As we have seen, the iconography of Death in the later Middle Ages tends to be centered on the idea of confrontation: Death calls and the living respond. What is important to note in this tradition is that the confrontation itself is based on a paradox: the end of things is actually an opportunity to begin again, a last chance to reorder an entire lifetime before being called to account for it. Such a view is compatible, of course, with a system of belief that interposed between the soul and its destruction a series of second chances. At the bedside of the dying, the last sacraments prepared the soul to make its final choice; saints and angels might be called on for assistance; the very pains of dying might be offered as penance for sins; and even if the final repentance was ragged, and the atonement barely sufficient, there was always Purgatory, where the process might be completed. When the event of death is viewed in this manner—as a last chance on earth—the event itself takes on a great deal of importance, and one prays, not for a sudden and “easy” death, but for a death that allows some breathing space.

As even Catholic theologians noted, however, the idea of the breathing space may itself become a danger, in that the living may put all the reordering off until the last minute. As early as the thirteenth century, the church had begun encouraging
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annual sacramental confession, and by the early sixteenth century Catholic theologians (including the early Christian humanists) were putting more and more emphasis on the entire life as a preparation for death. To the early Protestants, too, deathbed conversion was suspect; faith and assurance of salvation, if genuine, should come early in life; a truly holy death was thus a manifestation of rather than a means of salvation; and fear of damnation not only was an unsuitable substitute for assurance of salvation but probably indicated a reprobate in the first place. Although these reactions to the old tradition were in turn modified during the seventeenth century, we can probably best trace the development of ideas through the changing nature of deathbed counseling: the Art of Dying in its many permutations.

Even with the breathing space allowed, late medieval theologians and artists seldom pretended that death as an event was pleasant. Rather, they stressed the agony of separation between body and soul, the devils that hovered about the dying person to tempt him to Hell, and the terrors of the judgment that awaited the soul. As early as the thirteenth century, death lyrics began enumerating not just the horrors of the grave (end product) but also the horrors of the deathbed (event):

> When the hede quakyth
> And the lyppis blakyth
> And the nose sharpyth
> And the senow starkyth
> And the brest pantyth
> And the brethe wantyth
> And the tethe ratelyt
> And the throte roteleth.

Here we do not have the later intellectualization of death but a physical confrontation with the reality of dying, the event in all its ugliness. Still, we remember Philippa Tristram’s observation: “it is sometimes more helpful to know that a nightmare is shared than to be told that it does not exist” (183); and once the nightmare of death was documented, it could be dealt with point by point.
An indication of how fourteenth- and fifteenth-century society dealt with the nightmare may be seen in the transformation of the Death Signs lyric quoted above, which became, in the fifteenth century, an instructional book in little:

When thy hede quakyth: Memento.
Then thy lyppys blakyth: Confessio.
When thy nose sharpyth: Contricio.
Then thy lymmys starkyth: Satisfaccio.
When thy brest pantyth: Nosce teipsum.
Then thy wynde wantyth: Miserere.
When thy nyen hollyth: Libéra me domine.
The deth folowyth: Veni ad judicum.²

To the nightmare has been added on ordering agent: a step-by-step plan of what to do at each point in the process. And it is this need to order chaos, to give the human creature something that it can do in a frightening situation, that marks, not only the Legends and Dances of the period, but also the flood of treatises setting forth rules on how to die.

The *ars moriendi* of the late Middle Ages is basically an instructional manual. It guides the dying, and the friends of the dying, through the crucial event in such a way as to use most effectively the last chance now provided to the soul. As Sister Mary Catherine O'Connor has so accurately characterized it, "The *Ars moriendi* is not a book of remote preparation for [death]—except for one or two perfunctory sentences in praise of a virtuous life, no *ars vivendi*. It is a complete and intelligible guide to the business of dying... no more intended to frighten and depress than is any medieval book on hunting or hawking or on table manners for children."³

During the fourteenth century, the instructional manual on dying began to take shape in compendia of religious teachings, particularly in sections based on Henry Suso's *Horologium sapientiae* (ca. 1328), which contained sample deathbed meditations and a frightening description of a soul going unprepared to death. By the end of the century, or sometime before 1408, the orderly procedure of dying was formalized in Jean Charlier de Gerson's
De arte moriendi, part of his Opusculum tripartitum. In this seminal work, which depended heavily on church liturgy, Gerson attempted to provide a ritual that could be followed at the dying person’s bedside when the services of a priest were not available—a useful tool when there were so few clergy left in the plague years. The ritual contained exhortations to the dying, sample meditations, prayers, last duties for the dying to perform, and a series of interrogations through which the dying could affirm their faith, indicate repentance, and commend their souls to God.\

Shortly after Gerson’s Opusculum, a long series of tracts on the art of dying began to appear all over Europe. Apparently deriving from one original treatise, the Tractatus artis bene moriendi, they took many forms: long manuscripts, “blockbook” versions (picture books for the illiterate), printed copies with and without illustrations, and versions that varied the numbers and sources of quotations from scripture, liturgy, pagan philosophers, and church fathers. Despite all these variations, however, the ars moriendi of the fifteenth century is essentially one document, and allowing for the variations, we may well use one of the latest in the series as an illustration of the handbook’s method: Caxton’s 1490 printing “The arte & crafte to know well to dye.”\

The treatise is divided into six parts: (1) reasons why “one oughte to deye gladly”; (2) temptations at the moment of death; (3) questions to be put to the dying; (4) instructions to be given to them; (5) meditations on the sufferings of Christ; and (6) prayers to be said by the dying or by those assisting at their deathbeds (A1r). The first section opens with the apparently granted assumption that the death of the body is the most fearful thing imaginable but hastens to assure the reader that, once the pain is over, the soul will have escaped an unsatisfactory world to live in a perfect one with God—that is, if the soul has made adequate preparation by living a good life or at least being contrite for a bad one: “And therefore euery good crysten man and also euerych synner verily contryte oughte not to be sorowfulle ne trouble hym of the temporall or bodily deth, ne he oughte not to fere ne doubte hit, for what some euer mater or cause be layd to hym but he oughte to suffre and receyue it pacyently and in thanks.”
Assuming that one has made this preparation, death is only "the goynge oute of pryson" and a laying down of the heavy weight of a body (A1v). Even the pagans have said that one "ought sonner to chose the bodily deth" than to do anything contrary to virtue, so surely a death that is so universally praised cannot be totally bad (A1r).

There is something a little spurious about this reasoning, and indeed it is contradicted by the carefully outlined procedures in the other sections for escaping all the dangers surrounding death. But the first sections of all these treatises are meant to proffer comfort before the battle against temptation begins, and the basic effect is to direct the mind toward death as a threshold to be crossed rather than as a pain to be undergone.

And at this threshold the temptations are mighty, as the devils gather for their last assault on the soul. According to all the ars moreindi treatises, those "in thartycle of death haue many greuous & strong temptacions vereli suche that in their lyf they neuer had lyke" (A2r), and these are five in number:

1. The temptation "of the fayth," when the devil will try to deceive Moriens (the dying person) into falling away from Christ, through "errours superstycions and heresie." Moriens must remember that a Christian is required to stand firm in his faith, and he may take comfort in knowing that "the deuyll maye not overcomme the persone as longe as he shall haue the usage of his free wyll well dysposed, if by his owne agrement he wyll not consent to the deuil." As an aid to resistance against this temptation, Moriens or those attending him should repeat the Creed "wyth an hye voys," and call to mind the constancy of all the saints, martyrs, apostles, and even good pagans as encouragement to steadfastness (A2r-v).

2. The temptation "ayenste hope by dyspayre," when the devil takes advantage of Moriens's weakened condition to make him grieve so much over his sins that he will despair of being forgiven. But Moriens must remember that God's capacity for mercy is infinitely greater than man's capacity for sin, and that "though that he had commited as many murtheres and theftes as there ben dropes of water and small grauell in the see," though he may
never have confessed his sins before, even though he may be too ill to confess them aloud now—still, if he repents in his mind at this last moment, God will accept his contrition: "for god dys-pyseth neuer a contryte herte and humble." As an exercise, Moriens should contemplate Christ on the cross: "For he hath the hede inclyned and bowed to kysse us, the armes stratched abrode for tembrace us, the handes perced & opened for to gyue to us, the syde open for to loue us, and all his body stratched for to gyue hym selfe all to us." And for encouragement, Moriens should call to mind other sinners who were forgiven: Peter, Paul Matthew, Mary Magdalene, the woman taken in adultery, the Good Thief, and "many moo other whyche were grete synners & horryble" (A2v-A3v).

3. The temptation "by impacyence: that is ayenste charite." In the great sorrow and pain of dying, Moriens may be tempted to "murmure or grutche" against God, and to act as though he were mad, tormenting not only himself but the people around him. He must remember, in this sore temptation, that charity and patience will bring him closer to God, and that, furthermore, the pain against which he is railing was sent him on purpose to help him atone for his sins: "Infyrnte tofore deth is lyke as a purgatore, soo that it be suffred . . . pacyently, gladly, & agreably. And it cometh by dyuyne dyspensacion that to the lengest vyce & synne is gyuen the lengest malady" (A3v-A4r).

4. The temptation to "spirituell pryde, by the whiche the deuylle assayleth most theym that be duoute." Since the devil cannot make the devout lose faith, hope, or charity, he rather inflates them with vainglory about their ability to withstand the other temptations. "O how thou art ferme & stedfaste in the faythe," says the devil in Moriens’s heart; "o how thou art sure in hope, o how thou art stronge & pacyent, o how thou hast doon many good dedes." It is an easy step from such thoughts to the sin of presumption, and when Moriens finds himself thinking such thoughts, he must try to humble himself, particularly by remembering his sins, but not so much that he will despair; rather, he must keep in mind that "none is certayn, yf he be dygne
or worthy to have deserved the love of god, or the hate of god” (A4r–v)

5. The temptation “that most troubleth the seculers and worldly [sic] men, . . . the ouer grete ocupacyon of outwarde things and temporall . . . which he hath moost loued in his lyf.” Moriens must put all such temporal thoughts from his mind and renounce the things of the world that he is about to leave, strengthening his resolve with the thought that the renunciation itself is a form of penance that may atone for at least the venial sins, and so spare him some of the pains of Purgatory. Above all, Moriens must lose his hold on life itself, because hoping to escape from death “is a thinge ryght peryllous &. moche dysordred in every crysten man and that ofte cometh by intynccyon of the deuyl” (A4v).

During all these temptations, Moriens may comfort himself with the knowledge that God does not permit us to be tempted more than we can bear. Further, we have been given the use of reason to combat temptation, and so long as we continue to fight, the devil cannot conquer us against our will.

In the illustrated versions of the treatise, there are two woodcuts for each temptation: one showing the devils swarming about Moriens’s bed, and one showing Moriens resisting their temptations, often with so many saints and angels on hand to help that the room seems jammed to the very doors and windows. This approach to the temptations, to risk overusing Tristram’s phrase, is the comfort of the shared nightmare. By enumerating all the symptoms, the treatise makes deathbed fear into a known and therefore treatable malady. Moriens is given a set of mental exercise to do, is provided the company of others who have suffered through the same pains before him, and is assured at each step that the very effort, no matter how unsuccessful or discouraging, not only is sufficient in God’s eyes, but may reduce the time spent in Purgatory. When effort is made useful like this, it becomes less painful.6

In the third section of the treatise, attendants at Moriens’s bedside are required to ask him questions about his faith, his willingness to repent, and his readiness to die. The interrogations are
stock questions, based on Saint Anselm, on Gerson's Ars, and on professions of faith used in church liturgy, and are posed in such a way that Moriens may answer with a simple "ye." If there are no friends present, Moriens may ask the questions silently of himself, but it is expected that the deathbed will be a communal affair, and that the friends present are morally obligated to help Moriens turn his mind to heaven. By no means is anyone to delude the dying person into hoping for a longer life, because such a vain hope will turn his mind earthward and endanger his soul.7

The remaining sections are given to meditations on the life and death of Christ (in which Moriens is reminded that Christ, too, moaned and wept at His death); prayers for different stages in the dying process; and admonitions to attendants at the deathbed that they not only help Moriens to a good death but learn from the procedure how to make a good death themselves when the time comes. Throughout the whole treatise, the emphasis is on comfort, a comfort reached, one may say, by staying busy.

Before we consider the different forms taken by the *ars moriendi* in the sixteenth century, it may be interesting to note how the fifteenth-century emphasis on comfort and active participation transformed even the traditional Debate of the Body and Soul. The early medieval version of the debate had emphasized the polarity between the two, sometimes with Body and Soul ending in armed warfare, and usually with the devil carrying off Soul to torment, Soul meanwhile hurling fearful imprecations back at Body. But in *The Dyenge Creature*, a popular dialogue printed in 1507 and reprinted many times thereafter,8 the debate takes a gentler form.

*The Dyenge Creature* is a dialogue—or perhaps one should call it a drama—somewhat in the manner of *Everyman* and obviously dependent on the temptations, remedies, and exhortations of the *Ars moriendi*. It is, in effect, a deathbed repentance taking place at the very last moment. In his death agony, the Creature complains to his Good Angel, to Reason, to Dread, to Conscience, and to Five Wits that they have not helped him meet this fearful moment. They reply that they have always tried, but
that he has not listened to them. Creature then turns to Faith and Hope for assistance, and they introduce him to Charity, whom he has sadly neglected but who can help him if he will accept her teachings. At this point, Soul complains that it has been neglected and wasted by Creature, and laments the fact that it must now undergo eternal suffering because of him. Creature is conscience-stricken, never having thought about Soul before, and in an agony of remorse apologizes and promises to seek help. He goes back to Faith, Hope, and Charity, who now tell him about Christ’s sacrifice, bid him repent of his sins, and encourage him to be of good cheer. Creature returns again to Soul, relates what he has heard, tries to make Soul comfortable, and asks whether he can do anything to help Soul through the coming time of sorrow, which has now been commuted to less than eternity. “Pray for me,” replies Soul, and Creature obediently prays to the Virgin Mary, who in turn petitions her Son for Soul’s salvation.

Retold baldly like this, the story sounds naive and simplistic, and perhaps even incomplete, since we never see the results of Creature’s prayers. But in dialogue, Creature is indeed Everyman, his surprised dismay at every turn representing the confusion of the accidental sinner—not the hardened criminal who has “committed as many murtheres and theftes as there ben drops of water and smal grauell in the see” (Ars, A3r), but the ordinary person who has followed the line of least resistance, not realizing how he has besmirched his soul. For him, and for the 1507 reader, the result of his spiritual awakening is completion of the story; he has followed the steps of the Ars moriendi, albeit at the last moment, and has gained Heaven, if only through the indirect route of Purgatory.

But The Dyenge Creature is almost the last tract of its kind. Just as the iconography of death begins to change at the beginning of the sixteenth century, and the skeleton to hide its potential victim, so the treatises on dying begin to retreat from the moment of death and to diffuse themselves into religious controversy and the ars vivendi.
It was the whole framework of ideas that began to change during this period. Christian humanists in England, now allowed wider scope for their studies by the comparative stability of the Tudor reign, rejected the formalism of Scholastic thinking and, while always insisting that Christ was the ultimate ideal, and that therefore the “good pagans” of antiquity had unconsciously sought that ideal, looked more and more to the classics for their models of right behavior. Meanwhile, the Protestant Reformation was sweeping across Europe, insisting on the utter depravity of man, preaching salvation by faith alone, casting doubt on the efficacy of deathbed repentance, and rejecting the doctrine of Purgatory. Interestingly enough, although the early humanists were Catholic, and the Protestants to a great extent distrustful of those early humanists, both groups began following their separate paths to the same end.

The most immediately evident change in the treatise on dying is the new attitude toward fear. Fifteenth-century writers had begun with the assumption that fear at the moment of death is both natural and reasonable. Lydgate’s Carthusian in the Dance of Death, it will be remembered, remarks that no matter how well one prepares for death, the event is still frightening; and in the same author’s Assembly of Gods, both Sensuality and Reason agree that anyone who does not fear Death is “an ydiote,” an opinion that Doctryne finds amusing but does not contradict. Dunbar, too, sees death as an evil that must be carefully prepared for by mental exercise:

Sen for the deid remeid is none,  
Best is that we for deede dispone,  
Eftir our deid that lif may we;  
Timor mortis conturbat me.  

And the Ars moriendi, while urging Moriens to “Deye gladly,” treats the moment of death as fraught with very real dangers, dangers that require strong remedies.

But sixteenth-century Catholic and Protestant alike—particularly those Protestants leaning toward the Calvinist view—rejected the idea of fear, making it, like the skeleton,
something to be hidden. For the Calvinist theologians especially, fear was a sign of doubt, and doubt a sign of damnation; for the new scholar of any persuasion, fear often seems to be a sign of something even worse: cowardice.

Thomas Lupset, who studied under Erasmus, More, Colet, and others of the great early Renaissance humanists, is one of the first to promulgate this new approach to—or retreat from—the fear of death. In *A compendious treatise, teachynge the waie of dieyng well* (1530), his overriding thesis is that, although "there is a meane measure of fere in deathe, that may be rekened honest and iuste, bycause nature maketh it necessary," human reason is capable of going beyond nature and of eliminating a fear that is demonstrably foolish.

Unlike the medieval *Ars*, which quoted pagan philosophers only to bolster arguments based on Christian revelation, Lupset's treatise turns to the pagans themselves to see how they were able to die fearlessly without benefit of revelation. His conclusion is that the human mind, vastly superior to that of an animal, can see beyond immediate sensation to the idea of life and death, and once having done so, can reason that life and death are the same, and that dying well is therefore only an extension of living well.

It is all very logical: "Reason saythe, we shoulde not feare that thynge the whiche we know not, & only yuel is worthy to be feared" (273). Now, while death cannot be good, since the giving of death to others has always been considered evil, neither can it be bad, since Christ and the holy martyrs embraced it, and even "good pagans" faced it willingly in order to combat tyranny. And since death is not of itself evil, therefore it is not to be feared.

Furthermore, death is not really unknown to us. We see it every day, and in fact we undergo it every day. Each moment of our lives passes into the past, which is dead; youth fades into age and age fades into death. Therefore, since we live every day in a state of dying, our daily conduct is also our deathbed conduct, and in order to die well, we must live well. Death itself, then, ceases to matter to one who has lived a good life.
As for the pain of dying, "it shulde be a comforthe to remembre, that after the peyne of deathe, there shall be no more peyne" (279). And for the leaving of this world, why do we mourn that we will not be here tomorrow, when we do not mourn our absence from the world before we were born? By leaving the world gladly, we show that it has no dominion over us, that our minds are free of the bonds of temporality.

But beyond these rational arguments, Lupset returns again and again to the emotional claim on courage. Since death is inevitable, he says, "Let vs then take a lusty courage of this desparation, seinge there is no remedy: lette vs manfully go to it" (280). And again:

There is no hope of remedy. Al this people that you se, howe longe thynke you shall be. It shall not be longe, but all shall by the course of Nature be called hens to dethe, and there hydde. . . . What nowe John [John Walker, to whom the treatise is addressed]? dothe not he seeme vnto you a shamefull cowarde, and a fearful wretche, a playn kikkes without an harte, that with moche intercession, with many prayers desyrethe a lytelle delay of deathe?. . . Lifte vp therfore your hart onely bycause there is no remedy, desyre not to flie when there is no place to runne to, lette nécessaire gyue you a courage, if al other strength decayeth.

These are stirring words, and almost make one want to march off to death for the sheer heroism of the thing. Indeed, "heroism" is the note that rings constantly through all of Lupset's treatise, a note that continually reemphasizes the capacity of the human spirit. And although the treatise is essentially and solidly Christian, the dangers that Lupset posits to the good life (and therefore the good death) are not the temptations of the old Ars but rather cowardice, idleness, and love of earthly things—all temptations that inhibit the flowering of the spirit.

Given Lupset's emphasis, in which every moment is seen as a form of death, the act of dying itself loses its importance as an event or a second chance. The whole lifetime becomes a test, indeed a campaign, and the individual's disposition at the instant of death passes judgment on his whole life: "for by the maner
of hym that dyeth, we conjecture the state and condition of the soule” (177). Thus, a sudden death or a prolonged one makes no difference when life is seen as an eternal now, and deathbed repentance becomes suspect because “the yuell lyuer . . . hathe nothyngen to laye before the mercy of god whereupon he maye take hope and truste to be made worthy of the sure lyfe, in which deathe medleth not” (272).

An important change of focus has occurred between the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century *Artes*. Lydgate’s Reason thought any man “an ydiote” who did not fear death; Lupset’s thinks the same of any man who does fear death. The Morientes of the *Artes* and the Dances of Death acknowledged fear at death and sought ways to work through the fear to acceptance or atonement; the *Waie of Dieyng Well* demands a denial of fear once the original reasoning has taken place. Ministrations of the church give way to the activity of the human mind, and the grace of God assumes significance primarily as it is reflected in the inviolability of the human spirit. Above all, heroic dying becomes not only a spiritual victory but a temporal one as well; it can foil tyrants as well as devils when men die cheerfully in the teeth of unjust persecution. The Christian humanist *Waie of Dieyng Well*, then, opens the way for the great drama of the Renaissance, whose protagonists must face annihilation heroically without the comfort of handbooks or attendants around the deathbed.

Among the more specifically religious treatises of the sixteenth century, we may well examine that of Thomas Becon, whose Protestant *Sicke Mannes Salve* became one of the most popular devotional books of its age. The book is set in a dialogue between the dying Epaphroditus and his three friends, following Epaphroditus step-by-step through his last hours of illness; and if it seems incredible that a dying man can both talk and be talked to at such length (four hundred pages in the 1561 octavo edition), we must remember that we are no longer dealing simply with a practical handbook but also with a preaching tract during the formation of the Anglican settlement, in which Roman Catholic doctrine must be specifically rejected, potentially aberrant
Protestants called back into line, and even the Christian humanists' references to "good pagans" carefully skirted.

Becon's work does retain some of the medieval characteristics. The friends around the deathbed are reinstated; Epaphroditus is given three temptations, impatience, despair, and excess love of earthly companions; he is interrogated by his friends about his faith; and the scriptural quotations of his friends offer him the same spiritual guidance that the angels and saints provided in the longer versions of the *Ars moriendi*. But only the framework of the old treatise remains; a new methodology of dying must be established for the Protestant theology.

Epaphroditus and his friends distrust the ministrations of the church, repudiate the doctrine of good works, and place their reliance entirely on Christ's redeeming sacrifice and on salvation by faith alone. Thus, the dying man is called upon to confess not his individual sins but rather his Sin, the utter depravity of the human creature, and to show by his unshakable faith that he has been plucked from his depravity and numbered among Christ's elect—not through his own merit but through Christ's. It is important that Epaphroditus be totally confirmed in his faith, because after death his soul must go immediately to Heaven or Hell; there will be no Purgatory in which to scrub away the last blemishes of infidelity. Paradoxically, in spite of the inefficacy of good works, this insistence on total purification before death throws Epaphroditus back onto the need to show his membership among the elect; as in Lupset, his disposition at death indicates his destination afterward.

What makes the struggle more difficult for Epaphroditus is that the "heresies" against which all Morientes, both Catholic and Protestant, must protest have become more visible and tendentious than they were in the more homogeneous medieval era. Therefore, whereas the old Moriens was required only to give a "ye" or "nay" to the elements of the Creed, Epaphroditus must enunciate his own creed—which he does for nearly thirty pages—carefully rejecting Catholic interpretations of scripture, denouncing popish superstition, and setting forth a detailed outline of what a Christian must believe in order to be saved. It is good,
solid, doctrinal preaching, and actually provides the reader with the same opportunity given to Moriens in the medieval Ars: that of saying “ye” or “nay” to an already formulated creed. Unfortunately, however, Epaphroditus is caught in what might be called the double bind that will affect much of the religious writing, as well as the treatment of despair on stage, in the next hundred years: when salvation depends on complete faith and nothing else, but when that faith is hedged around with numerous heresies that must be carefully avoided, when “simple” faith is no longer possible because of the promulgation of doctrinal traps, how can one be certain that one’s faith is complete? And if one is not certain, how can one be saved?

Ironically, a belief originally based on trust in the mercy of God and distrust in human works has led to a fear of fear itself, as an indication that one’s trust is not complete enough for salvation. Out of this insecurity now grows a need to give signs of faith so that one can be reassured of one’s salvation. Accordingly, once Epaphroditus has recited his creed, Philemon responds with praise for Epaphroditus’s holiness: “I greatly [thank] the Lord my God, good neighbor Epaphrodite, to se you in so good a mind, and to hear so goodly wordes proceed out of your mouthe. These things are evident testimonies of your good conscience toward God. Feare you not, the Lord hath sealed you with his holy spirit, & made you through his mercy, a vessell unto honor” (198–99). Indeed, this increasing need for “signs” of election appears to give tacit approval to worldly concerns. Epaphroditus’s wealth is seen as a sign of God’s approval, so he is called upon not to regret his lifelong concern for worldly goods but only to make practical disposition of them as he is dying. Furthermore, since his dying disposition must be taken as an indication of his election throughout life, he is very much concerned that his friends “be witnesses before God & the worlde, that I die a Christian man” (226). What began as an inward-directed faith, contemptuous of ritual and works, has become an outward-directed concern with approval and reassurance, a concern that will be reflected in many of the Tudor moral interludes.
As Nancy Lee Beaty observes, Becon's treatise is comforting only to those who are already comforted. Other Protestant treatises, however, were not so grim; many, while continuing to rail against papistry, often returned to the comfort-in-struggle propounded in the medieval Ars. Even Myles Coverdale, whom we now see as the leading edge of the Puritan movement within the English church, offers more consolation than Becon. In his Treatise on Death (1579) he describes at great length the temptations of the devil at death, citing in particular those of infidelity, despair, impatience, and love of earthly companions (vainglory is omitted). But for each temptation he supplies remedial meditations, stressing God's mercy and—most important—God's willingness to accept the struggle for perfection in lieu of perfection itself.

Coverdale is strictly Protestant in his views on predestination, salvation by faith, and the evils of papistry. But as O'Connor has noted, he "would be greatly pained to know how much resemblance there was between his Treatise and the Catholic books of which he thought so poorly" (198). Like the medieval Ars, he sees life not as a single moment but as a series of moments, each providing a second chance; we will undoubtedly fall into sin every day, but each time we do, we must repent again and call on God for help. True, a bad life separates the soul from God (the "bad life" seen here in terms of faith), but it is never too late to repent (101—02).

As an aid to the dying person, Coverdale emphasizes the obligation of friends to strengthen his resolve and turn his thoughts heavenward. The friends are sternly admonished not to wear the patient out with excess talk, but to ask him simple questions about his faith and his intent, to which he is to answer "yes," much as in the Ars moriendi. When the patient indicates trouble of mind, however, the friends may pray with him or read him appropriate passages from the Bible to allay his fears and combat his temptations. And as the patient begins to lapse into insensibility, his friends should have him make some last sign of faith, and then encourage him to the end with these words: "Fight valiantly, as a worthy Christian, and despair not; be not afraid of the rigorous judgment of God; hold thee fast to the
comfortable promise of Christ. . . . Christ thy Saviour shall never forsake thee. . . . Speak from thy heart-root with Christ thy brother upon the cross: ‘Father, into thy hands, into thy protection and defence, I commit my spirit’” (107—08).

Two popular deathbed treatises of the seventeenth century follow this same plan: Christopher Sutton’s *Disce Mori* (1600)\(^{17}\) and Lewis Bayly’s *Practise of Piety* (1612).\(^{18}\) Both stress the need for struggle against the devil’s last temptations (Sutton identifies these as attachment, impatience, and despair; Bayly, as infidelity and despair); both provide interrogations for the dying to respond to; and both are inclined to accept a struggle for the right disposition as meeting God’s requirements. Bayly, in particular, urges the dying person not to worry if he cannot feel joy while dying, because “the truest faith hath oftentimes the least feeling, and greatest doubts” (697; author’s emphasis); doubts are of the flesh and will disappear when the soul parts from the body; God will give us holy joy when the time is right. Later, Henry Montagu, in his *Contemplatio Mortis et Immortalitatis* (1631), will even protest against judging a person harshly if he shows a lack of joy while dying: “They take their marke amisse who judge a man by his outward behauiour in his death. If you know the goodnesse of a mans life, iudge him not by the strangenesse of his death. When a man comes to bee iudged, his life, and not the manner of his death, shall giue the evidence with him, or against him. Many that liue wickedly, would seeme to die holily, more for feare to be damned, then for any loue to goodnesse” (115—16).\(^{19}\)

But these acknowledgments of deathbed confusion are rare in the sixteenth century; writers increasingly picture life as the single moment and deathbed repentance as a contradiction in terms. So pervasive has this focus become by the end of the sixteenth century, that it is no longer a conscious doctrinal division but rather a sign of the times. Even the Jesuit Robert Southwell does not escape its influence; in *A Foure-Fold Meditatio of the Foure Last Thinges*,\(^{20}\) although Southwell follows the medieval *Quattuor novissima* tradition (meditations on death, judgment, Heaven, and Hell), two new elements seem to have crept in. First, amid the traditional death signs, there is evidence of
increasing revulsion on the part of the living at the sight of the
dead or dying:

Thy nostrils fall, and gasping thou dost lie,
Thy loathsome sight, thy friends begin to flie.

(B1v)

Thy carcase now, like carrion men do shunne,
Thy friends do hast, thy buriall to procure,
Thy servants seeks, away from thee to runne,
Thy loathsome stench, no creature can endure;
And they which tooke, in thee their most delight,
Do hate thee most, and most abhorre thy sight.

(B3v)

And second, the deathbed attempt at repentance is called into
serious question:

What booteth it, thy lewdness to lament,
And leaue off sinne, when sinne forsaketh thee,
What canst thou do, when all thy force is spent,
Or will our Lord, with this appeased be?
Thy life thou ledst, in service of his fo,
And seruest him, when life thou must forgo.

(B3t)

This seems to be the standard form that most treatises take
from now on: the futility of deathbed remorse, the fear of death
as a sign of damnation, and a consequent emphasis on cheerful
dying and the ineffectuality of death. We have noted before the
growing comicality of the skeleton in art, and the ineffectual figure
that Death assumes in poetry; now it becomes the Triumph of
Christ rather than the Triumph of Death that the religious writers
stress. An interesting broadside printed in 1604 illustrates this
point. The Map of Mortalitie retains two of the traditional wood-
cuts—the shrouded body and the skull—but its main thrust is
toward life. Three woodcuts at the top portray Jesus and sym-
bols of the Trinity and the Mysteries of God, with verses that
proclaim Christ’s victory over death. Directly below, there is a
set of words and pictures meant to be read as an acrostic: on one
side, a rooster symbolizing the awakening from sin; on the other side, a swan symbolizing the pure conscience singing “to last howre”; and, between them, these verses:

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{Earth:} \quad \begin{cases} 
goes to treads on as to 
shall to \quad \text{EARTH} \quad \begin{cases} 
as moulde to moulde 
glittering in goulde 
returne nere should 
go eer he would consider may 
be stout and gay 
passe poore away.
\end{cases} 
\end{cases} 
\end{align*}
\]

A Conscience pure, Singes to last howre.

The remaining verses relate Christ’s triumph over death, urging the Christian to die cheerfully, and concluding on this note: “And feare not death: pale oughlie though he be. / Thou art in thrall, he comes to set thee free.”

John More’s 1596 treatise, A Lively Anatomie of Death,²² pursues the point of victory over death almost as far as it will go, stopping just short of claiming that there is no such thing as death at all. Death was born of the devil, More says, but man by his fallen nature creates death in himself by sin. What we speak of as “death” is really only a passing out of the body into God; the true death lies within: “Whereby we have to learne, that the life of sinners is no life (indeed) but a death being estranged from the life of God, & all remaine as dead, which lack beliefe in Christ” (C2v–C3r). It is true that we will be tempted at the time of passing over; the devil will tempt us to despair, the world to love of possessions, and the flesh to love of companions. But if we have believed, eschewed sin, and lived a “godly” and “upright” life, we can easily turn these tempters away, despite their insidious whispers urging us to live: “And wilt thou die (O man) . . . ?” (E1v–E3v). Only the evil will want to avoid death; in the words of the now familiar formula, “A greater token (next faith in Christ) there is not for our election, then not to stand in feare of Death” (E6v).

George Strode, too, in his Anatomic of Mortalitie (1618),²³ continues to stress the death-in-life motif, going beyond even Bayly
and Southwell in his contempt for the flesh: "We are now in our best estate, but as a dunghill covered with snowe, which when Death shall dissolve, there shall nothing be seen of all our pompe and glory, but dust, rottennesse, and corruption" (72–73). If this sounds like the early medieval de contemptu mundi, it may also be overlaid with the nausea of Webster. And Strode has further absorbed much of the comic grotesque surrounding the corpse and skeleton during this time:

And how loftie soever men looke, death only shewes how little their bodies are, which so small a peice [sic] of earth will containe whom before nothing would content; and therein the dead carcasse is content to dwell, whome at his coming the worms doe welcome; and the bones of other dead men are constrained to give place. And in this house of oblivion and silence the carcasse being wound in a sheete, and bound hand and foote, is shut up though it neede not to have so great labour bestowed upon it, for it would not run away out of that prison, though the hands and feete were loose. (71–72)

This is not to suggest that only the negative strain survived into the seventeenth-century treatises on death; as we have seen, the thread of religious consolation remains very strong. And the humanist tradition begun in Lupset continues as well, not discarding religious themes by any means, but subordinating them to appeals to human reason—perhaps now as a means of reaching all people regardless of their more and more divergent religious views even within the Church of England. Bacon, for example, points out that "It is as natural to die as to be born; and to a little infant, perhaps, the one is as painful as the other." Although contemplation of death may be "holy and religious," he says, "the fear of it, as a tribute due unto nature, is weak" (8).

J. Guillemand's A Combat Betwixt Man and Death, translated from the French by Edward Grimestone in 1621, continues this line of thought, comparing the cries of the coward at death to the cries of the infant at birth—both are ignorant and misguided about the world into which they are being born. Like Lupset, Guillemand addresses "infidels" as well as Christians and speaks
throughout in Senecan terms: since death is inevitable, we must meet it courageously. Like Lupset, too, he reminds the reader that we die a little each day, and adds that the last death must then be considered the best one, because it ends all deaths forever. In fact, death may even be viewed as a desirable step in the acquisition of knowledge; once the mind is freed of bodily and temporal constraints, how much greater will be its activity in immortality! Surely, this is a scholar’s paradise that has not yet been suggested even by Bacon.

There is another interesting departure from the norm in Guillemand’s treatise, although one should probably not emphasize it unduly, since it seems to be a matter of translation rather than intent: in the Combat, death is female. Other than Whitney’s classical Mors in the 1586 Emblemes, we have not seen a female Death since Dame Death of the fourteenth-century Death and Liffe. However, what has probably happened is that Grimestone has simply translated the French too literally; abstract “death” in French is “la mort,” and only the dead man is “le mort.” Still, considering Guillemand’s enthusiasm for heroic dying, the feminine gender leads to some rather disconcerting and even necrophiliac images, particularly when Guillemand urges his reader (presumably male) to run to Death, to woo her, and to “imbrace” her (15). It would perhaps be rash to relate a mere literalness in translation to the growing sadomasochistic nature of death on the stage at this time—but one cannot help wondering.

It cannot be denied, however, that by this time the fear of death had become an object of contempt to worldlings and churchmen alike; to the former, it was cowardice, and to the latter, a sign of damnation. Like the Monk in Lydgate’s Dance of Death, everyone now felt compelled to show “chere outeward / hard to deuyce,” but, unlike the Monk, no one would admit that “Al ben not merie / which that men seen daunce” (391–92).

When we are forced to repress a fear instead of facing it and working it through, there arises a need to transfer the fear into a related expression, one that can be worked through. Aided, no doubt, by the continuous emphasis on life as one long preparation for death, or one long series of deaths, and fortified by the
new poetic convention of beauty worship, the late sixteenth century began to transfer its anxiety to the passage of time, to Time the Destroyer. Rather than lamenting one’s own end, one could now lament the end of all beautiful things—and the more beautiful and fragile, the better. The classical *ubi sunt* theme returned in full force, and the withered flower became an emblem of all mortality.

It is a healthy transference to mourn the passing of oneself in the passing of all things; it is the bitter made bittersweet, the nightmare shared, the company around the deathbed, the feeling that even in one’s passing one is part of an eternal process. But the theme of eternal change that brings stability because it is eternal may lead to something less comforting as well: the questionable nature of a moment that is simultaneously the only reality and no reality at all. What this may develop into is perhaps most evident in the “Arithmetike” of Richard Greenham, whose collected *Works* yield such a cavalier tossing away of time that the whole reasoning process is worth reproducing in full:

> Well, in the numbring of our yeeres we neede take no great paine, for *Moses* hath set it downe to be 70 yeeres. If our life last but so long, a little Arithmetike will cypher it out, and we know it is a matter of no great arte to number our yeeres, even from our first father to this ages. A worldly man in this businesse would begin to adde and to multiply, putting still to the times past that which is to come, and withdrawing from time to come, times past: But we must know that all that is past, is to be subtracted, and to be counted nothing, and the daies to come are not to be added, for an addition must be of a thing existent, but the time to come is not. But let vs make a supposition of that to be which is not, that a man may write of 70 yeeres, let vs, I say, set that downe as the grosse summe. Halfe that time is spent they say in sleepe, which then we may detract from the great number, & then there remaines but 35 yeeres. From these we may deduct 14 yeeres in our youth, wherein we are vnfit to glorifie God, or doe good to man, and so there remaines sixteene yeeres, and of these sixteene, to set downe the dayes of sicknesse, or those times which we sinfully spend in yeelding to anger, to our lustes, or to worldlinesse, wherein we are as vnprofitably occupied, asthough we were not, halfe of the
number would be cut off, and so we should leave but seven or eight years. But now we have the summe, from whence we might take out, but not that time out, which is past we know, seeing now it is nothing; what is to come, we know not, and it cannot be added, time is but short, and therefore great need we have of God his spirit to teach vs. To this we know, how suddenly death doth take from vs time to come. . . . The best way then to reckon aright, is to make the number, which we may take out, and that which we should subtract, all one, and that is none. If in the way we haply finde something, we may take it for our advantage, and see that we use it to God his glory. For this being set downe, that our daies past are none, and the daies to come none neither: so that no daies past or to come can be counted part of our life, and consequently have none but the present time, which is very little.26

I have used the term cavalier to describe Greenham’s juggling with time, and indeed if we isolate the last few sentences of his reasoning (eliminating only the phrase “to God his glory”), we may realize with a shock that we are hearing the carpe diem philosophy of the Cavalier poets. It is one of the many ironies of the turbulent early seventeenth century that Christian homiletics should come to inform Cavalier hedonism; if the one could say, “This moment called Life is nothing,” the other could reply, “It is the only thing; by your own arithmetic, nothing else exists.” And both would be correct, given their first principles.

The answer to this paradox, of course, is that none of the arithmetic is to be taken any more literally than the corpse, the skeleton, or the skull; it is merely another mask that living creatures have fashioned for death because one cannot face the faceless, a clever response made to the summons because silence is unthinkable. And on the stage, where all reality wears a mask, more than three centuries of drama wrestled in the same way with death, trying to find the mask that would make it acceptable, the response that would send it away.