The Summons of Death
on the
Medieval and Renaissance
English Stage
The Summons of Death on the Medieval and Renaissance English Stage

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To

Karl Snyder and Marjorie Lewis
without whom none of this
would have been
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Preface

The human mind is afraid of nothing. . .

Depending on how we read such a statement, it may seem either a truism or an absurd (if gallant) falsehood. To clarify the statement, we may try a simple mental exercise.

Picture infinity. Populate it with infinite worlds, infinite possibilities, parallel universes, time and space running in all directions, always expanding, always (if necessary) returning and beginning again. It is confusing, but not impossible. We tend to pick out highlights as exempla of what exists beyond what we are able to imagine, to say "et cetera" and go on to something else, and finally to yawn and stretch and go away, promising ourselves that we will think of more later.

Now picture finity. This is much easier; we can place a frame around our "et ceteras" and feel a comfortable sense of closure—until we are asked to imagine what lies outside the frame. Now the message is clearer: The human mind is afraid of Nothing.

It is at the moment of death that Everything and Nothing meet, and throughout the history of humankind, art has struggled to make them both less frightening by transmuting them into Something, a something that can be borne. The greatest art, indeed, has been not about love, as we often like to think, or
about duty or the class struggle or sex or God or military victories, but about endings: the deaths of heroes, the passing of innocence, the discarding of illusions, the saving of one precious object from the wreck of many others. The endings themselves may be seen as fortunate, as in the slaying of the dragon or the resolution of a love triangle; but, as Samuel Johnson has pointed out, in each ending we see and struggle with our own end:

We always make a secret comparison between a part and the whole; the termination of any period of life reminds us that life itself has likewise its termination; when we have done any thing for the last time, we involuntarily reflect that a part of the days allotted us is past, and that as more is past there is less remaining. . . . [By] vicissitude of fortune, or alteration of employment, by change of place, or loss of friendship, we are forced to say of something, this is the last. (Idler, No. 103, in Rasselas, Poems, and Selected Prose, ed. Bertrand H. Bronson [New York: Holt, 1971], 214–15.)

In the great age of the English drama, death walked the stage in many guises, constantly reminding Renaissance man and woman that all endings were one end. But such a vivid reminder was not new to the Renaissance audience, and in fact was not only a mutation but a muting of the Death that had frightened and comforted audiences for two centuries before. Without the medieval Legends and Dances of Death, without the Dreary Deaths that brandished spears from medieval painting and stage, there would have been no Doctor Faustus, no Bosola, no Yorick.

It is the purpose of this study, then, to examine the way in which four centuries of art managed to grapple together Everything and Nothing into the greatest drama of the English language—only to lose sight, at the end, of what they were grappling with, and to wrestle helplessly with the scenery as the curtain came down.

Since drama does not exist in a cultural vacuum, I have thought it advisable to provide a background against which the moving figure of Death may best be seen. My first two chapters block in this background: a description of the changing
iconography and theology of death during the fourteenth through
seventeenth centuries, exclusive of the drama itself. In this I depart
from the method of Theodore Spencer, whose seminal work,
*Death and Elizabethan Tragedy*, provided the impetus for my study.
Spencer describes each generation separately in terms of the art,
philosophy, poetry, and drama of the given age. But it is my inten­
ton to observe how the ideas of one age mingled with another,
how some artists hung back from change while others leaped
ahead, how some followed one diverging path while others fol­
lowed a second one or retraced their steps. And in order to see
patterns within such apparently random motion, we ought first
to have an idea of the overall pattern in all its permutations.
Therefore, I have postponed actual discussion of the plays until
the background is established.

In beginning with medieval ideas and medieval drama, I do
not mean to suggest that the Middle Ages are either the begin­
ing or the standard from which all death literature is to be mea­
sured; however, we must begin somewhere, and I have chosen
to begin with the earliest staged English drama, with all its ideas
and influences in place, and to trace changes from there to the
closing of the theaters in 1642. Obviously, just as the Renaissance
was influenced and reacted against conventions of the previous
period, so the Middle Ages also had its influences and contrasts.
For readers who would like to explore earlier conventions, I highly
recommend both Spencer’s work and Frederick Parkes Weber’s
*Aspects of Death and Correlated Aspects of Life in Art, Epigram,
and Poetry*, as well as the other works listed in my bibliography.

In selecting texts for this study, I have tried to combine the
flavor of the original with the fluidity of the modern. Although
in some cases I may have preferred an old-spelling edition of a
Renaissance play—for example, F. L. Lucas’s edition of Webster—I
have used instead the best modernized text available, to avoid
making some plays seem “quainter” than others of the same
period. For the medieval plays, and the prose and poetry of all
four centuries, I have generally used the old spelling, but with
certain modifications: the substitution of th and y for thorn and
yok, respectively, and minor adjustments as indicated in the text where oddities of spelling would have interfered with intelligibility.

I am deeply indebted to Karl Snyder, Marjorie Lewis, and Bob Frye of Texas Christian University, who helped more than I can say with the original research on this manuscript; to Gloria K. Fiero of the University of Southwestern Louisiana, who steered me toward many of the medieval representations of Death that appear in my discussion; and to my colleagues at Ohio State University, without whose suggestions and encouragement I might have despaired of ever completing the final version.

This work does not pretend to be a comprehensive study of all that was written, painted, and sung about death in the fourteenth through seventeenth centuries; my difficulty lay not in finding examples to include but in deciding what I could bear to leave out. Like all human endeavor, the result is only a finite representation of infinite possibilities, an attempt to blend Everything and Nothing into Something.