In its day, Everyman must have caused a sensation. Because we are now so familiar with the play, we tend to take its conventions for granted, seeing in it the beginnings of the great themes of isolation and self-knowledge treated in King Lear and Hamlet, and perhaps even judging the older Moralities by what we admire in Everyman. But the key to Everyman's power is that it turns Morality conventions upside down. This is not to suggest that the play preaches a new moral; it is as firmly orthodox in its doctrine as it is heterodox in its methods, and in fact, as Lawrence V. Ryan points out, "the doctrinal content is Everyman's reason for being." What differs is the method of instruction—a method that not only teaches doctrine in a new way but forces the audience to develop a new way of viewing drama.

In the Mysteries and earlier Moralities, Death is a coda to the piece; the audience watches the linear development of a figure's life and then sees Death strike him down. At the moment of arrest, furthermore, Death becomes a sort of guest lecturer, announcing himself to the audience, explaining his purpose, delivering a homily on good works and repentance, and reminding members of the audience that they, too, will come to dust. The audience is thus given all the information that it needs and is prepared to evaluate the response of Death's victim in terms of what it
has learned from the onstage Death and what it knows of the Dances, Legends, and *Artes moriendi*. The victim himself then becomes an exemplum of, more than a participant in, the discourse between audience and Death.

Such generalizations, of course, must always be modified for individual plays. The *Judgments* and the Wakefield *Lazarus* are after-rather than before-the-fact pronouncements; the battle scene in *Pride of Life* must have included a discourse between Death and Life; and *Humanum Genus*, in the *Castle*, begins to learn about eternal verities at the moment of death. But as a rule, the audience knows more than Death’s victim does, and Death represents the end of a linear progression, the last event in a chain.

In *Everyman*, Death begins the chain of events. Everyman enters as a fully developed human creature, and only as he is learning to die does the audience learn about his life. This retrospective development of plot and character onstage is an innovation in medieval drama, a method of exposition that points backward to Greek and Senecan tragedy and ahead to the powerful tragedies of the Renaissance but does not seem to be allied with the medieval stage. Or does it? The *Judgments*, we recall, are similarly based on explanation by means of past events, and they themselves appear to have their roots in the Dances of Death, which expand the moment of death into a recapitulation of life and an adjustment to the act of dying.

It is insufficient, then, to say, as Jim Corder does, that *Everyman* represents not a Summons of Death but an *Ars vivendi*, a linear description of the creature’s journey from youth to old age and death. It is true that Everyman does not die immediately after the Summons, but neither does he put together a life; rather, he watches with increasing trepidation as his life falls apart—twice.

This dual structure of Everyman’s moment of death teaches the audience to learn in a new way. There are two definitions of self-reliance (actually a form of self-knowledge), and two forms of death. During the first half of the play, the audience knows more about Death than Everyman does but must learn from Everyman about his life. The hero, on the other hand, may instruct the audience piecemeal about the facts of his life but must
learn through questioning about the meaning of his life and death alike. By the midpoint of the play, the hero and audience begin to learn at the same pace; but at this point, both must reevaluate many assumptions formed in the first half of the play. Learning, then, becomes not merely a receiving of information but a development of the ability to formulate questions.\(^3\)

Death is the first of Everyman’s instructors, although Everyman is still so ignorant of the lesson that he cannot formulate the correct questions and therefore cannot understand the instruction. The very opening of the play makes it clear that this “messenger” of God’s is an agent of correction rather than of punishment; God tells the audience that he is sending Death, not to slay evildoers, as in Herod and the Castle, but rather to call people to a “reckoning,” an explanation of what they have done with the lives lent to them. If people are not called to account periodically, says God, they will fall away not only from grace but from their own human nature:

For, and I leave the people thus alone  
In their life and wicked tempests,  
Verily they will become much worse than beasts;  
For now one would by envy another up eat;  
Charity they all do clean forget.\(^4\)

(47–51)

Death appears at God’s summons and pauses only for a brief address to the audience before going in search of Everyman. It is significant, in the context of what will follow, that his address contains only hints; although given a headstart, the audience is not taken entirely into Death’s confidence:

Every man will I beset that liveth beastly  
Out of God’s laws, and dreadeth not folly.  
He that loveth riches I will strike with my dart,  
His sight to blind, and from heaven to depart,  
Except that alms be his good friend. . . .

(74–78)

Everyman then enters, and what follows is unique in the annals of death drama so far: Everyman does not recognize Death when they are face to face. One of two things may be happening
here. First, Death may be costumed as an ordinary messenger, with none of the traditional signs of death, such as skulls, worms, scythe, or spear. This seems unlikely, however; Death mentions that he has a “dart” with him, and the frontispieces of the sixteenth-century printed versions show Death as a skeleton, indicating that people were accustomed to seeing him in this guise. We are left, then, with something almost revolutionary in drama of the time: a skeleton (or mummy) has appeared to Everyman, and Everyman does not notice.

The progress of Everyman’s self-deception may be discerned in his response to Death’s initial summons. At first, he merely echoes Death’s words, a classic method of stalling for time:

_Death:_ In great haste I am sent to thee
From God out of his Majesty.
_Everyman:_ What, sent to me?

(90–92)

Next, ignoring Death’s hint that they are about to “depart” (96), he asks a question whose answer he should already know but does not wish to face: “What desireth God of me?” (97). Death mentions a “reckoning,” and Everyman now falls back on evasion and a pretense not to understand: “To give a reckoning longer leisure I crave; / This blind matter troubleth my wit” (101–02). But the problem with pretended ignorance is that it forces the messenger’s hand; an attempt at evasion, it ironically becomes a demand for further explanation. And Death obligingly repeats his message in more concrete terms, so that Everyman can no longer ignore it. Now that Everyman must deal with a direct but unwelcome statement of fact, his demeanor changes to one of hostility and denial, although his form of denial again serves only to force the messenger’s hand: “Full unready I am such reckoning to give. / I know thee not. What messenger art thou?” (113–14).

To this point, Everyman’s method of learning has been through various stages of denial. By refusing more and more pointedly to accept the message, and by rejecting in turn each of Death’s attempts to explain, he has backed himself into a
mental corner where he is bombarded over and over again with the very message that he is trying to avoid. And because he has finally expressed his rejection in the form of hostility, he has placed himself in a mental framework within which he can no longer formulate questions that will bring him useful answers. The only path out of hostility is through escalated hostility or pacification; there are no grounds for cooperation.

The audience witnessing Everyman’s retreat has meanwhile been subjected to a new kind of dramatic irony—suspense. Knowing the messenger to be Death, and wondering why Everyman does not recognize him, it has watched in fascinated horror this unexpected attempt to escape from the inescapable, much as twentieth-century filmgoers watch in growing dread as the hero wanders closer and closer to a hidden murderer or a monster—except that here the monster is in Everyman’s mind. Everyman is systematically cutting off one escape route after another as he backs toward the corner, and his “I know thee not” is the last fatal step that ushers in the drumroll cadences of Death’s fearful pronouncement, and the crumbling of Everyman’s defenses:

Death: I am Death, that no man dreadeth.
   For every man I ’rest, and no man spareth. . . .
Everyman: O Death! thou comest when I had thee least in mind!

(115–16; 119)

From the arrogant creature who audaciously insulted God’s own messenger, Everyman changes to a pitiful bargainer. First he attempts to bribe Death:

In thy power it lieth me to save,
   Yet of my goods I give thee, if thou will be kind;
   Yea, a thousand pound shalt thou have,
   If thou defer this matter to another day.

(120–23)

When this plea fails, Everyman asks for a reprieve of twelve years so that he can amend his “book of reckoning” and make himself ready for judgment. Death will have none of this. Now becoming
frantic, Everyman grasps at any straw that will make his journey easier to contemplate. Will he come back again if his reckoning is acceptable? Death says no. Will he be able to take his friends along? Death says only if he can find any who are willing to go. Finally, Death impatiently tells Everyman that he is being "mad," and Everyman, who had earlier tried to bargain—first for a reprieve until some indefinite "other day" and then for a respite of "twelve years"—is now reduced to begging for just one more day:

O wretched caitiff! whither shall I flee
That I might 'scape endless sorrow?
Now, gentle Death, spare me till tomorrow,
That I may amend me
With good advisement.

(171-75)

Death refuses to bargain any longer and leaves Everyman alone to begin his journey. Everyman is now in that state of despair that is often brought on by misplaced hope. Still unwilling to accept the inevitable but terrified of what he cannot accept, he cries out against his own existence in words that echo those of the damned souls a century earlier, and that will be echoed by another damned soul—Doctor Faustus—nearly a century later:

Now have I no manner of company
To help me in my journey and me to keep;
And also my writing is full unready.
How shall I do now for to excuse me?
I would to God I had never been gete! . . .
The time passeth; Lord, help, that all wrought.
For though I mourn it availeth naught.
The day passeth, and is almost a-go;
I wot not well what for to do.

(186-90; 193-96)

To this point, in what might be called the first act of the play, Everyman has shown all the symptoms of a person confronted by the idea of his own death: shock, disbelief, resentment, attempts to bargain for smaller and smaller reprieves, and finally
a frenzy of quasi despair that is no despair at all but rather a desperate hope that there must be something one can do to prevent this calamity, if only one had time to think of it. And having rejected the inevitable, Everyman is of course unequipped to deal with it.

Theologically, Everyman is rejecting salvation by rejecting God's message. His attempts at bribery, and his pitiful questions about what happens after death, show that he is still thinking in terms of this world rather than of God's kingdom. The irony of his two questions—will he come back and will he have company?—is that, in heavenly terms, the answers are "yes": he will come back to life in Heaven, and he will have the company of the angels and saints. But in rejecting the lesson that Death brings him, Everyman makes it impossible for Death to tell him what he needs to know. It is a vicious cycle: In order to ask a question, one must already know part of the answer, and because Everyman asks the questions in terms of this world, he cannot receive an answer in terms of the next world.

Further ironies in the play develop from the fact that Death, in his own way, has actually told Everyman many of the things that he will find out through experience during the rest of the play: that only a very "hardy" friend will go with him; that his worldly goods have been only lent to him and will be passed on to someone else when he is gone; and that it is within himself and his "five wits" that he must look for the power to amend his life and find salvation. This, of course, is what Everyman has been told all his life; but he has apparently rejected all of God's messengers during his life, and now having rejected the idea of Death as well, he must struggle through his deathbed suffering to the truth that has always been available to him. Once again, it is not the correct answer that he must find, but rather the correct question.

Psychologically, Everyman has followed a pattern of response to death that is virtually timeless. As Allen D. Goldhammer has pointed out, his interview with Death follows the three preliminary stages of the dying process as defined by modern psychologists: denial, anger, and bargaining.5 Goldhammer, to be sure,
excepts the stage of anger, which, he says, "does not appear until later encounters" (91), but Everyman’s original audience would most likely have seen the anger as well. Death, after all, has announced himself as God’s messenger, and Everyman’s rudeness to him is a violation of the laws of feudal diplomacy, by which a lord’s messenger was to be treated with the same courtesy due to the lord himself. There can be no question about Everyman’s hostility at this stage, and it is at the height of denial and anger that the bargaining process begins.

What might be called the second act of Everyman focuses on Everyman’s growing isolation as he is deserted in turn by Fellowship, Kindred, Cousin, and Goods. As the “betrayals” occur, Everyman is forced further and further toward acceptance of Death and reliance upon himself. The growing hostility that Fellowship, Kindred, and Cousin show as Everyman presses them for a commitment to join him is, as Goldhammer notes, representative of “the inability of friends to accept one’s terminal state” (92). But it is more than this; it is another method of instruction. Everyman’s stock response throughout the departure of the things of the world is “I was deceived.” In other words, he is in the process of being undeceived, of seeing his own rejection of Death as an error once he sees the error manifested in others.

Everyman is also developing a theologically healthy distrust: the things of the world lie. Fellowship offers to accompany him to Hell, but when taken up on the offer, he glibly explains that he meant the offer in terms of bawdry and murder. Kindred and Cousin have also sworn eternal allegiance, but now Kindred has other things to do, and Cousin cannot make the journey because of a cramp in his toe. Significantly, these scenes are the closest thing to comic relief in all of Everyman. Indeed, in other circumstances the scenes would be quite funny, but their juxtaposition with Everyman’s impending death makes them shocking instead, not only to Everyman but to the audience.

It is tempting, at this point in the play, for hero and audience alike to reject Fellowship, Kindred, and Cousin utterly; to view them in the light of the traditional comic devil or Vice and to cast them off as betrayers of the soul. And at this point in the
Death as Educator

play, it is a reasonable response. But hero and audience will later have to reevaluate the response in terms of the second set of false friends, and will find that what is to be rejected is the attachment to worldly connections, not the connections themselves. And here lies the reason for the abortive comicality of the scenes. The audience is being led to reject the frivolity on stage as something inappropriate to the action; it is being directed into forming a scale of values about what is most important in the universe; and, like Everyman, it is being prepared for the next set of lessons.

Goods is the last of the earthly betrayers, and the most malicious of the four. Closely allied to Covetousness, the Vice of the Castle, he has been deliberately lying to Everyman all along and has led him into avarice only to damn him. His mockery of Everyman sounds curiously like Garcio’s mockery of Humanum Genus; and in a crushing irony, it is also a recapitulation of Death’s warning to Everyman:

Death: What! weenest thou thy life is given thee,
And thy worldly goods also?
Everyman: I had weened so, verily.
Death: Nay, nay; it was but lent thee;
For, as soon as thou art gone,
Another a while shall have it, and then go therefrom
Even as thou has done.

(161-67)

Goods: As for a while I was lent thee,
A season thou hast had me in prosperity. . . .
Therefore to the soul Goods is a thief;
For when thou art dead, this is my guise—
Another to deceive in the same wise
As I have done thee, and all to his soul’s reprief.

(440-41; 447-50)

Goods’ apparent viciousness is a last step in dramatic misdirection; just as the audience has been led to reject earthly companions for their inappropriate frivolity, so it will now despise earthly goods for their inherent evil. Not until the second half of the play will the audience have to revise its judgment and see all
the rejected earthly things in their proper context. But while the audience is rejecting, Everyman is being rejected, and both are approaching the midpoint at which they will begin to learn together.

The order of these rejections, furthermore, is not only dramatically effective but doctrinally sound and psychologically accurate. Ryan has noted that the false friends “appear in a climactic order according to the increasing danger of each as a distraction from one’s maker,” and indeed the attachment to worldly companions and goods is seen as one of the major temptations of the devil in the *Ars moriendi*. In Lydgate’s *Dance of Death*, it is difficult to part with loved ones, but even more difficult, as the Burgess says, to part with “Howses rentes / tresoure & substauns”:

There-fore / wise is no creature
That sette his herte / on gode that mote disseuere
The worlde hit lente / & he will hit recure
And who moste hathe / lothest dieth euer.

(308-12)

The Empress, too, in Lydgate’s poem, sees the temptations in this order, although in her summary of vanities she lists them in descending order of importance:

All worldly power / now may me nat availe
Raunsoun kyndrede / frenship nor worthynesse
Syn deth is come / myn hih estât tassaile.

(78-80)

Such hierarchic ranking of theological dangers is grounded in the psychology of relationships between the self and things outside the self. Each false friend in *Everyman* is closer to Everyman’s self: Fellowship is a peripheral thing that is often changed with time, locality, or mood; Kindred is something closer to the self, something that is always there and can be drawn on at will; Cousin is the specific manifestation of Kindred that seems to mirror the self; and Goods is a mistaken image of the self—personal objects that one has gathered outside oneself as an identity for the self. It is this increasing degree of identification with the
self that makes each attachment increasingly dangerous to the soul, and increasingly shattering to the psyche when the objects are removed.

As each betrayal comes closer to what Everyman perceives as his own identity, then, he feels his identity being stripped away layer by layer until, in worldly terms, he is a nonentity. But by this process he has also been forced to discard the worldly terms with which he previously bolstered his rejection of Death; and now that he is reduced to his real self, he is ready to find terms in which to ask the right questions.

It is at this moment of spiritual and emotional nakedness that the third act may be said to begin. For the first time, Everyman accepts the fact of his isolation and, in doing so, also accepts the fact that what he is and does is more important than what he has. His earlier wish that he had never been born now gives way to a healthier kind of self-hate, one based on self-realization and a desire to change:

Then of myself I was ashamed,
And so I am worthy to be blamed;
Thus may I well myself hate.
Of whom shall I now counsel take?
I think that I shall never speed
Till that I go to my Good Deeds.
But alas! she is so weak
That she can neither go nor speak.

(476-83)

Doctrinally, he has gone through the first steps of repentance: acknowledgment of sins, sorrow for the sins, and resolution to sin no more. And psychologically, he is learning to see things as they are instead of as he wishes them to be, to accept the fact of his imperfections, and to work through his difficulties instead of denying them or blaming them on others. This is the emotional state that leads to health, and the spiritual state that leads to salvation. By turning to Good Deeds for counsel, he is not only reaffirming the doctrine of salvation through good works, but is asserting his own integrity as a person responsible for his
own actions. Later in the play, he will carry this self-reliance too far, trusting in his physical properties rather than in his soul, but now it is a healthy sign that he is ready to stand alone without worldly props.

When Good Deeds introduces Everyman to Knowledge, then, she is actually showing him something that he has gained through his own efforts: the nosce teipsum of the Artes moriendi. In this sense, Knowledge is not the end product of learning, as we think of it today, but rather the process itself, the insight that enables one to learn. And theologically it is the acknowledgment of sin that is the first step toward repentance, the opening of the soul to grace.

Confession, the first of the sacraments that Everyman will go to on his journey to death, is quite clear about the relationship between thoughts and deeds on the path to salvation. He says to Everyman:

Because with Knowledge ye come to me,
I will you comfort as well as I can,
And precious jewel I will give thee,
Called penance, voider of adversity. . . .
Ask God mercy, and He will grant truly;
When with the scourge of penance man doth him bind,
The oil forgiveness then shall he find.

(558-61; 570-72)

As in the earlier Ars moriendi, penance is viewed not only as a punishment for sin but as a form of prepayment that diminishes the time in Purgatory:

Everyman: In the name of the Holy Trinity,
My body sore punished shall be.
Take this, body, for the sin of the flesh. . . .
Now of penance I will wade the water clear,
To save me from purgatory, that sharp fire.

(611-13; 617-18)

The intent to undergo punishment, and the active working out of the intent, are in themselves good deeds that add to
Everyman's store. Thus, his penance strengthens his previously meager Good Deeds, who is finally able to rise from the floor and accompany Everyman to his reckoning.

It is interesting, in this context, to look ahead a century to Claudius's abortive repentance scene in *Hamlet*. Claudius's rueful "Words without thoughts never to Heaven go" (3.3.98) appears at first glance to be a properly Protestant remark on the inefficacy of verbal formula unaccompanied by faith; but if we look more closely at the scene, we can see Everyman's dilemma without Everyman's solution. Claudius has earlier mused:

**But oh, what form of prayer**
*Can serve my turn? "Forgive me my foul murder"?*
*That cannot be, since I am still possessed*
*Of those effects for which I did the murder—*
*My crown, mine own ambition, and my Queen.*
*May one be pardoned and retain the offense?*

(3.3.51-56)

The answer, of course, is no. Claudius has balked after the first step—acknowledgment of sin—and will not go on to confession and amendment. The will to action is missing; what Claudius has really said is, "Thoughts without deeds never to Heaven go."

In contrast, Everyman has taken the next, active step. Good Deeds now clothes him in the symbolic garment of contrition and readies his book of reckoning, and Everyman seems almost eager to begin his journey:

**Everyman:** Now blessed be Jesu, Mary's Son,
*For now have I on true contrition.
And let us go now without tarrying;*
*Good Deeds, have we clear our reckoning?*
**Good Deeds:** Yea, indeed I have it here.
**Everyman:** Then I trust we need not fear.
*Now, friends, let us not part in twain.*

(649-55)

In a lesser play, this would be the resolution and happy ending, with Everyman striding off triumphantly to salvation. Surely the contemporary audience would have thought it so—but, like
Everyman, the audience would have been mistaken. It is at this point that the play begins again.

Before Everyman can go to his reckoning, he is given four new companions: Strength, Discretion, Beauty, and Five Wits. Since they are introduced by the steadfast guides Knowledge and Good Deeds, and since Everyman is in a state of grace, it is easy to accept the new companions as true friends, in contrast to the false friends of the early scenes. Everyman, we may assume, has now learned his lesson and will rely on his own properties rather than on things outside himself. And has not Death earlier counselled him that his Five Wits will show him the way to salvation (168)? But these companions, like the others, will desert him.

All starts well, certainly. The new friends promise to stay with Everyman “unto death’s hour” (688)—a promise that has ominous overtones only in retrospect—and Five Wits delivers a theologically correct homily to Everyman on the efficacy of the sacraments. It is only after Everyman leaves the stage to receive the last two sacraments (the eucharist and extreme unction) that the more alert members of the audience may begin to see some limitations in even these new friends. Five Wits has praised the priesthood as the highest guide for humankind; but after Everyman’s departure, Knowledge adds that the office of the priesthood is sometimes betrayed by sinful priests, and delivers a satire in little on such bad shepherds. Five Wits seems curiously obtuse about Knowledge’s point:

Five Wits: I trust to God no such may we find.
Therefore let us priesthood honor,
And follow their doctrine for our souls’ succor.

(764–66)

Such an overly sanguine view of reality begins to be called into question almost as soon as Everyman reenters. Suddenly, for the first time since the Summons of Death, Everyman begins to feel the death signs physically: “Alas! I am so faint I may not stand, / My limbs under me do fold” (788–89). And the physical properties on which he has relied perhaps too much begin to fail him. First his Beauty goes, then his Strength, with Discretion
following shortly thereafter; and finally even his Five Wits desert him. Moreover, despite his earlier experience with the things of the world, he is no more able to accept the second set of betrayals than he was the first. Even more to the point, the more querulously he accuses them of treachery, the more hostile they become, much in the manner of the first false friends:

Everyman: Strength, you to displease I am to blame;
    Yet promise is debt, this ye well wot.
Strength: In faith, I care not!
    Thou art but a fool to complain.
    You spend your speech and waste your brain;
    Go, thrust thee into the ground.

(820-25)

What has happened? Surely Everyman's state of grace, bolstered by Knowledge and the sacraments, should have prepared him to bid a more even-minded farewell to the world, or at least to expect less of it. And yet this last set of departures calls forth his most agonized response: "O Jesu, help! All hath forsaken me!" (851).

Theologically, Everyman has been attacked by the most insidious temptation described in the Ars moriendi: the temptation to vainglory. Having given up his attachment to things outside himself, he has come to rely too much on himself; having cast off despair and watched his Good Deeds grow, he has wandered too close to the sin of presumption. Like Moriens in the Ars, he has heard the devil's whisper: "O how thou art ferme & stedfast in the faythe, o how thou art sure in hope, o how thou art stronge & pacyent, o how thou haste doon many good dedes."

The key to this double temptation of Everyman's—first to despair and then to vainglory—lies in what he and the audience have been learning about the uses of earthly things. Just as Five Wits has proved an insufficient companion, even after having been recommended as a guide by both Death and Knowledge, so Goods has reappeared as a help to salvation, even after having lured Everyman to the edge of damnation:
Everyman: In alms half my goods I will give with my hands twain
In the way of charity, with good intent,
And the other half still shall remain;
I it bequeath to be returned there it ought to be.
This I do in despite of the fiend of hell,
To go quite out of his peril
Ever after and this day.

(699-705)

And in fact Goods has earlier hinted to Everyman how riches may be used either for good or for evil:

Goods: But if thou had me loved moderately during,
As to the poor to give part of me,
Then shouldst thou not in this dolor be,
Nor in this great sorrow and care.

(431-34)

The things of the world, in other words, have a neutral capability and are good or evil only as the human creature uses them. The first companions—even Goods—were never evil in themselves; they betrayed Everyman only because he had used them to betray himself. And the new companions were not good in themselves; Everyman had obviously turned Beauty and Strength into bawdry and riot with Fellowship (271-82) and had used his Five Wits to seek out pleasure rather than Knowledge.

Everyman, in fact, has made the same mistake twice, relying on temporal answers instead of eternal questions. And in this second form of the same error, the audience has been led to join him, by being lulled into the expectation of a happy ending too soon, only to be even more bitterly disappointed than Everyman himself. Whereas the audience was able to feel smug in its foreknowledge during the first betrayal, it has now been tricked by the reversal of a dramatic convention into identifying more closely with the tricked Everyman, and will instinctively echo his anguished cry: “O Jesu, help! All hath forsaken me!”

But as always in Everyman, it is not only the theology or the dramaturgy that persuades. Psychologically, Everyman has
reached the last and most profound depth in the process of dying: the point at which the dying person begins to lose control of his faculties. As Beauty departs, he must learn to accept the repulsiveness of his own person, so graphically described in the death-signs lyrics; as Strength and Discretion go, he must deal with the frustration of not being able to move or think as he wishes; and as his Five Wits leave him, he must watch helplessly the final flickering out of what has been his only universe.

It is this very helplessness that makes Everyman’s descent into the grave so poignant—and so victorious. It is the letting go of the self that we all fear the most, the recognition that there is nothing further to be done, that we have lost control, that our solipsistic assumptions about our own importance are dissolving before our eyes. It is Nothing encroaching upon Everything. It is the end.

At this moment, the self is stripped, not only of the accretions of the world, but of its very selfhood. And at this moment of apparent annihilation, who would not be tempted to cry with Everyman, “All hath forsaken me”? The answer, of course, as Conrad Aiken has pointed out, is the Christ himself “cried his ‘forsaken’ . . . on the darkening hilltop.” And Everyman, in his final letting go, is joining Christ in his final agony.

The Ars moriendi, we remember, encouraged meditations on the Passion as a way of uniting the soul with Christ crucified. Although Everyman has perhaps unconsciously echoed Christ’s words in his last shock of self-realization, his doing so rescues him from vainglory, forces him to turn back to his Good Deeds for help (instead of to his earthly personhood), and locates him on the correct road to Heaven: that state of healthy uncertainty prescribed by the Ars, in which the soul will not presume to say “yf he be dygne or worthy to haue deserued the loue of god, or the hate of god.” Having seen, as Lydgate’s Bishop put it, that “al shal passe / safe oneli owre mérite,” Everyman puts his trust in Good Deeds, whom he now recognizes as his only “true friend” (855), asks God for mercy, and commends his spirit to God in Christ’s words from the cross: “In manus tuas—of might’s most / Forever—commendo spiritum meum” (886–87).
It is ended. After Everyman and Good Deeds go into the grave together, Knowledge announces that Everyman’s soul has indeed made a good reckoning, and an Angel appears to call Everyman’s soul to bliss. Everything has happened with lightning speed—one hundred and fifty lines from Knowledge’s dispute with Five Wits to Everyman’s death and salvation, as compared with seven hundred lines from Death’s announcement to Everyman’s penance. There has been no gradual winding down in debate, as in the Castle and Pride of Life; no lengthy explanation, as in Herod and Lazarus. We go to the grave with Everyman, and the play is over. This type of whirlwind ending that deliberately leaves the audience shaken was to culminate in the great tragedies of the Renaissance, the shattering last scenes of Hamlet and King Lear that leave the audience stunned, drained, and finally ready to ask the correct questions.

The Doctor’s epilogue, then, like the last words of Fortinbras and Albany, are meant more to ease the tension than to instruct. As spectators, we have already experienced the lesson: we have been shuttled between the expected and the unexpected in dramatic convention; we have been knowing observers of the playwright’s irony and smug dupes of our own expectations; and, having been thrown off balance by the dual nature of our response, we are at last left in the same healthy state of doubt as Everyman’s—a doubt that turns to anagnorisis only with the last-minute announcement of Everyman’s salvation. As we gather up our coats and trail out into the street, we too may be looking cautiously over our shoulders, wondering, like Everyman, whether we “be dygne or worthy to haue deserued the loue of god, or the hate of god.”