lied with Bottom. He is the one who dances as he dies to the world of the play. If that sounds preachy, it probably should.

Poor Dryden, who failed to recognize the pertinence of laughter, of merriness, as an appropriate, perhaps even natural/organic (if queer) mode of perception for the apprenticeship of death, who did not see that his predecessors might have in fact wanted nothing more than this "mixed" reaction. This, at least to me, amounts to a confession of shortsightedness from that playwright, and such a failure of imagination in so imaginative a poet is to say the least, arresting. I hardly need arguing that the "height" of representation that Dryden longs for can actually be achieved when the alloy of laughter and death is so brilliantly realized. Let the plays themselves conduct the argument. But if I insist on Dryden it is because his rigorist reservations remain informing as they direct our attention to the broader question of early modern attitudes towards death and its representation, and the place of humor in the ritual modalities of death and dying of *The Craft*.

Dryden, a neo-classical arbiter of taste, had surprisingly little use for laughter itself when came the time to write his own comedies; in his preface to *An Evening's Love* (1671), a comedy, Dryden even writes that he is “often vexed to hear the people laugh, and clap, as they perpetually do, where I intended ’em no jest; while they pass the better things, without taking notice of them” (Lauter, 194). Here Dryden gives himself away, or at best he confesses the failures of his own pragmatic agenda as a playwright: he does not get the reactions he wants from his audience. Suspicious of laughter (or, of a certain kind of laughter), Dryden prefers to it the somewhat imprecise and certainly hard to measure “delight.” I would suggest to him that the presence of humor in the representation of death and in its reception is an important part of the dramatic success of the many plays that took that aesthetic risk or that received humorous reception. Thus I look at the want for humor on either side of the equation author/audience, one that we may ourselves engage with at the prospect of dying, as a mode of perception, or in Marjorie Garber’s terms, a mean of approachability:

Like Perseus’ shield, Shakespearean comedy deflects the horrid visage of the Medusa that is each man’s death and, in doing so, makes it possible for us not only to gaze upon it but to approach it...the play[s] [are] portal[s], anchored, grounded in the possibilities of death – and in its certainty.... Just as its characters ‘play’ at death and do not die, so the play plays with the idea of dying, lets us experience death imaginatively, ... and escape it (1980, 125).

Without naming it, what Garber spectrally describes here is akin to *catharsis* and returns us inevitably to Aristotle’s *Poetics*. We experience the gravity of death while watching, hearing, reading the play and yet escape its grip. The question of course is whether the experience changes us or not, heals us, alters our subjectivity or not. Significantly, she writes “like Perseus’ shield”: her allusion is not fortuitous; it borrows Ovid’s rendering of Perseus’ strategies to surmount the paralyzing gaze of the gorgon (a stand-in for death) as

...there he saw (a wretched case)  
 The shapes as well of men as beasts lie scattered everie where  
 In open fields and common ways, the which transformed were  
 From living things to stones at sight of foule Medusas heare [sic],  
 But yet that he through brightnesse of his monstrous brazen shield  
 The which he in his left hand bare, Medusas' face beheld  
 (*Metamorphoses*, Book 4. 950-955, translation by Arthur Golding).

Perseus witnessed what happened to those who looked at death the obvious way, the only way, straight in the eyes; for this lack of invention, they are literally petrified. Perseus does not deny her existence, nor does he heroically provoke her. He looks for a way to approach the creature and triumphs. Cleverly, he deflects Medusa's look by using his shiny shield as a mirror to advance towards her. There's instruction here. I would argue that laughter in death is one such shield aimed at deflection in an exercise of approachability that Garber contends the plays invite. As Simon Critchley proposes:

Humour [before death] recalls us to the modesty and limitedness of the human condition, a limitedness that calls not for tragic-heroic affirmation but comic acknowledgement, not Promethean authenticity but a laughable inauthenticity. ...That realization is not an occasion for moroseness but mirth. (102)

Critchley invites us to weigh the immodesty of gravity, of "tragic-heroic affirmation" before the issues of death; he is a philosopher, and consequently he writes this in conclusion of a long and prudent meditation on the matter. And whether Garber avows mirth over moroseness as a strategy of deflection, she returns us to considerations of aesthetics that I for once will only welcome.

The criticism of the last thirty years has lucidly eviscerated holistic conceptions of the early modern period; yet this was often accomplished through a retrograding of aesthetics as a mode of criticism. For instance, now that New Historicism has allowed us to reject universals we can appreciate how, say, Tillyard's *Elizabethan World Picture* was but a seductive ideological fiction, partaking naively or willingly in ideological

repression. Now too we can better measure how Eliot was partially “myth-making” “when he defined his famous ‘unification of sensibility’ for writers and artists before the mid-seventeenth century” (Grady, 39). As to the issue of death and its representation, Michael Neill, as I have already mentioned, has brilliantly exposed death as a protean cultural construct; in explicating the “crisis of death” brought on to the period by the “effectual displacement of the dead as a distinct ‘age-group’ in Protestant societies,” Neill reminds us that “the dead, now beyond the help or intercession of their survivors ... [loaded] the Protestant conscience with an intolerable burden of remembrance” (244). May not ending one’s life in mirth alter that burden of remembrance? In the same spirit of elucidation, Robert N. Watson, building upon Ernst Becker’s brilliant *The Denial of Death* (1974), has expertly made evident the nascent proto-Existentialism that not-so-timidly emerges from plays he has exposed as steeped in religious skepticism. Those are remarkable critical achievements and yet, when all is said and done, achievements that settle little. Neither did they mean to, or should they. What they do in turn is rescue the experience of death and specifically, its theatrical representation, from the fetters of sectarian unanimity, and respectability. They raise anew the anxieties of death; they further messy up its inherent messiness. As Philip Larkin observes in his *Aubade*: such criticism has made us face a “very special way to be afraid, no trick dispels” (lines 21-22).

How is one to speak one’s own death? Writing about death, I have come to realize, has in it some odd built-in hubris. As I made clear in the second chapter, these pages abound with the words “us” and “we.” It simply must. Death appears as the one universal that will not be debunked or demystified by criticism. Who is to speak? And on

what authority? Thus when in criticism written thirty years ago Garber argues that the play (any play in fact) “lets us experience death imaginatively,” she opens the door as to what imagination was/is and did/can do. Laughing back at the smiling skeletons of *The Dance of Death* might very well constitute such an act of imagination. Then to examine how *death is a lesson* and how levity can philosophically inform the death praxis in plays and perhaps in turn impact our own approaches to death and dying, I return to works that rely less on outrageousness and more on plausibility, plays that, though they present “in extremis” situations, maintain a psychological immediacy less susceptible to alienate the everyman in the audience.

Take the tranquil death of the boisterous Sir John Falstaff in *Henry V* (1600). In what must be called a “great theatrical robbery of the Shakespearian canon” we are left with what Dryden would approve: the tale of his death rather than its representation on stage. And it is Mistress Quickly, the hostess given to embellishment, who does the relating of Falstaff’s sad end. If her tale chronicles the advance of death upon Sir John’s body, it is a memorial we attend, rather than a death scene. The scene conjures the ethos of the *ars moriendi* tradition in a very specific way: like the text of *The Craft*, it is very inclusive of those meant to accompany the dying and it remains a performance. In this sense, the scene is highly representative of an early modern playwriting strategy to dramatize this rite of passage as Marjorie Garber conceives it:

It became clear that Shakespeare was interested in these rites as they affected both the individual and his society before and after, as well as during, the period of transition itself. And this is just what we cannot know about dying. The playwright’s dilemma is thus closely analogous to that of every human being: how to envisage and describe experiences of which neither he nor his audience can have any real knowledge. ...Shakespeare evolved a number of dramatic strategies to cope with this problem (1997, 214).

One such strategy, Garber contends, was to dramatize the grieving of those left behind. Yet here the grief manifests itself through the comedic register. Mistress Quickly's relating of the events deflects, puts us at a distance from which we observe Falstaff's death like curious bystanders at a New Orleans' carnivalesque funeral; it is a sad event that puts a smile on our face. But all poignancy is not lost; even if we are robbed of his death, of the material man dying in his bed, heartbroken, estranged from his beloved boy-king, we have Quickly's report. What's more, we know something of Falstaff's view on death; we have seen him faking death on the battlefield in *1 Henry IV*, a play where, after all, Hotspur himself declares "Doomsday is near; die all, die merrily" (4.2.135).

*Enter Douglas. He fighteth with Falstaff, who falls down as if he were dead (5.4.75).*  
In the quick of the battle, Prince Harry (Hal) "*spieth Falstaff on the ground*" and says:

PRINCE HARRY:     What old acquaintance, could not all this flesh  
                          Keep a little life? [...]  
                          Embowelled will I see thee by and by,  
                          Till then, in blood by noble Percy lie. *Exit.* (5.4.101-109)

Hal departs and to our joy Falstaff revives, piqued by the perspective of his untimely embalment. He will then stab dead Percy and claim the body as a casualty of his own bravery.

FALSTAFF:           Embowelled! ... 'Sblood, 'twas time to counterfeit, or  
                          that hot termagant Scot had paid me scot and lot too.  
                          Counterfeit? I lie, I am no counterfeit: to die,  
                          is to be a counterfeit; for he is but the  
                          counterfeit of a man who hath not the life of a man:  
                          but to counterfeit dying, when a man thereby  
                          liveth, is to be no counterfeit, but the true and  
                          perfect image of life indeed. The better part of  
                          valour is discretion in the which better part I  
                          have saved my life;(5.4.110-118).

In the terrors of the Shrewsbury battlefield filled with all-too-real cadavers, Falstaff finds occasion for comedy. But in his jubilation, he makes intriguing claims: freshly

resurrected, he ponders on the illusory nature of death, and concludes that if one has to “play dead” to stay alive, then life itself might after all be an illusion. The greatest French translator of Shakespeare, Jean-Michel Déprats, reads in this passage a commentary on Plotinus “who makes of all life in this world a simulacrum in regard to what will the ‘real’ one be in the afterlife” (1501) [my translation]. But could Falstaff also be making a case for actors who, in the habit of counterfeiting death, become somewhat apprenticed in a higher form of living? The passage (Déprats calls it “baroque”) intimates as much. Mostly it affords humor in a moment (a deadly battle) that does not spontaneously lend itself to it; this humor seems to want to make a point beyond eliciting laughter. When Falstaff, master faker, ultimately does die, he does so like most in the period, in his bed. We are made to believe that a broken heart is the cause.

Katherine Koller objects to John R. Moore’s assessment that, in his dramatization of Falstaff’s death, Shakespeare is burlesquing the death of Socrates. Such an arcane allusion to the philosopher’s death, she argues, would have been lost on Elizabethan theatregoers; she adds that to be successful, a satire must “be immediately recognized by the audience” (383). On this last point, this critic forgets that the recourse to allusion is scarcely an author’s mean to reach masses; it often proves a pleasure of authorship for its own sake.<sup>145</sup> Koller estimates, rather, that Falstaff’s demise “as the Hostess recounts it, is a satirical picture of the conventional deathbed scene in Shakespeare’s day as it was outlined in the popular how-to-die literature”(383). Koller contends that:

It is not necessary to say that Shakespeare read the literature on holy dying. The amount written on this subject was so large that its general rules were part of every Christian's knowledge. No Elizabethan family could have escaped some contact with the conventional ritual of the deathbed...The art of dying was the

<sup>145</sup> For an excellent analysis of the politics of allusion, see Charles Whitney’s *Early Modern Responses to Renaissance Drama*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2006.



art of arts, and it is safe to postulate that Shakespeare and all Elizabethans knew it by one means or another. And surely the Elizabethan audience would have recognized in the Hostess's report of Falstaff's death the satiric humor of this departure from the accepted deathbed ritual and the suitability of such an end for such a sinner (386).

Koller's claim that Elizabethans would have known the art of dying "by one means or another" seems plausible enough. But the problem with both these critics' positions (Moore and Koller) is their insistence upon the so-called satirical, or burlesque charge that they allege the scene hosts. This brief scene has plenty of humor but it is hardly satirical; in view of the situation it dramatizes, I would rather call it, like Bottom's acting feat, paradoxically poignant. As I have maintained earlier that acting is inevitably a form of criticism (I posited actors as theorists of the plausible) – that often, I concede, can prove a reductive form of criticism. This passage presents an opportunity to look at how the scene can/should be played.

We may first want to consider the levity brought to Sir John's death as Quickly's own doing, and her motives to couch it so may be multiple; could she be varnishing the facts to console her grieving friends? Are her own insufficiencies at understanding her dying friend, the literate Falstaff, interfering with a proper relating of what took place at Eastcheap? According to Koller and Moore, Falstaff's death would showcase either the mockery of another's (Socrates) or a parody of what the "good death" should entail. The scene hosts the ethos of *The Craft*, but only in its situation not its means, and certainly not in its dramatic ambitions. I would offer that the theatre affords such other means, other modes of perception that were neither satirical nor referential, but original and iconoclastic. True enough, Falstaff does die in his bed, attended by Mistress Quickly and the lowborn who have not deserted him, and the scene as reported has indeed all the

veneers of an *ars moriendi* scene; a closer look shows otherwise. If Falstaff mentions God, is it to pray? Not by any evidence that would be supported in court; it is all hearsay, Quickly's poeticized report. Was he cursing God then? And is Quickly covering for him? Falstaff does not dispose of his possessions in a formal will as *The Craft* would command, and most importantly those around him are not testing his faith with various inquiries; on the contrary as Falstaff cries "God, God, God! three or four times" (the sole reported verbatim of Falstaff in the scene), the Hostess "bid[s] him not think of God; I hoped there was no need to trouble himself with any such thoughts yet" (2.3. 17-20). Consolatory or in denial, Quickly may likely have hoped for her friend's recovery. That may be the function of the "yet" at the end of the line. This said, Falstaff's death as she describes it could lead us to believe that he does indeed give in to the temptations of despair and impatience. Yet, something else may have happened in this room. Were I directing the piece, I would ask the actor playing the Hostess to cover for what really took place (whatever it is). I think Falstaff may just as well have been swearing at God, at whores, at bad wine. We can't know of course, and that's not the point. The real stake of the scene is raised by the risk of its register.

Instead of a scene embracing the modalities of *The Craft*, Shakespeare gives us a simultaneously moving and droll portrait of mourning, a view from those left behind; we are presented with verbal pieces of a puzzle that must be reconstructed from our own earlier encounters with Falstaff. What is the theology of Falstaff's death? We as audience members must decide. His death, good or bad, is ours to devise and we are the mourners left to make sense of our loss. The ribald and masterful speaker of the earlier plays is reduced – again, through hearsay in the not-so-reliable reporting of Quickly – to a mere

babble, a (seemingly) incoherent final moment. I would risk that the moment is brilliantly performative in the sense that it effects how it may feel to learn of the loss of someone we love, removed as we are from the events of his death, particularly for someone who has made us laugh this much.

In his essay “Falstaff and the Art of Dying” (1987), Paul M. Cubeta recognizes that “the theatrical gamble of creating a character by not creating him, of giving him life by destroying him yields the most memorable scene of the play” (197). This critic proposes:

This final creating of a character thematically and dramatically dead at the end of *2 Henry IV* is thus theatrically and structurally achieved through a transformation of an *ars moriendi* meditation composed of the fragments of the disintegrating comic world of *The Henriad* (209).

I concur with Cubeta’s use of the word *transformation* (rather than prescriptive qualifiers like parody, or satire) to describe the scene. To the loyal (and soon to be hanged) Bardolph who wishes he could be with his old friend “wheresome'er he is, either in heaven or in hell!” Quickly answers:

HOSTESS	Nay, sure, he's not in hell: he's in Arthur's bosom, if ever man went to Arthur's bosom. (2.3. 9-10)
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As has been often noted, Quickly naively makes a malapropism in confounding Abraham’s bosom with that of the legendary king. That in and of itself is both allusive and funny. But as Marjorie Garber observes, the audience may also resonate with a Falstaff bound for an “English Heaven, tailor-made for his quintessentially English spirit” (1981, 215). Maurice Hunt suggests that “rather than to Abraham’s salvific bosom, Falstaff in the Hostess’s confused mind goes to that of a patron of secular chivalry” (23). It is not as if Shakespeare has not repeatedly made obvious Falstaff’s need for reforming

his ways. If we laugh it is partly because Quickly's diction individuates Falstaff as someone, the only one perhaps, who in fact would befit such a made up heaven. Falstaff appears certainly as a figure of modernity in terms of religion; his biblical references are cherry-picked to suit his good pleasure, or better, he creates a *sui generis* catechism (in his soliloquy on honor for instance). Falstaff is his own religion. His death is no reformation, as no reform is needed in a world where one makes up the rules. He speaks of his vocation in Protestant terms, even when thievery is his vocational call (*1 Henry IV*, 1.2. 92-93). Hugh Grady has called him a "character [that] has come to embody a central moment in the development of Western modernity."<sup>146</sup> This huge world of a man, Quickly tells us:

A' made a finer end and went away an it had been any  
christom child; a' parted even just between twelve  
and one, even at the turning o' the tide. (2.3.10-12)

With no priest on site to administer the last rites (a legitimate expectation as we are in Lancastrian England, Catholic, late medieval), Falstaff the sinner is compared to a baby at baptism, in white chrisom robe, pure, innocent. In a sense, he might very well be. The contrast between this angelic figure and the knight we know better as "fat-witted with drinking of old sack," "this gentlemen of the shade" is irresistibly funny, but only in our paradigm. So we laugh. And yet, there is a kindness of tone in what Quickly says, a tenderness that inevitably oozes from her description. She grants him a reformation he hardly needs. Falstaff, she categorically maintains, "made a finer end" than a sinless baby. This is no satire of *The Craft*, but its clear dismissal. That is the transformation taking place. We have followed in both parts of the second *Henriad* the unrepentant sinner he was. Now we laugh hearing of his death.

<sup>146</sup> Quoted in Whitney, 103.

“If [Falstaff] in some minds represents merry Old England, it is a dissolute late-medieval Catholic England of Elizabethan Protestant imagination” (Hunt, 23). And need I add a Protestant imagination that has entirely recalibrated the modalities of salvation. “Oh if men were to be saved by merit” Falstaff vociferates in his very first appearance in *2 Henry IV*, “what hole in hell were hot enough for him” (1.2.94-95).<sup>147</sup> Shakespeare here is even queering time. He situates his play in a religious past where salvation was indeed to be achieved through merit (the Catholic good works), but he makes Falstaff speak in Protestant terms. What may we read in this befuddling feat of moral, religious and temporal relativism? A thief nostalgically invokes the past (i.e. the temporal present of the play) and wishes damnation no longer attainable by the sins of another thief in the present (i.e. in the temporal future of the play). May not this ideological confusion, this back to the future instance, bespeak a malaise symptomatic of the religious ethos of the times that wrote the plays? Seemingly, in his motley religion, tenets handpicked and protean, Falstaff need not worry about his own salvation when “undemonstrated faith alone can save him near the end of his hedonistic life void of good works” (Hunt, 20). Quickly pursues:

I saw him fumble with the sheets and play with  
flowers and smile upon his fingers' ends, I knew  
there was but one way; (2.3. 13-14)

Now Mistress Quickly narrates the agonal descent and her description entails moments of both agitation and tranquility for Falstaff. The image of the old man fumbling with his sheets signals a possible impatience or unrest. Agonies, as Sherwin Nuland writes in *How We Die* (1997), can often present themselves with

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<sup>147</sup> Falstaff speaks of Gadshill, a rival thief that may pre-empt his next highway robbery.

Some violent outburst of protest arising deep in the primitive unconscious, raging against the too-hasty departure of the spirit; no matter its preparation by even months of antecedent illness, the body often seems reluctant to agree to the divorce (122).

The contrasting portrait of a beatific Falstaff marveling at his own fingertips follows this moment of unrest. One senses a discontinuity in Falstaff's agony as described by Quickly, as his legendary eloquence vanishes from the bedroom at Eastcheap. Things happen one after the other without much apparent relation to one another. These signs of senility may be the byproduct of its once-removed reporting, or that Shakespeare does imagine such a fragmentation of Falstaff's mind on his deathbed. Anyone who has attended a deathbed vigil knows that agonies can be very protracted affairs, messy, and in our medical present uneventful to the point of boredom. Quickly wraps her whole tale in a mere twenty lines. It is obviously a condensation of a much longer event, a plotting for effects. I cannot but detect in the Hostess's speech a certain "editing touch" – again, that is certainly how I would encourage an actor to play the scene. Either to hide something, to spare her interlocutors, or herself, she tidies up the mess that dying manifests. At some point she says, he "babbled of green fields." As has been observed by many critics, this babbling probably alludes to a recitation by Falstaff of Psalm 23 ("The Lord is my Shepherd") a well known biblical passage that Quickly herself fails to recognize. But we do; and the scene is for us. If she next tells him to cheer up, that means that while he is reciting the psalm, he might show signs of distress. Or he is beyond prayers. Or she herself is plunged in what Michael Neill calls the "crisis of death."

HOSTESS      So a' bade me lay more clothes on his feet: I put my  
hand into the bed and felt them, and they were as  
cold as any stone; then I felt to his knees, and  
they were as cold as any stone, and so upward and  
upward, and all was as cold as any stone. (2.3. 20-23)

Mistress Quickly presents the evidence of Falstaff's death: his testes are cold as stones – the facile innuendo is too well known to dwell upon. In return, that Quickly uses such evidence is telling and funny. If his balls are of ice, then the lascivious old man is irrevocably dead. Is she not contesting Bardolph's claim?

NYM	They say he cried out of sack.	
HOSTESS	Ay, that a' did.	
BARDOLPH	And of women.	
HOSTESS	Nay, that a' did not.	(2.3. 24-27)

That last line often gets the biggest laugh while Nym and Bardolph and Quickly sob. Quickly knows something we don't. It has to do with sex and laughter. She may be flattering herself. But unlike us, she was there. Whether it is Shakespeare or Quickly who is bawdy here matters little. The death scene, in its saucy summation, is met with laughter, a laughter that totally befits the high emotion of the scene as it is "in character" that Falstaff dies. Even his "frozen balls" contribute to animate for us his former living self. The humor instructs us; it voices Falstaff for us, and tells us there is more about him we don't know and will never know. His death effects both mystery and wonderment. We laugh informed of our ignorance. Humor does that. To reach such conclusion, we might consider an earlier clue in the play: in Act I of *Henry V*, the Archbishop, admiring of the reformed Henry V who has shed the former Hal, concedes that since "miracles are ceased, ... we must needs admit the means how things are perfected" (1.2. 68-70). The dereliction of miracles is a Protestant affair, another queer play on temporality on Shakespeare's part. The king's reformation is miraculous nonetheless, a miracle that little but his former dissipation may explain; his wallowing in bawdiness may be understood as a form of schooling. And very proper schooling it may have been. As for Falstaff,

Instead of a sentimental farewell in the cold, pragmatic Lancastrian world, Shakespeare seeks instead a resolution in which tragedy and comedy, doubt and belief, clarity and confusion are bound in a manner historically appropriate, morally satisfying, and psychologically dazzling (Cubeta, 197).

Falstaff and Socrates, the former a notorious corruptor of youth, the latter a rightly or wrongly convicted one, may after all have had something in common: a philosophical approach to death. Harold Bloom calls Falstaff the “Socrates of Eastcheap.” Falstaff, R.I.P. And do come back from the dead in a theatre near us. Harold Bloom, who has championed Falstaff, suggests: “the tale of any individual life in a mellow autumn of the body too easily can become a study of nostalgias. Is it perhaps the final use of high imaginative literature to tint one’s own fading with the color of the sublime?” (2009, xvi). Professor Bloom does have a point.

Falstaff’s slow fading into death does acquire a faint tint of sublimity in Quickly’s relating. Yet the spectrality of *The Craft* never leaves the room at Eastcheap as its nine tropes, some discreetly, some in more frank fashion, all find their niche in the unfolding of his death. Falstaff’s related death was *an action*: in my reading, an attempt by Quickly to spare his devastated entourage; his death made much of *the invisible visible*, as Quickly resurrects the ribaldry of the old man now present in her speech; it was a *performance*, as we observed all that Quickly was doing to cover up what may have taken place in the room at Eastcheap; it was *a theatre of lies*, as I read Quickly embellishing what may have been a *terrorizing moment*. Falstaff has moved on to a country of his own, “Nay sure, he’s not in hell,” but in a merry old English heaven that befits only him. Quickly has discouraged his pondering on Godly things as the theatre often takes the secular view. Most importantly, at the gates of death, against the solemnity of *The Craft*, she asks him the impossible: “What, man! Be o’ good cheer” (2.3 16-17). She asks for a



change of register for this awful unfurling called death. The metaphorization, while rather faint in Quickly's often literal speech, (she seems only capable of producing similes), is nonetheless present in the scene and in two ways: the frank metaphors belong to Bardolph who will pronounce: "Well, the fuel is gone that maintained that fire" (2.3. 36). There is no more wine. And this sad lot has lost in Falstaff their ticket to the red carpet events of their old friend Hal, now king. The most potent metaphorization belongs to the playwright: his choice of a comedic register metaphorizes the lonely, devastating end of one of his greatest creations.

My first claim, I repeat, is that in relation to the somber conformism of *The Craft*, humoring death generates a sovereign form of individuation. Humor is always the product of a mind at play, a mind occupied at ludic musings. Even in works of imagination, the dying character dies as she wills and must.

Let me give another example that may further this point if in different valence. Years ago in Canada, I was in a production of *Romeo and Juliet*; I played Mercutio and every night after being killed, I stood in the wings for the final act.<sup>148</sup> During previews, the young actor playing Juliet was coming back from the bows, defeated because she was getting laughs during her death scene, obviously not a course of events she wanted.

JULIET                      What's here? A cup closed in my true love's hand?  
                                     Poison, I see, hath been his timeless end.  
                                     O churl! – drunk all, and left no friendly drop  
                                     To help me after? I will kiss his lips.  
                                     Haply some poison yet doth hang on them,  
                                     To make me die with a restorative.  
                                     [*She kisses Romeo's lips*]  
                                     Thy lips are warm.

CHIEFWATCHMAN: Lead, boy. Which way?  
 JULIET:                      Yea noise? Yet I'll be brief.

<sup>148</sup> *Romeo et Juliette*, Théâtre du Trident, Quebec City, Season 1987-88. Mercutio's death is explored later in this chapter.

[*She takes Romeo's dagger*]  
 O happy dagger,  
 This is thy sheath! There rust, let me die.  
*She stabs herself, falls [and dies]* (5.3.161-169).

Night after night in this 600-seat theatre, she tried different strategies of delivering the lines, softening here, interiorizing there, and each night, she got the same little giggle on “O churl!” then a longer laugh on “drunk all” and a sustained one on “restorative” before kissing Romeo. (The play was produced in a French version, but these lines lost none of their charge in translation as I have witnessed similar reactions in other Anglo-American productions). For this actress laughter at this moment was catastrophic; she blamed herself, and most often the audience. What is relevant here is that whatever the actor attempted, the lines defeated her. The laughter was irreducible or rather, as would become clear, Juliet’s temperament could not be curbed as written in the lines. She was after all calling her love an egotist (“O, Churl” became in our production “O, l’égotiste!” a word that has still much currency, unlike “Churl” has in English).

We discussed the problem after each performance and often concluded that maybe it had to do with time, and that what occurred as funny now may not have been so amusing in Shakespeare’s time. I am not saying this happens in each and every production; but unlike Dryden, an unexpected, or unwanted reaction from an audience may be a reflection of something other than a dramatist’s faulty writing, or an unsophisticated audience. This is no doubt the case for a lot of early modern humor: it does not always time-travel well. But for young actors intoxicated on Jan Kott’s claims that Shakespeare was our contemporary, this was hardly satisfying, it was in fact

crushing.<sup>149</sup> There somewhat remains a seduction to Kott's claim of abolished temporalities before Shakespeare's dramatic genius.

In this spirit then, someone suggested one night that maybe the laughter could “serve” the scene, or that it was integral to the scene's design, wished for by the playwright. It was a mere intuition and with the agreement of the director, we suggested that she actually aim for laughter with these lines, nurturing it, at least trying it with this in mind. The result was intriguing. By acting the necessity of humor into the situation, the performer allowed the laughter to become a sort of preparation for the “dagger bit” that in subsequent performances registered with an audible frisson of horror from the audience. It made for sensational theatre. And yet, the actor's enduring reticence – throughout the run of the play she remained, Dryden-like, irked by laughs she deemed indecorous for a death scene – is just as informative. Were we honoring the dramatist's design or, as my colleague believed, playing into the audience's immaturity? And why would a modern-day actor wish to deny humor (if it is legitimate) to a dying character she plays? Was it her issue or the character's?

Marjorie Garber observes how “Juliet knows she is an actress. The language of ‘acting’ in both senses – stage performance and activity – pervades her speeches” (2004, 208). Juliet herself concedes the theatrical nature of her task after agreeing to Friar Laurence's macabre stratagem: “My dismal scene I needs must act alone” (4.3.19). Then following Garber, I would say that the actress who played Juliet did not want laughter while the actress that Juliet is wanted little else. Stephen Greenblatt questions the insistent sting of comedy in a play he calls “saturated by paradoxes, oxymorons, [and]

<sup>149</sup> Jann Kott's *Shakespeare, Our Contemporary* (1961) was suggested reading at the Conservatoire d'Art Dramatique du Québec, where I trained as an actor.

double entendres” even in moments heightened by tragedy (1997, 866). Greenblatt contends that in her death scene

Juliet plays with the word ‘restorative’ (the kiss as medicine; poison; death; resurrection) [to expose how] wordplay functions not to deflate but to cram into brief utterances more meanings than language would ordinarily hold and to force us to confront both unresolvable contradictions and hidden connections. That is, puns work to juxtapose or hold open possibilities that normally are viewed as mutually exclusive (1997, 867).

Highlighting the arbitrariness of language, what Greenblatt addresses here is again a queering of the tragic form through the enduring practice of alloying humor and horror that sustained what Andrew Gurr has called the “English playwriting’s greatest sixty years” (2009, vii). As we have seen with Dryden, this habit of hybridity often nurtured the many objections against the theatre made by both antitheatricalists and critics supportive of the art form. I want to return briefly to Sidney’s objection. In his *Defense of Poesy* (c.1580, published 1595), Philip Sidney famously bemoans the porosity between comedy and tragedy in plays “not without cause cried out against, observing rules neither of honest civility nor skillful poetry ... again, [he says] of those I have seen” (44). Sidney, an ardent defender of the theatre, nonetheless questions “how all their plays be neither right tragedies nor right comedies, mingling kings and clowns, not because the matter so carrieth it, but thrust in the clown by head and shoulder to play a part in majestic matters” (46). Clowning at death’s majestic touch is indeed a special kind of iconoclasm, one that does not whitewash the walls of the tragic or destroys its altars, but rather superimposes one film over another, making room for both, or even discovering the latently and organically humorous in the expected solemnities of death and dying. But what is actually here the object of laughter? And what kind of laughter is it?

I do not mean to minimize the extreme nature of the situation attending the play; yet *Romeo and Juliet* conserves I would suggest a decorous integrity that does not test believability the way, say, *'Tis a Pity She's a Whore* does.<sup>150</sup> An entirely different kind of outrageousness attends the conclusion of *Romeo and Juliet*. Though the work is for countless reasons an exceptional one, its basic premise is unexceptional enough. The play's accommodating ability to lend its plot to reinvented contexts that cast Capulets and Montagues as Israeli/Palestinian, as black and white, as gay lovers, or as New York singing gang members speak to that unexceptional premise. What is more, that the tragic conclusion of the play should hinge on a technicality adds to its pathos. As Catherine Bates has observed, in this tragedy the protagonists are little more than the victims of a "messy and prodigal world ... of illiterate servants and an inefficient postal service" (189). The tragedy occurs because Friar Laurence's explanatory letter to Romeo fails to arrive on time. That is risible enough, but that is hardly why we laugh. Why did the audience laugh at my colleague's attempts at the seriousness of death? If there must be an explanation for this uncalled for laughter, I need briefly expand on its possible motives.

Philosopher John Morreal approaches laughter and humor according to three theories that in regard to theatrical practice make enormous sense: in the "first..., represented by Plato and Aristotle, we laugh from feelings of superiority over other people."<sup>151</sup> The Barry Humphries's quotation offered as the third epigram for this chapter is an apt illustration of this; it is the Hobbesian laughter. Hobbes tells us in *Human Nature* (1650) that this laugh of superiority "is nothing else but a sudden glory arising from some sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison

<sup>150</sup> John Ford. *'Tis a Pity She's a Whore*, circa 1629. In 5.4, Giovanni enters holding on a bloody dagger the heart he freshly ripped from his lover/sister's body.

<sup>151</sup> Simon Cruchley provides this summation of Morreal's view on laughter in *On Humor*, 2002, (pp. 2-3).

with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly” (46). The second according to Morreal, *the relief theory* derived in great part from Freud, advances that “the energy that is relieved and discharged in laughter provides pleasure because it allegedly economizes upon energy that would ordinarily be used to contain or repress psychic activity.” Finally, the incongruity theory asserts “humour is produced by the experience of a felt incongruity between what we know or expect to be the case, and what actually takes place in the joke, gag, jest or blague” (47).

Though I am not entirely sure why both the sight and the site of Romeo drinking poison, of Juliet turning herself into a sheath for his dagger may occasion laughter, I intuit that the laughter may be primarily informed by the second theory. Yet the dramatic situation and wordplay that attend both the young lovers’ deaths I would argue host all three models. The situation is incongruous enough: the forbidden lovers reunite for a mock resurrection in the dwelling of the dead. And the theatre, through dramatic irony, always places its audience in a position of superiority; it knows something the characters do not. Even if Romeo and Juliet cannot conceive of it, we as audience members acknowledge that within the implacable mechanic of tragedy there is no other way. The irony goes further: we recognize these individuals who die “in character,” in the “intactness” of their intense love, as their deaths crystalize its beauty, put an end to the mutable selves they inevitably would have become. They will not live fat, drag their kids to school and retire to the suburbs of Verona. Their deaths look like them, they resonate with their personalities, personalities that we may recognize as earlier (adolescent) iterations of our own. One fact remains: two adolescents commit suicide and yet both pun while they’re dying. Romeo himself observes as if he is about to drink the poison

ROMEO                      How oft, when men are at the point of death,  
                                     Have been merry, which their keepers call  
                                     A lightning before death! O how may I call  
                                     This a lightning?                      (5.3. 88-91)

How indeed may he? Is Shakespeare himself punning here? Could this *lightning* that Romeo invokes be a homonymic “lightening” of the tragic, performed by the playwright? Surprised by Juliet’s intact beauty, he wonders if “insubstantial Death is amorous and [if] the lean abhorred monster keeps [her][there] in dark to be his paramour?” (5.3.103-105). He has a fit of jealousy. Romeo of course does not know that she is faking death. The tragic scene in fact is the result of Friar Laurence’s miscalculations, of a priest’s miscalculation, or as Bates puts it, of a pathetic postal service. In what may prove the meta-oxymoron of the play, the crypt, dwelling of the dead, is set to become a site of rebirth. For all its anecdotal limitations, my production story allows me to reify my second claim: that humor does not sap the pathos but adds poignancy. The actress playing Juliet thought that laughter was unbecoming of the moment, indecorous when in fact what was needed for that specific performance was its nurturing; again, I concede that need not be case for all productions of the play. Humor did not in any way diminish the sting of death in the scene; on the contrary, it aggrandized it. Juliet’s death scene may contribute to the anatomy of this register of oddities and bring to light how/why the comedic may infiltrate itself into the fragility of these moments to again, unhinge, challenge, and recalibrate the expected solemnities attending the theatrical representation of agony.

Thus, the organic emergence, and in some instances the subtle latency of the comedic, in death speeches examined so far must also be understood primarily as an aesthetic phenomenon. “Elsewhere in the histories and the tragedies, death is almost

never presented solely in the religious context which the culture of Shakespeare's age normally supplied for it. ... In short, death in Shakespeare's plays is primarily secular" (Grady, 194). That is not to say that we do not gain insight when we historicize these deaths as they possibly mirror, or at least hint at, a new set of eschatological anxieties born of the long Reformation. A century of theological quarrels ceaselessly erased, reshaped and manipulated many anterior projections of the afterlife. But the near century of schismatic disputes that nurtured a reformation of the afterlife beliefs in England alone could not alter the most ineluctable of facts: that whether you go to heaven or to hell, whether you linger in purgatory for a time of penance or not, whether the soul/body dichotomy proves sound or not: we all die. For most, hardly a laughing matter and still, in so many of this canon of plays, we may find ourselves at a solemn moment giggling like children at Mass.

Ironically enough, this out-of-place laughter professional actors have always had a name for, and when it visits them while performing, they call it *corpsing*. An actor corpses if he/she is unable to maintain the verisimilitude, the seriousness of the situation required by any given scene. It ruins the theatrical illusion but paradoxically invariably amuses the audience, as if it was somewhat grateful to be reminded that the terrible proceedings (if a tragedy) are but make believe. Though *corpsing* is an all-together different affair, its hybridity is somehow germane to the dark humor that playwrights build in their death scenes; in both cases, the disruptive agency of laughter in emotionally heightened moments may enhance its theatrical efficaciousness. Often when *corpsing* occurs, the mitigated laughter it produces, tainted by a vague erring feeling, makes its contagion even more uncontrollable. For a moment, both the intelligence and the



emotiveness of the audience are animated. I aim to disprove Henri Bergson's claim that "emotion is the grand enemy of laughter" (35)[my translation].<sup>152</sup> As the dramatists strategically construct death scenes with what I may best describe as an audience-bound "built-in corpsing," they seem to target both the intelligence and the emotions of those gathered to witness the play. They metatheatricalize, by bringing attention to their craft of illusion as a craft, being magicians unafraid to give up the trick, a welcome instability of realities; in other words, in these scenes where the playwrights let their character comment, appreciate, verbally adorn their agonies, they queer death. Bergson's dyad of foes presents, if anything, an unconvincing and inert stasis. The nexus laughter/death, a road much travelled in this theatre of agony, favors a *mise en scène* of the instable, a courting of ambiguities with which I would like to bring this chapter to a close. And I would choose to close with expounding on my initial queering statement: the dramatists are not injecting comedy but excavating the drollery that may legitimately attend the experience of dying; they recognize the inherent comic nature of existence (its absurdity, Watson might say) and thus go for the kill: rather than comic relief, they nurture "comic wounding."

Returning to our taste for citing the humorous musings of the dying (those of Wilde, of Raleigh) I've said that, when push comes to shove, we thirst for heroes facing death *in character* undiminished by the sting of illness, not paralyzed by the fear of annihilation. We wish our favorite authors to be still writing, our beloved leaders to be still shaping the politics of the nation, our Nureyevs to be still dancing on the brink of obsolescence and erasure. As I discussed in earlier chapters, all too often the cast of

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<sup>152</sup> The idea is obviously not Bergson's alone; see the chapter devoted to Marlowe in Erich Segal's *Death of Comedy* (2003).

moriens of the early modern English dramatic canon – unlike the good Christians of *The Craft* who have to combat the devils of an invisible theatre - view their agonies as a combat (an agon) inevitably leading to the queerest of failures. They have to lose since the plays ordain that they do. They die and will later come to jig to the approving music of applause. But the before is not filled with the after. First they must be shamed into death.

So many death scenes of this canon of plays deploy their tale in this fashion: death as a shaming and shameful failure. Mercutio's death scene, which I save for last, partakes of this shame in very unique ways, ways that resonate with the shame of death as Thomas Browne conceives of it. Yet Mercutio is not about to be disfigured “gently into that good night; his humiliation must accomplish and serve a grander design. But before getting into the movements of the scene itself, I must make one further comment on the complex issue of shame.

In *Humiliation* (2011), Wayne Koestenbaum makes this insightful comment that I would like to juxtapose to Mercutio's death scene: “humiliation has its rewards. Among them: the privilege of being seen as exemplary. The pleasure of being a spectacle. The perk of visibility, of becoming legible” (Fugue #1. 27). I think this critic's comment adds great profundity to a discussion of the praxis of dying, and obliquely it informs its theatrical representation in the comedic register. Koestenbaum suggests that there may be pleasure in being shamed and spectacularized. Mercutio might actually give credence to this view. Later in this work, Koestenbaum cites Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick on the issue of shame:

Shame is both peculiarly contagious and peculiarly individuating. One of the strangest features of shame, but perhaps one that offers the most conceptual

leverage for political projects, is the way bad treatment of someone else, bad treatment by someone else, someone else's embarrassment, stigma, debility, bad smell or strange behavior, seemingly having nothing to do with me, can so readily flood me – assuming I'm a shame-prone person" (Fugue #10. 12).

Resorting to this no less insightful comment from his late colleague, Koestenbaum conveys the idea that shame is in fact contagious, that it splashes all those witnessing it. As they will be useful in a moment, let us have in mind Mercutio's very last words: "Your Houses!" (3.1. 103). If death, as Thomas Browne sees it, is indeed a cause for shame, then we all shall be sooner or later subjected to its shaming effect; it will visit our houses. From Aristophanes to Chaplin, such occasions of shame have shown how they could become the life force of comedy. Comedy is in part a forceful method of sublimating such shame, but a sublimation that instead of erasing, intensifies its horror through pacifying illusions.

That the late Elizabethans and Jacobean laughed at some of the things we do today is a given; that what we today find amusing would amuse them is less than certain. Then as now, one's object of amusement is another's cause for outrage. And the comfort of genres ("it's a tragedy, tears are in order") won't necessarily help. I personally find *King Lear* more humorous than *As You Like It*; I could probably say the same about the multiple productions of these two plays I have seen. I saw Mark Rylance milking more laughs from "the death of Kings" speech in *Richard II* than W.C. Fields possibly could, and Rylance's take was hardly out-of-place; yet it certainly was unorthodox.

In the fictions of the theatre, the playwright's decision to show death, or rather to dramatize its progress, fosters the necessity of representing final moments in performances-to-be that are powerful, at times expectedly chilling and in turn, to avoid

alienating audiences, at times chillingly amusing.<sup>153</sup> But perhaps in Koestenbaum's scheme, these shameful deaths shame us too. That is one of the potencies of these wounded and wounding texts.

Couched in the comedic register, playwrights may appear to dull the sting of death for those witnessing them or bolster the resolution of their dying characters. But more importantly, their action – their aesthetic choice for their dramatizations - may make a greater tribute to the real than is suspected. Away from the boards, in the realm of the real, the domestic early modern death, the final words of *The Craft*, had enormous weight since they carried the sign that the moriens had indeed overcome the five temptations discussed in chapter one. And, according to Richard Winderli and Gerard Broce, there existed

a popular attitude toward death in early modern England that seemingly was shared by Protestant and Catholic alike and which ran counter to any Christian theology of death: that the state of mind of a dying person at the final moment before death *determined* one's salvation or damnation. As a popular attitude in a religiously tormented age, belief in the 'final moment' was optimistic and offered salvation to everyone. It was also an attitude of *radical individualism* because an individual could control, by mental concentration, his own death and salvation (259, emphases mine).<sup>154</sup>

The evidence these two scholars use to marshal their thesis gives much to ponder. In early modern England, the reporting of "radically individual" deaths they argue existed proves scarce. No wonder, as the last moments of life had been prescribed, scripted since the Council of Constance (1414-18) and trapped in the amber of the *Ars Moriendi* manuals, most would comply with the orthodoxy of form and ritual. Of their own admission, Winderli and Broce concede that "unfortunately, descriptions of real people

<sup>153</sup> For an enlightening discussion of the ambiguity attending the word 'dying', see Fred Feldman's *On Dying as a Process* in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. 1, no. 2, December 1989.

<sup>154</sup> *The Final Moment before death in Early Modern in England* *Sixteenth Century Journal*, XX, No. 2, 1989.

dying real deaths are rare, certainly when compared with literature telling people how they ought to die” (268). Even the singularly moving and arresting descriptions of the “verbatim” dying of martyrs in Foxe’s *Actes and Monuments* seem designed to elicit the desire for the *good death*. They have been manipulated for Foxe’s Protestant agenda.

Unsurprisingly, to convince with expressions like “popular attitude” and “radical individualism,” Winderli and Broce must resort to the fictions of the theatrical canon, as must we; they even open their essay with Claudius’ prayer in Act III of *Hamlet*. In matters of death and dying the theatre did indeed provide momentous heterodoxies that nonetheless could warrant exemplarity. Mercutio’s spectacular death scene in *Romeo and Juliet* is a case in point.

As far as death scenes are concerned, few moments of theatre in the Shakespearian early canon display the poignancy of death, of dying in fact, its devastating power to fracture reality and communities in a matter of seconds, better than Mercutio’s death scene. It also illustrates the intactness of spirit that I have argued humor makes evident. If the first scene of act III does not close with Mercutio’s final words, the play nonetheless changes, brings what Frank Kermode calls “[its] sense of an ending.” Yeats’ *Golden Bird* has just sung; it has announced, “what is past, passing and to come” (Kermode, 3). But unlike Yeats, the dying is not that of an old man, and its knell has an engrossing levity to it; we laugh, but it is a qualified laughter. Let me address the many factors, some obvious, some more oblique, that support my take on a scene that actually teaches something about the craft of dying.

First the dramaturgical force of the character himself: despite the relative brevity of the part – a mere 62 interventions – Mercutio’s personality looms large upon the

narrative. His disappearance five minutes into Act III, and the unpredictable, volatile skirmish that brings it about, hits its audience with surprise and surprising strength. The play from then on entirely changes register and pace. Were it music – and of course it is one of sort – one could say that the allegro movement is over. Now enter the largos, the andantes, as the piccolo is put away for the remainder of the play. The role, mercurial in so many ways, is challenging not only for the oscillation between the lewd and the lyrical found in his speeches, but because of the intensely layered adolescent contradictions that attend his presence on the page/stage; here appears a superb distillation of adolescence, bouts of adulthood tempered by the lingering of infancy, the difficulty to concentrate on one thing at once, one may say, the most poetic rendition of Attention-Deficit-Hyperactivity-Disorder. In comparison, the title roles are much simpler performing propositions. While Romeo and Juliet have a predicament, Mercutio is his own: he must crudely entertain while his rich sensibility must poetize. But his death, his death makes us smile like the skulls we will one day be.

I think it is important to underline what *Romeo and Juliet* exposes in matters of representation of death and what the presence of humor thriving upon those sad proceedings reveals about deep-seated anxieties: first, evidently, the unnaturalness of dying for so many of its young protagonists; by the end of the play, Tudor-like, both Verona families have broken their dynastic line of succession. The cruel irony being that these soon-to-be childless parents have heirs and only their own prejudices embroil them in an inevitable, plausible and irreversible bloodbath brought upon by a specific *hamartia*, one so endemic to Shakespeare's period: petty intolerance between equals living under the same laws. The prologue is clear enough on that issue: "Two households

both alike in dignity ... from ancient grudge break to new mutiny, where civil blood makes civil hands unclean” (1.1. 1-4).

Second, it is important to notice how much ribaldry, how much punning attends the many mentions of death and dying before Mercutio’s death. Though little prepares for it, Mercutio’s final scene is skillfully engineered. The young playwright experiments with plot. As if a rehearsal of sorts, Shakespeare has Mercutio die at virtually the same moment in the play as one of his later creations (another effective and shocking death scene): that of Julius Caesar in his eponymous play. Exposing how much he trusts his art (and his art form), i.e. his craft, the author impresses upon us how much these scenes count. He monumentalizes the death of his creations; they are showpieces. This brief exchange from *Julius Caesar* exposes the playwright’s ambition loud and clear. While Caesar lies dead and bloody on the marble of the Capitol, Cassius tells his co-conspirators:

CASSIUS	Stoop, then, and wash. [ <i>They smear their hands with Caesar’s blood</i> ] How many ages thence, Shall this our lofty scene be acted over, In states yet unborn and accents yet unknown!
BRUTUS	How many times shall Caesar bleed in sport, That now on Pompey’s basis lies, No worthier than dust! <span style="float: right;">(3.1, 112-117)</span>

It is one of the great ironies of the theatre, the art of the ephemera, that characters, literal word assemblages, become through performances imagined by the reader or experienced in the theatre, flesh and blood individuals that acquire longer lives than any of ours. If they receive a life, these creations are also given a past. It is because Mercutio becomes in his brief *stage life* enough of a sympathetic figure that his death registers so

funny/horribly. If the stage is life's abbreviation, then Mercutio makes much of his rather short time in the sun. And so before attending to his death, a brief review of his *life*, and the spectrality of death in it, is in order; call it a stage obituary, if you will.

In his first appearance, a dressed-up Mercutio is on his way to the Capulet's ball where he was invited and that his friends Romeo and Benvolio intend to crash; he attempts to shake Romeo's melancholy over with a series of punning jokes of a sexual nature:

ROMEO MERCUTIO	Love is too rough ... [Love] pricks like a thorn. If love be rough with you, be rough with love. Prick love for pricking, and you beat love down. Give me a case to put my visage in, A visor for a visor. What care I What curious eye doth quote deformity? ... Come, we burn daylight, ho! ... We waste our lights in vain, like lights by day.
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(1.4. 25-42)

The obvious sexual references, and the habit of laughter they instill in the audience in their experience of Mercutio, cannot obfuscate the most important aspect of this exchange, its poignancy: life is short, Mercutio seems to say, let us not waste time with all the Rosalines of this world unwilling to reciprocate our sexual favors. Our feelings are too hard to bear? Let us mask their deformity! An element of stoic resoluteness attends Mercutio's discourse. I suggest that Mercutio introduces here the double reality of the play, the faking motif, its reliance on an oxymoronic sensibility where what is felt is spoken obliquely, in contrarian figures, where the tragic itself borrows from its shadowy doppelganger: the comedic genre. A visor for a visor, a mask for a mask, a genre for a genre. In this first scene, as in most of his appearances, Mercutio stands as the eternal ironist, proto-Noel Coward, the one who resists, no, refutes all emotional entanglements



in a play incessantly built upon them – at least his allure tells us so, visor for a visor that he is; the fool to his own king.

To placate Romeo's unshakable self-pity over Rosaline, a character promised to attend the ball, Mercutio launches into his famed Queen Mab soliloquy, a showy divertimento that seemingly bears little on the action of the play, if only to expose the creative bawdiness of its speaker. But the speech in fact accomplishes far more than an impromptu; it atomizes desire, turning it into a contaminating agent; virus-like, desire (and its shame when rebutted) becomes a plague that travels from the benign fantastical to the depths of a macabre realm and foreshadows the entire movement of the play. Queen Mab does not, Puck-like, cast a spell over the sleeping; she awakens in the sleep of those she visits a desire that was already always there:

...She gallops night by night  
through lover's brains and then they dream of love  
On courtiers' knees, that dream on curtsies straight  
...oft the angry Mab with blisters plagues  
...  
Sometime she drive'th over a soldier's neck,  
And then dreams he of cutting foreign throats (1.5. 68-82).

All in good fun and mischief, the fairy brings dreams of sexual gratification to those she visits but soon those turn to nightmares of blood and war. "This is that very Mab ... much misfortune bodes" (1.5. 88-91). The three friends then partake in the Capulets' festivities where Romeo meets Juliet. After the ball, Benvolio and Mercutio look for Romeo, already en route to a certain famous balcony. Mercutio soliloquizes yet again, but this time the obscene tenor of his discourse seems out of balance, exacerbated by either drink or heartache and heralds the darkness to come. As he calls him in vain:

MERCUTIO

He heareth not, he stirreth not, he moveth not.  
The ape is dead, and I must conjure him. (2.1.15-16)

For all the amusement it procures, the first scene of Act II shows that some of Mercutio's veneer has somehow dulled; there is a crack in that beautiful vessel of words. We meet him the morning after, enquiring about the comings and goings of Romeo, who has just been defied by Tybald. Benvolio assures Mercutio that their friend will in time respond to the challenge; this prompts Mercutio to say:

MERCUTIO                    Alas, he is already dead – stabbed with a white wench's  
black eye, run through the ear with a love song. ...and he is  
a man to encounter Tybald? (2.1.11-12)

Though death is, here again, pure contemplation in jest, something to make light of between young friends, to even tempt if one can, a shard of ice has tampered with Verona's sunniness. Tybald is subsequently described as a studious duelist who plays by the rules of a fencing etiquette that (of course) he will fail to respect later. Mercutio describes his clan's foe as a man "who fights as you sing pricksong; keeps time, distance, and proportion; he rests his minim rests" (2.1.20-21). And thus the fight to be between Tybald and Mercutio has expertly been anticipated. Follows the real "Mercutio Show" where to the delight of his friends and the audience, he mocks Romeo coming back "without his roe, like a dried herring."

MERCUTIO                    O flesh, flesh, how art thou fishified! Now he is for  
the numbers that Petrarch flowed in. Laura to his  
lady was a kitchen wench, ...Dido a dowdy,  
Cleopatra a gypsy, Helen and Hero hildings and  
harlots, Thisbe, a grey eye or so, but to no purpose.  
(2.3. 33-38)

The playwright is at work planting clues, foreshadowing but again all in pleasure and laughter. Yet through his deriding of Romeo's post-coitus indolence, by raising the specters of Petrarch's Laura (who died young) and those of Dido, Thisbe and Cleopatra

(all suicides), by mentioning Helen, a woman deemed responsible for the calamitous Trojan War, Mercutio displays a trait of his personality that may alienate some attending the play: a misogynistic streak. Though innocent in appearance, the dramaturgical web awaits its prized prey. Another scabrous episode ensues where Mercutio insults the Nurse before he leaves the stage with his crowd of admirers.

At the beginning of Act III, Mercutio accompanied by Benvolio walks through what is described in the stage direction as *a public place*; there lurks a smell, an intuition of death from the very start of the scene when Benvolio speaks:

I pray thee, good Mercutio, let's retire:  
The day is hot, the Capulets abroad,  
And, if we meet, we shall not scape a brawl;  
For now, these hot days, is the mad blood stirring.  
(3.1. 1-4)

Mercutio dismisses his friend's warning, but subtly plants in the audience's conscience - I assume they have not seen the play yet- through an elegant chiasmus the imminence of inversions, the life/death, fun/pain about to unfold:

MERCUTIO            Come, come, thou art as hot a Jack in thy mood as  
any in Italy, and as soon moved to be moody, and as  
soon moody to be moved.            (3.1. 11-13)

Their rival faction eventually joins the scene led by Tybalt quick to insult Mercutio; he questions his masculinity and intimates his *unnatural* love for Romeo. The banter becomes innuendos, the innuendos overt insults that soon escalate; a skirmish ensues, first playful, then flirting with danger, leading to a mortal wound to Mercutio. Interrupted by brief questions on his state, here is Mercutio's death aria:

I am hurt.  
A plague o' both your houses! I am sped.  
Is he gone, and hath nothing?  
...  
Ay, ay, a scratch, a scratch; marry, 'tis enough.

Where is my page? Go, villain, fetch a surgeon.

...

No, 'tis not so deep as a well, nor so wide as a church-door; but 'tis enough, 'twill serve: ask for me to-morrow, and you shall find me a grave man. I am peppered, I warrant, for this world. A plague o' both your houses! 'Zounds, a dog, a rat, a mouse, a cat, to scratch a man to death! a braggart, a rogue, a villain, that fights by the book of arithmetic! Why the devil came you between us? I was hurt under your arm.

...

Help me into some house, Benvolio,  
Or I shall faint. A plague o' both your houses!  
They have made worms' meat of me: I have it,  
And soundly too: your houses! (3.1. 92-104)

This is a messy speech because death, the playwright reminds us, is a messy affair, particularly in the scenario of the *mors improvisa*. The speech makes enormous demands on its performer, death is laboring here; its lines are short, disjointed, akin to broken limbs, as if the character while speaking is looking for breath – as in fact the performer invariably is: he has just fought a fencing match that is virtually always a high point of any production of the play. The aria showcases affective contradictions, an ostinato motif of death's speeches: there is a constant imbalance, a queering of feelings, the need to curse those left to live, the need to love, a good measure of self-pity counterweighed by a good measure of self-deprecation. Theologically, in the modalities of *The Craft*, his death is a failure...faithless, despairing, angry, vainglorious, Mercutio curses the material world, that against his will, against his youth banishes him. He swears. We recognize the menagerie that Lear conjures at death's door. We hear Iago's mockery of Cassio's military knowledge. If he measures his wound with the template of church doors, perhaps it is to indicate how many of these houses of factions, these churches are responsible for such woundings. His swan song exposes what I can best describe as the clown's ethical

duties; and Mercutio gives a two-fold acting lesson, one that resonates across the centuries and is still taught in most rehearsal halls today: one, stay in character; two, the show must go on.

In *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* (1967), his riff on *Hamlet*, Tom Stoppard has Guildenstern question the player about death:

GUILDENSTERN You! What do you know about death?  
 PLAYER: It's what actors do best. They have to exploit whatever talent is given to them, and their talent is dying. They can die heroically, comically, ironically, slowly, suddenly, disgustingly, charmingly, or from a great height.  
 GUILDENSTERN Actors... That isn't death! (*More quietly*) You scream and choke and sink to your knees, but it doesn't bring death home to anyone – it doesn't catch them unawares and start the whisper in their skulls that says – “One day you are going to die”. (*He straightens up*) You die so many times; how can you expect them to believe in your death?  
 PLAYER On the contrary, it's the only kind they do believe. Audiences know what to expect, and that is all that they are prepared to believe in. (*To the Spies [the band of actors]*) Show!  
*The Spies die at some length, rather well.* (p.77).

Stoppard's player speaks more convincingly than Guildenstern, and of course we know that poor Guildenstern's days are numbered; so does the player as he has read the play in Stoppard post-modern rendering. The theatrical death is the only we are prepared to believe, so contends the player; maybe because we seem reluctant to prepare for our own end. Or because there is no school teaching us how to it is meant to be done. Mercutio, who dies every night, may know something of this believable death. His swan song, a series of sudden emotive storms, illustrates his belles-lettrist propensity: in death, he speaks in parables. He says “I have it, and soundly too;” just before splashing his shame around, casting their houses in shame, he has “it.” This “it” is steeped in ambiguity, “it”

is obscure, queer to no end, but “it” is what Mercutio teaches. Like Wilde, like Raleigh, Mercutio has “it”; he gets “it.” And this “it,” he has revealed: ‘tis not so deep, ‘tis not so wide, ‘tis enough, ‘twill serve. Perhaps he is not speaking of his wound, after all. He loves to mess with us.

Does he, at the threshold of annihilation, understand some grand cosmic scheme? Or is he aware of some grand cosmic farce? Or does he perceive the absence of any cosmic order and sees life for its absurd arbitrariness? His laughter (the one he may elicit, the one he lets out) has been described as “sound of signification at the limits of signification” (Stott, 143). “It” is perhaps knowledge, some realization about death, ineffable, or that no one has been able to reveal, as the dead do not come back. Like Lear, Mercutio sees something we don’t: “it.” This is the extent of his revelation. One may only get “it” as one dies. Like some who say that youth is lost on the young, death perhaps one gets, only when one dies. Death is easy, comedy is hard. We might want to learn the hard way and might as well laugh. It may prove a wiser way to become dying-voice literate.

## EPILOGUE:

*Every Time We Say, Goodbye...*

- KANE                      Rosebud...  
    Last words of Charles Foster Kane in Orson Welles' film *Citizen Kane*,  
    1941.
- REINE MARGUERITE    You will die in an hour and a half, at the end of the show.  
    *Le Roi se Meurt* (1962), a play by Eugène Ionesco, [my translation].
- LUTHER                    In the teeth of life we seem to die, but God says no – in the teeth of death we  
    live. If He butchers us, He makes us live.  
    *Luther*, a play by John Osborne (1961)
- PRIOR                     I'm almost done. ... This disease will be the end of many of us, but not  
    nearly all, and the dead will be commemorated and will struggle on with the  
    living, and we are not going away. We won't die secret deaths anymore.  
    ... Bye now. You are fabulous creatures, each and every one.  
    And I bless you: *More Life*. The Great Work Begins.  
    *END OF PLAY*  
    *Angels in America, Part II, Perestroika*, a play by Tony Kushner  
    (1993).

The composer and lyricist Cole Porter whose famous song provides the title for this envoi knew all too well how to give death a little lilt: his song nonetheless makes an argument that resonates with the one I have pursued all along: the representation of agony schools its audience into self-reflection, and as they say goodbye to a character they have grown to know in a “two-hour traffic,” something in them may die a little.<sup>155</sup> In Porter's song, saying goodbye becomes a foretaste of the irreversible end, an apprenticeship of the inevitable. I have posited a similar form of schooling through theatergoing, when watching, hearing someone die on stage inevitably raises the specter of one's own death. We have come to the theatre to be entertained for sure; to be invigorated perhaps, and perhaps, some of our worldviews, our conceptions, or even our unmet expectations

<sup>155</sup> The song composed in 1944 for a review called *Seven Lively Arts*, was used in Derek Jarman's film version of Marlowe's *Edward II* (1991); Annie Lennox sang it as *Gaveston* and the King had to part.

die... a little. I have acknowledged at the outset of my project the inherent immateriality attending this process and the vexing immeasurability of its affective impact. Still audiences pack the theatre; they come to hear stories they often already know: they see Lear, the king who had it all and who, through hubris, the malevolence of those around him, and a gratuitously conspiring cosmos, loses all. They witness the shepherd who from improbable beginnings, builds an empire, and schooled in cruelty ultimately over-reaches to better fall: as Tamburlaine dies, something in me crumbles...a little, “for [even] Tamburlaine, the scourge of God, must die” (II.5.3.248). They come time after time to enjoy Bottom’s death of his dreams of acting success.

Sometimes music attends the representation of agony and guides an audience’s heart as to what it should feel. I have already posited the operatic death aria as the brainchild of these artifacts, these plays that I suggest may help us become *dying-voice literate*. Many of these plays became in fact operas. It is strange that they should sing, as they die, these Opera people. But the moment of death, as devised, rehearsed, performed on the early modern English stage pointed them to it; death in this canon rarely wants for an instantaneous rupture between life and what it is not; instead, it wills an un-abrupt transition akin to a cinematic slow motion as the soliloquy, and specifically the soliloquy in performance, often aims at slowing things down. It seems that Shakespeare and his contemporaries, and then the Opera masters after them, had intuitively weighed what Elisabeth Kubler-Ross would much later call *death as the final stage of growth*, i.e. death as a synchronic part of the progress of life. In other words, if indeed it takes an entire life to die, then the playwrights seem keen to expose this progress-towards-death, planting here and there in the stage life of their characters the seedlings of the good theatrical



death, one that accomplishes permutations within the play's cosmology, within the plot, when death makes things happen. I have strived in this study to show the life of characters imbued with their deaths at the end of the play, or with their ends within the plays.

Curiously we have observed that many death scenes of this canon host secular concerns, which may surprise for a period so steeped in religious conflicts and fractious quarrels over elements of doctrine; that of course should not cast religion as a lesser agent upon the unraveling of death in these plays. On the contrary, with plenty of Christological allusions, even in their irreligious savagery – few going gently into that good night - these swan songs employ themselves to prophesize and curse, to rectify or revision, to blame or praise, in short, these death speeches have agency upon those left to live, and those yet to hear in the vast theatrical future; that is their religion. Epitaphic or homiletic, summarizing life or conferring unto it a fashioning significance, the discourse of agony of this theatre has a willingness to linger among the living and inform future generations. They give, I have suggested, a little lesson to the living; unto death, they keep the door ajar, albeit briefly, and make us the audience a little more *dying-voice literate* as they wound our sensibility and force us to imagine what it will be like when our turn comes to “fall off the twig.” But playing these roles also wound the actor who defends the part; I should know.

In the last thirty years, I have died hundreds of times. I have been poisoned on stage in an Agatha Christie play (*And then there were none*, 1943). I have fallen under Tybald's blade while playing Mercutio in *Romeo and Juliet*; I have died robbed of my crown in Ionesco's *Exit the King*; I died confronting my failure as a painter playing

Vincent Van Gogh in *Vincent's ear* (2008, 2015), and in Shakespeare's *Winter's Tale*, I even died *pursued by a bear* (yes, on stage). Recently at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, in *None but the Lonely Heart* (2014), I died as Tchaikovsky while the strings were making sure that my death should accomplish "something." Though playing dead is obviously not facing death, my duty as an actor was often to die convincingly, or at least imagine what doing so might entail, and most importantly how to do justice to the glorious swan songs given to a dying man by the playwrights, and specifically those of the early modern period, who were so prodigal with such scenes. Yet, what does *dying convincingly* mean, and to whom? Who shall be the arbiter of this? Actors are left with the same tools as the authors of *The Craft*: their blunt imagination, applied to the verbal mysteries invented for their death fakery. The discourse of death would be much poorer without this resorting to imagination.

True enough, conventions of make-believe denature, they reduce or aggrandize; they can make the atrocious, beautiful. Terry Eagleton posits that problem with acuity in *Sweet Violence* (2003):

It is not clear just how [the theatrical representation of agony] is to be distinguished from a high-flown sadism. Yet what if tragedy can fulfill its role of lending a glamorous aura to suffering only at the price of a palpable lack of truth-to-life, which then undercuts its ideological impact? (28)

But, we may ask, when did death not invite fictions? Do not the scenarios laid out in the *ars moriendi* manuals themselves rely, for the sake of their ideology, on the fictional too? An atheist would think so. And must not at least some of these protocols be acknowledged as "fiction for effect," if we take the word of the people of faith who wrote them? The eschatological debates between Catholics and Protestants (to use the simplest of binaries in very complex sectarian discourses), debates amongst people of faith, must

incessantly dismiss as fictions their opponents' tenets to forcefully state the irrevocability of their own. When I wrote in earlier chapters that the theatre "taught" people how to die, I was not being literal (as my self-denouncing quotation marks must attest) but argumentative. I was making a declaration of faith in the inherent didactic nature of representation. But I am aiming here at something much simpler: the theatre can show how one may have to die (no quotations marks required). As Eagleton observes: "if tragedy ennobles suffering, then it edifies [or teaches] only at the cost of the truth, since most real-life suffering is not in fact ennobling" (29). I have faith the fictions of the theatre will only assert their didactic potential through their rhetorical ability at capturing "human achievements," at convincing that what's staged supersedes the real, through what Coleridge has called "poetic faith." Desdemona never fails at teaching me. But as the scenes that depict the deaths of individuals borrow for their expression the diction of religious faith in more than an accessory fashion, we are faced with the paradox of the poetic good death manipulating issues of religious faith for its own efficaciousness.

In *Faith in Shakespeare* (2013), Richard C. McCoy distinguishes "poetic" from "religious" faith, by establishing that religious faith (in the words of philosopher Anthony Kenny) "must be held with the same degree of certainty as knowledge", while "faith in Shakespeare does not demand irrevocable conviction but presents instead a far more limited, more congenial, and safer alternative" (4-5). McCoy freshens Kenny's view with a personal credo that, it is safe to say, would rally most actors, theatergoers, and playwrights; he writes: "I believe ... that poetic faith demands serious intellectual engagement and active goodwill" (5). So do I. But my goodwill had an agenda in these pages: I meant to reiterate that the expressions *the art of dying* and *the swan song* may in

fact be more than soothing metaphors to alleviate the anxiety inherent to our finite existence, that a secular art of dying for our times may appropriate for our ends artful practices to find meaning, beyond comfort, and take a legitimate role in palliative medical approaches that currently ill-exist. This is where *dying-voice literacy* becomes more than a convenient catchphrase.

Asked by many people what it is I have hoped to accomplish with such a study, I often hesitate. Studying death, or rather its representation gives little advantage on the issue, and even the perspective of acquiring a doctoral degree for this endeavor only seems to aggrandize the window of my ignorance: I know a lot more about how little I know. One thing is clear: I was never looking for a cradling of death anxiety, nor was I searching for comforting certainties or niceties. Like the Gentleman-Doctor seems to intuit in *King Lear*, I searched for what was right in front of me all along: the belief that art may prove a well-chosen accomplice in our progress toward death. I believe that poetry, like cardiac surgery, does accomplish miracles through its delicate manipulation of the human heart. I nurture a queer intuition that poetry might very well be the way to go, literally.

In *The Unnamable* (1955), a swan song novel, Samuel Beckett hints that his unnamed/unnamable protagonist may be nothing more than the construct of the language he speaks: as long as he speaks, he lives. As long as we speak about death, as long as we represent it, we construct ourselves into it and conceive of death unto us, as a part of us we must own. On the scaffold, what was separating Raleigh from the blade, were merely words; he spoke at length. "... It will be the silence, where I am, I don't know, I'll never

know, in the silence you don't know, you must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on" (*The Unnamable*, 414). And so, having said so, now, only now perhaps, the great work begins.

## ANNEX I

*A Brief History of a Poetic Trope.*<sup>156</sup>

That swans should sing melancholy arias at the threshold of death has disquieted western thinkers ever since such tales began to appear in Ancient Greece; extant texts make clear that both Greek and Roman men of science went to great lengths to disprove the existence of *swan songs*.<sup>157</sup> More than baffling, the metaphor was insulting to the ancients: how in the first place would swans know they are dying? Is not what separates man from beast the faculty of reason that gives man alone his knowledge of his finitude? W. B. Yeats reminds us of this ancient belief in his poem *Death*: “Nor dread, nor hope attend a dying animal; ... Man invented death.”

Swan song fables, so thought the ancients, erred by clinging to a misguided anthropomorphism to generate mere consolatory and spurious metaphors. For, even if swans should intuit their end, why would their last breaths be couched in sublime laments? Why should they, when death all too often unravels in horrific fashion? Why should redoubtable death ally itself to an estheticism of lyrical poignancy? The metaphysics of Plato already prescribed a world made of appearances and transience; to add yet another fable seemed intolerable to these thinkers. Yet their protestations did not preclude this uncanny alliance of death with beauty, of beast with man to become an enduring currency of death discourses. Swan songs remain a transhistorical apothetic

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<sup>156</sup> This brief overview of the swan song trope proved too lengthy for footnoting.

<sup>157</sup> In a 1971 essay, Geoffrey Arnott makes a comprehensive compilation of denunciations of the Swan Song myth by classical authors; he cites among others Alexander of Myndos in his *Athenaeus* and Pliny the Elder from his *History of Animals*. Twenty-five centuries later, the Victorians were still debating of the myth's foundation in biology.

trope in the parlance of most cultures. As we have seen, the trope proves a governing motif in many of the death scenes of the early modern English theatre, and prefigured what would become the operatic death aria. In some of the death scenes encountered in this study, the abject, the repellent, insistently, bizarrely, effectively, court sublimity, as both must exist symbiotically to foster the eloquent stasis, the suspended liminal that attends the theatrical representation of agony – that suspension being granted by the soliloquy of death. In other words, in this theatre the swan must and will sing.

If all living creatures must die, some death metaphors will simply not. In extant ancient Western literature, Aeschylus is often thought to have initially used the swan song tale in *Agamemnon* (458 BCE); as blood-spattered Clytemnestra returns from murdering her husband, she says about dead Cassandra, the prophetess and war trophy, “there she lies, like a dead swan after its last song.”<sup>158</sup> However an earlier iteration of the tale – if in a slighter different register - is to be found in Aesop (c. 620-564 BCE) as deployed in the brief fable of *The Goose and the Swan*:

A certain rich man bought in the market a goose and a swan. He fed the one for his table and kept the other for the sake of his song. When the time came for killing the goose, the cook went to get him at night, when it was dark, and he was not able to distinguish one bird from the other. By mistake he caught the swan instead of the goose. The swan threatened by death, burst into song and thus made himself known by his voice, and preserved his life by his melody (133).

Though the story heralds the *Tales of a Thousand and One Nights* (the swan imitates Scheherazade, who tells a tale night after night to postpone her execution), it nonetheless captures the essential elements of the swan’s song myth: upon the threat of death, the bird “burst[s]” into “melody,” churns beauty out of the detestable, in short makes of life’s last things an occasion for sublimity. A swan song invariably claims

<sup>158</sup> *The Oresteia*, translated by Ted Hughes. 1999.

exceptionality, as it cannot be repeated. In this story however, the swan, “caught by mistake” – committed by the cook or induced by the night - sings to escape the impending horror of the kitchen’s pots and knives and ultimately does. A sense of mistake, of inequity, of “not now, not yet” attends the tale, like it often does in so many of the death scenes we have encountered so far.

The preoccupation with the representation of death on the Early Modern English stage – as we have seen, *obsessive* or *morbid* some critics will relentlessly write, *heroic* I prefer to call it - has many inspirations and antecedents. But the swan trope endures. Many creative dramatists achieved fame because of their insubordinate approach to the conventions of playwriting and Aristotle, by effect more than intent, has much to answer in thwarting for more than two millennia the imagination of obedient playwrights who kowtowed to his rules (that were as we have seen not expressly his rules). Shakespeare, Marlowe, to name but two such creators, did create a theatre that spits its rebellious wit, offering moments of humanity both electric and fragile in performance, a theatre that when only seen on the page, may even seem unlikely to work dramatically, as implausible as swan songs themselves, and yet, a theatre which remains four centuries later more malleably alive than play-texts complying to the Aristotelian how-to mode. I think anybody writing about the theatre should read *The Poetics* once a year, to remind themselves that Aristotle’s text hosts guidelines rather than rules. Unlike *The Book of the Craft of Dying*, Aristotle’s *Poetics* foments interpretation the way tyranny does revolution. And Aristotle’s *Poetics* has often been seen as a response to Plato’s “lover’s quarrel” with poetry. Let me explain: though Plato readily asks in *the Republic* that poets



should be expelled from his utopian polis, he himself writes like a poet. The Swan Trope is not beyond him.

We have already seen in Chapter I what Plato does with the Swan Song trope; for the sake of this independent section, it bears repetition. Plato famously gives the Socrates of his *Phaedo* the lengthiest of swan songs (the entire work is a relating of the Philosopher's death) where, most unlikely, both the swan and the goose of Aesop's fable appear:

O Simmias, how strange that is; ...will you not allow that I have as much of a prophetic capacity in me as the swans? For they, when they perceive that they must die, having sung all their life long, do then sing more than ever, rejoicing in the thought that they are about to go away to the god whose ministers they are. But men, because they are themselves afraid of death, slanderously affirm of the swans that they sing a lament at the last, not considering that no bird sings when cold, or hungry, or in pain, not even the nightingale, nor the swallow [...]; which are said indeed to tune a song of sorrow, although I do not believe this to be true of them any more than of the swans. But because they are sacred to Apollo and have a prophetic capacity and anticipate the good things of another world, therefore they sing and rejoice in that day more than they ever did before (147).

We will remember that for Plato, the swan sings but it sings in joyful tones, in proto-Christian expectations of Heaven. In the *Phaedo*, ensue Socrates' quasi-comedic yet ethical last words: "Crito, I owe a cock to Asclepius: will you repay the debt?" (189). Crito acquiesces and Socrates dies. In this instance, Platonic dogma forbids belief that swans should sing of grief, but allows nonetheless the beasts to sing, "having sung all their lives;" they do it from joy at their "prophetic capacity" and rejoice at the blessings of the next world.

This notion of the prophetic at the threshold of death will certainly not be lost on many of the dramatists of the early modern period. One needs only think of John of Gaunt's death scene in *Richard II* in this passage that in this study has until now remained unmentioned:

GAUNT:                   Methinks I am a prophet new inspired  
                                   And thus expiring do foretell of him [Richard].  
                                   His rash, fierce blaze of riot cannot last,  
                                   For violent fires soon burn out themselves. (2.1. 5-34)

Gaunt predicts the fall of Richard but first hopes that his ‘death’s sad tale may yet undeaf his ear’ (line 16). This sad tale, spoken by the “tongues of dying men,” waxes musical, must be steeped in “deep harmony.” The dramatists most often will hold their dying creations to such standards of momentous exceptionality: it is their last chance at a *Fermata* at the liminal, at the threshold of mutability, to look at both worlds Janus-like. This will endure well into the twentieth century:

MARGUERITE	He thinks he is the first to die.
MARIE	Everybody thinks they are first to die.
	(84, my translation). <sup>159</sup>

Eugene Ionesco uses the swan song trope as the grand gestural movement of an entire play as he writes *Le Roi se Meurt* (1962), a literal two hour long swan song whose last line echoes an endemic pessimism akin to both *Macbeth* and *King Lear*: “It was a rather useless agitation, wasn’t it?” speaks Queen Marguerite as she prepares King Bérenger, for his last breath [my translation]. Our death is exceptional because it is ours, our first and only death, and our last.

A late sixteenth century anonymous poem that prompted Orlando Gibbons (1583-1625) to compose a popular ballad captures this spirit of exceptionality, of ‘first and last’:

The silver Swan *who living had no note,*  
 When death approached *unlocked* her silent throat:  
 Leaning her breast against the reedy shore  
 Thus sung her first and last, and sung no more:

<sup>159</sup> *Exit the King* is the title of most English translations of Ionesco’s play, and it is an erroneous one: a character that exits does not die. The play in French is named *Le Roi se Meurt*, and the literal *The King is Dying* would make far more sense. One must probably impute the ambiguous title at the reflex of modern producers acting on fear of deterring audiences, with the literal translation, and if it is the case, a telling sign of the times.

‘Farewell all joys, O death come close my eyes,  
More geese than swan now live, more fools than wise’.  
(97, Emphases mine).

Here again, it is death that gives one a voice; death unlocks what had been willfully or not, silenced. The breast in movement (the heart) chafes with the “reedy shore” (the obstacle, the wound, the sorrow, the sickness, old age), and only then can the bird sing: first a regret, then a supplication, and finally, and more interestingly, a jab, an imparting insult directed at those who remain on the mortal shore. By Gibbons’ age, to “sing one’s swan song” has long become a ubiquitous idiomatic expression. Chaucer uses it in the fourteenth century in *The Parliament of Fowles*: “The Ialous swan ayaens his deth that singeth” (line 342).<sup>160</sup> Later Shakespeare will give Portia during the casket scene the following: “Let music sound while he doth make his choice; then, if he lose, he makes a swan-like end, fading in music” (3.2, 43-44).<sup>161</sup> By then it meant that one has said her last things, made a final appearance (often dramatic or theatrical, a meaning that survives today) before the inevitability of death with a gestural statement; therefore the last thing becomes at times, but far from always, a pronouncement *designed a priori*, an expected fashion of the end, something planned, eschatological in nature; the end cannot unfold without the swan song just as the swan song may literally trigger death as is the case in most suicide scenes of the period; it can also be the duplicitous perennial farewell tour of countless contemporary artists; Frank Sinatra, to name but one singers, has had a few of these.<sup>162</sup> Indigent and at death’s door, playwright Robert Greene opens his final work, the enigmatic *Groats-Worth of Wit* (1592) in this very fashion:

<sup>160</sup> p. 383 in *The Riverside Chaucer*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1987.

<sup>161</sup> All citations from Shakespeare are taken from the Norton Shakespeare, 1997.

<sup>162</sup> In *The Anatomy of Influence*, what was until last month his most recent work, the indispensable Harold Bloom writes: [this book] “is my virtual swan song, my desire is to say in one place all I have learned to

To the Gentlemen Readers.

Gentlemen. The Swan sings melodiously before death, that in all his life vseth but a iarring sound. Greene though able inough to write, yet deeplier searched with sickenes than euer heeretofore, sendes you his Swanne like songe, for that he feares he shal ne[u]er againe carroll to you woonted loue layes, neuer againe discouer to you youths pleasures. How euer yet sickenesse, riot, Incontinence, haue at once shown their extremitie, yet if I recouer, you shall all see, more fresh sprigs, then euer sprang from me, directing you how to liue, yet not diswading ye from loue.<sup>163</sup>

Greene here, a tad dyspeptically perhaps, does not intent to sing only melodiously; he wishes his swan song to be a barb to the new generation of dramatists who are showing him the door. And of course, as we can read in the Folio of Shakespeare's *Complete Works* (1623) Ben Jonson uses [and possibly coins] the "Swan of Avon," as his rival's nickname, alluding to "the ancient Greek belief that the souls of the poets pass into swans."<sup>164</sup>

Intentionality abounds in these last utterances and we can appreciate how multifarious is the myth, how when at war with itself it can become contradictory; the swan song then, is its own struggle, myth fighting myth. The inherent agon that takes shape as a combat, an inner struggle, a tension between the desire to end and the need to stay cannot simply be described as a battle between life and death.<sup>165</sup> The Swan song trope bears witness to such contradictions. Through the trope, the dying body deploys itself in all configurations, as a betrayer, an instrument broken or breaking in real time, an embarrassment of failure, but nonetheless it remains an instrument, a broken wing, as the

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think [...] (9). His hardly incidental use of the word 'virtual' should keep publishers busy for years to come.

<sup>163</sup> This strange work, a compilation of stories, fables and admonitions faintly disguise the deathbed repentance of a dissolute playwright; Greene's last work is famous for introducing Shakespeare as a different kind of bird: the swan of Avon under Greene's quill becomes an "upstart crow."

<sup>164</sup> Definition of *the Swan of Avon* from The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary. I have not located in any ancient Greek primary texts mention of such a belief. But then again, myths are good at breeding myths.

<sup>165</sup> In ancient Greek drama terminology, Agon is a formal debate that takes place between the chief characters in a Greek play, protagonist and antagonist, usually with the chorus acting as judge. The character that speaks second always wins the agon, since the last word is always hers.

swan must sing. The popular public dissections of the Renaissance, “a species of didactic tragedies” as Michael Neill calls them, reproduce themselves in the literal disembodiments of agony. Simultaneously as the body collapses, an accounting, a settlement in action unfolds. Swan songs are dramatic agonies attempting to verbally map landscapes of irresolution, where grief is often sovereign but never precludes all kinds of other emotional intrusions, even that of humor, as we have seen in chapter four. Such moments may compromise the generic integrity of the play in which they appear. But for all their grace, swans can be vicious animals, and combative birds; in a second their graceful sailing can turn into a boxing match. The metaphor then fits all kinds of deaths.

This is forcibly the case in the anonymous lyric aforementioned that Gibbons set to music; the poem ends with a blast of aphoristic vision. The swan (now made female), neither white nor black, but silver, imparts knowledge and not without an ironic and mean-spirited streak: “Fools, you may remain on the reedy shore”, the bird intones, “I as of now know better”. The bird, who ‘had no note’, when death approaches – Aesop’s cook - unlocks her throat, opens what was prior enclosed, treasured, kept within – and therefore was never without a note but possibly unwilling to share it. No single tone presides over the poem – though clearly elegiac when it was set to music, merely a minute-long worth of it – and it hosts pell-mell a myriad of reactions, of agencies upon last things; an emotional irresolution imbued with poignancy: the desire to say goodbye to things now passed tinged with an invocation to end all, to close the book so to speak, and move on. The poem seems unconcerned about the destination or the way of death, nonetheless, by virtue of the ‘pearl of wisdom’ it leaves behind, death becomes an agent of knowledge, again, a teacher of sort. It accomplishes rather than merely punctuate. The

swans, now crown property in the United Kingdom, had for a long time been a common food source for the royal party. But a taste for swans was not exclusively royal; Chaucer in the prologue of his *Canterbury Tales* reminds us that the monk “a fat swan loved he best of any roost” (line 206). My favorite use of the trope in the period remains John Donne’s doing. On the death of Mistress Elizabeth Drury, he writes:

Since herbes and roots by dying, lose not all,  
But they, yea Ashes too, are medicinall,  
Death could not quench her vertue so, but that  
It would be (if not follow'd) wondred at:  
And all the world would be one dying Swan,  
To sing her generall praise, and vanish than.<sup>166</sup>

The all-encompassing use of the trope is here intensely moving. Elizabeth Drury’s death must accomplish, root-like, its medicinal end. Death serves its medicine to the mourners who themselves have yet to sing, swan-like before their own end. In here too, death then, proves an important lesson.

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<sup>166</sup> *Anniversaries* (1622-12) John Donne, *An Anatomie of the World. Wherein, by occasion of the untimely death of Mistress Elizabeth Drury*. (494-499).

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