Death Takes an Alias

The Late Moralities and the Secular Mode

Personified death rarely makes an appearance under his own name on the English stage of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, and it is tempting to attribute the figure's disappearance to a simple cause: as the Mystery and Morality Plays gave way to "real-life" drama, allegorical personages become inappropriate. But this standard explanation not only oversimplifies the case but ignores what actually happened to the drama of the period. The Morality play itself continued well into the last decades of the sixteenth century and was then permuted into the masque, in which deities, spirits, virtues, and vices still paraded in fancy dress. Even "real-life" plays continued to feature allegorical figures, if only in plays within the plays or in prologues or debates between the acts. And ghosts and devils haunted the stage until the closing of the theaters in 1642. If Tragedy and Comedy, Fortune and Fame, and Hecate and Mephistophilis could walk the stage, why then was Death absent from their company?

Paradoxically, beginning in the latter half of the sixteenth century, death as an event became far more common on the stage than it had been during the previous two centuries. Seneca-influenced, multiple-murder plays like Selimus and Soliman and Perseda often yielded in excess of a dozen corpses onstage and another half-dozen offstage, while even the great tragedies like
Hamlet and The Duchess of Malfi left the stage littered with bodies in their last scenes. The bony sergeant, strict in his arrest, might well complain, like the devils of the Wakefield Judgment, that his increased workload in these latter days was driving him to exhaustion. Absent from the stage—no, but he appeared under a series of aliases, becoming a symbol rather than an allegory.¹

To speak of Death’s “alias,” however, is to invite another common misconception about his role. Scholars have been almost unanimous in seeing a symbolized Death in any figure of punishment or retribution in sixteenth-century Moralities. But this member of a “series of allegorical figures who signify judgment and punishment in this life”² is not necessarily our skeletonic friend of the N-Town Herod; in fact, given the theology of the day, he is more often a preacher of conversion. Of the twelve “aliases” listed by Peter J. Houle in The English Morality and Related Drama, for example, only one is an actual summons of and to death (God’s Plague in Enough Is as Good as a Feast); the others are figures of temporal punishment or political reform.³ It is easy to understand how scholars and critics have come to make this error; the fault is not theirs but the rise of a new system of reward and punishment in the late Morality. Simply stated, in these plays the good do not die.

It may be helpful, in this regard, to digress for a moment on the nature of the Morality hero. In the Middle Ages, the old Man-kind figure was a mixture of good and evil. As in the Castle, he might backslide any number of times after being won over to virtue, or, as in Everyman, he might do a few good deeds among his bad ones. But generally, at the moment of death, he would achieve anagnorisis and be granted a second chance for salvation—either through penance or through the intercession of the Blessed Virgin—and, if necessary, could complete his penance in Purgatory. Almost all these properties of the Catholic Mankind were refuted by early Protestant theology, and, as one might expect, the characters in the plays changed accordingly.

Again, those critics who note the growing division between good and bad morality figures, the tendency of the protagonist to become almost a Vice or a Virtue himself, may be reasoning
backward about dramatic development.\textsuperscript{4} The all-good or all-bad protagonist is certainly no closer to the realism of later drama than is the lovable, ruffianlike King of Life or the poor, bewildered Everyman; if anything, the new types are less convincing as humans than their predecessors. Rather, the Protestant (and particularly the Calvinist) theology of predestination, the classification of all souls as unchangeably either elect or reprobate, may have given rise to onstage souls of the same order.

Although Lutherans and early Calvinists disputed the exact nature and consequences of predestination, and although the developing Anglican theology eventually rejected the Calvinist doctrine of perseverance in grace (see chapter 7), most of the Protestant Morality Plays that we shall consider here show the influence of ideas held by the Calvinist party within the English church; and these ideas almost naturally call for such a bifurcation of humanity. Since a creature’s destiny is sealed before birth, there can be no last-minute change; in fact, there can be no change at all. True, the elect experience a “conversion,” a “turning again” to God; but the reprobate are doomed to evil all their lives. Backsliding and subsequent recovery are out of the question, because the elect are given the gift of perseverance, and any soul which does not persevere in faith and holiness is ipso facto reprobate.\textsuperscript{5} A Calvinist Humanum Genus would not be accepted into the Castle of Perseverance a second time, nor would his prayer for mercy be answered once he left.

Furthermore, as I have noted in chapter 2, in a system predicated upon justification by faith alone, the anagnorisis—in this case, the conversion or attaining of faith—must come well before the moment of death; as a gift from God, it must be complete from the start; and as a sign of salvation, it must remain unshaken to the end. According to Calvin: “wherever this faith is alive, it must have along with it the hope of eternal salvation as its inseparable companion. Or rather, it engenders and brings forth hope from itself. When this hope is taken away, however eloquently or elegantly we discourse concerning faith, we are convicted of having none” (Institutes, III.iii.42). The fearful Everyman and confused Dying Creature, learning about faith at the last
moment and trembling in terror of Judgment, would stand convicted as charged.

In a Protestant Morality, then, the souls to be saved must evince their election throughout the play; but, unfortunately, unmitigated goodness and surety of salvation make for singularly dull drama. We must have villains to boo as well as heroes to cheer, and if the villains are ineffectual from the beginning, we are deprived of the suspense that lends savor to our booing. We must also have the horrible example to show us what might have happened instead; but in a theological system that denies free will and damns backsliding, the horrible example must come from outside the good hero. And since vice itself cannot die, the bad character must be a reprobate human creature rather than a vice.

Like all such generalizations, of course, these must allow for exceptions. Not all the new Moralities are strictly Calvinist, nor even are all the Calvinist plays totally consistent. The two “bad” children in Nice Wanton, for example, repent at the hour of death; and it is never quite clear in Trial of Treasure whether Lust is a reprobate soul or simply one of Just’s temptations (the good do not have vices). In addition, as with the drama of the preceding two centuries, we must generalize only from fragments that have survived, without ever being sure of what has been lost or why. And we must also remember that, concurrently with the new drama, the old continued to play, both in private performance and on the pageant wagons in public streets.

That much of the old drama persisted is evident from town records, at least as far as the Mystery pageants are concerned. The Catholic Morality plays may have died an earlier death, perhaps out of irrelevancy to the new religion, perhaps out of fear. The 1520s through 1550s were indeed frightening times for some. One of the hallmarks of the English Reformation was the close association of religious belief with loyalty to the ruling monarch, who was not only temporal but spiritual ruler. Proponents of the old religion, therefore, became not only heretics but traitors and, as such, were liable to the terrible penalties for treason. Their position was complicated by uncertainty as to what the “old” and “new” religions were; during Henry VIII’s reign, at least, articles
of faith seemed to change every few years. One year there might be three sacraments, the next year, seven; praying for the dead might be encouraged today and taboo tomorrow. Considering the Treasonable Utterances Act passed under the aegis of Thomas Cromwell in 1534, by which even idle conversation became as actionable as a printed pamphlet, it may have been safer not to produce any of the plays that contained questionable doctrine.7

As we have seen in Epaphroditus's deathbed confession of faith,8 such spiritual and doctrinal confusion tends to lead more often to doctrinal polemics than to the simple faith originally professed by the Reformation itself; and for the soul's solace under such conditions, it becomes easier to decry a common spiritual enemy than to flounder among one's own uncertainties. Consequently, as Rainer Pineas has pointed out, “where the old play warned its audience against errors of conduct, the new play, for the most part, warned its audience against errors of theology—namely, Catholicism.”9 And because the new drama was given over to propaganda and controversy, attention was necessarily drawn away from the individual soul. Whole systems were now on trial, not the poor dying creature within the system.

And yet the Mystery cycles survived well into the reign of Elizabeth I, although her proclamation of 16 May 1559 prohibited the performance of plays “wherein either matters of religion or of the governance of the estate of the common weale shalbe handled or treated,” unless such plays were approved and licensed by local authorities.10 Gradually, however, the licensing restrictions and popular aversion to the old religion took their toll. In some townships, the authorities simply denied licenses; in others, where the populace still clung to old ideas or traditions, a little bureaucratic neglect shuffled the applications to the bottom of a growing pile of business, where they were conveniently lost. Throughout the 1560s, the popular cycles gradually starved to death or strangled in red tape, and by 1570, the York cycle—the last of the great pageants—breathed its last.11

Perhaps coincidentally, but more likely not, the 1560s and 1570s have given us the largest surviving bulk of new drama since the Mystery cycles themselves. It was in these two decades that
the translations of Seneca’s plays began coming off English presses; and it was in these two decades, too, that Protestant Moralities, secular tragedies, English chronicle plays, and classic and domestic comedies and farces virtually jostled each other off the stage in their bid for public favor. Despite the licensing requirements that were probably meant to clear the boards of Roman Catholics on the right and Anabaptists on the left, the Elizabethan settlement opened up a far wider middle ground of allowable religious content in the drama of the day. To be sure, it was still good policy to attack Romanism on stage; this was not dealing with “matters of religion” but rather deriding a foreign power. And as long as God could be kept off the stage, even the most blatant preaching might pass for ethical instruction—as long, too, as it did not contradict the growing list of articles of faith, which were now primarily Calvinist, though with enough latitude for many interpretations short of Rome or Anabaptism. With the extremes effectively closed off, the middle road lay open on the stage, and hordes of new playwrights rushed to catch the nearest way.

Of the new Morality playwrights, one of the most interesting is W[illiam?] Wager, whose *The Longer Thou livest*, *The More Fool Thou Art* (ca. 1567) and *Enough Is as Good as a Feast* (ca. 1570) show both the development of the all-good or all-bad protagonist and the return of Death to the stage. Moros, the “fool” of *The Longer Thou livest*, is a descendant of the earlier youth-play heroes, who are seduced into vice until they are brought back to the fold by a combination of grace, the Virtues, illness, self-knowledge, and the hanging of their evil companions. But Moros, like the reprobate sons in another youth-play of the time, Misogonus, never does return to the fold, despite the urging and instructions of Discipline, Piety, and Exercitation. A fool at the beginning, he remains a fool at the end, ignoring, like the revelers in the *Pardoner’s Tale*, the warning of the Legend.

Although Houle, as I have noted, cites God’s Judgment as the Death-figure in *The Longer Thou livest*, he is so only in the sense that he warns Moros of the end and administers a temporal judgment along with Moros’s sudden illness:
God’s Judgment: With this sword of vengeance I strike thee.

[Strike Moros and let him fall down.]

Thy wicked household shall be dispersed,
Thy children shall be rooted out to the fourth degree
Like as the mouth of God hath rehearsed.

(l. 1791–94)

Moros seems dazed and ignorant of what has happened; speaking to himself rather than to God’s Judgment, he muses on his sudden discomfort as being perhaps the “falling sickness” or the “palsy” (1795–98). And when God’s Judgment urges him, “If thou hast grace for mercy now call,” Moros seems not to hear him. The days of the Castle are gone, and Moros, as a reprobate Protestant, does not have the grace to call for mercy. Instead, he dismisses his uneasiness as a fit of indigestion, and God’s Judgment fairly snorts in disgust, pronouncing a Calvinist judgment on the oblivious Moros:

Moros: It was but a qualm came over my heart;
I lack nothing but a cup of good wine.

God’s Judgment: Indurate wretches can not convert
But die in their filthiness like swine.

(1803–06)

Confusion, the actual Summons, then enters to bear Moros to Hell, but before they go, both Confusion and God’s Judgment point out to Moros for fifty lines that all the world will now scorn him. Only at the end of this diatribe does Confusion refer to Moros’s punishment in the afterworld:

God’s Judgment: To all the world shall appear thy abusition,
Thy wickedness, and false belief to great and small.

(1809–10)

Confusion: But thou art now a peasant of all peasants,
A derision and mock to man and woman.
Come forth of thy folly to receive thy hire,
Confusion, poverty, sickness and punishment;
And after this life, eternal fire
Due for fools that be impenitent.

(1845–50)
What we have here is the converse of the faithful man's deathbed in the *Sicke Mannes Salve*. Epaphroditus, we remember, was concerned with his good fame as an elect Christian soul; and his friends hastened to assure him that they would tell everyone about his dying demeanor and the tangible signs of God's favor that surrounded him—that is, his worldly success. Moros, on the other hand, is punished with bad fame and worldly failure, damnation coming almost as an afterthought. It is not merely, as some critics have suggested, that "the distinction between heaven and earth . . . becomes less acute" in these plays, or that the afterworld loses its significance; rather, with the Judgment having occurred before birth, Heaven and Hell become foregone conclusions, and the soul, in trying to determine whether it is saved or damned, looks more and more toward outward signs of grace. That these signs should come to include worldly comfort or pain is almost an inevitable result, and since death is the ultimate worldly pain, we should not be surprised to find, as I have noted earlier, that in these plays only the bad souls die.

This is not to suggest that the good never suffer any pain at all in the Protestant Moralities, but they do so only infrequently, and usually offstage. One of the few instances of this holy suffering occurs in the *Trial of Treasure* (ca. 1567), an anonymous play obviously meant more as exhortation than as entertainment; it is prefaced by Saint Paul's stricture to "Do all things to edify the congregation," and has as its good hero a figure much given to preaching to both his on- and offstage audience. Just, the elect soul, indeed often tends toward a Malvolio-like, gloomy brand of Puritanism; to his counterpart, Lust, whom he has caught singing, he declares:

*Just:* But remember ye not the wise man's sentence?
It is better in the house of mourning to be
Than in the house of laughter, where folly hath residence,
For lightness with wisdom cannot agree.

*(Dodsley, 3:264)*
Preachers such as William Perkins were later to exhort their congregations in the same way, putting laughter only one step below dancing in sinfulness:

Againe, if we must give an account of every idle word, then also of every idle gesture and pace: and what account can be given of these paces backward & forward, of caprings, jumpes, gambols, turning, with many other friskes of lightnesse and vanitie, more beseeming goats and apes, of whom they are commonly used, then men. Whereas Salomon esteemed laughter as madnesse, he would (no doubt) have condemned our common lascivious dauncing much more for madnesse, laughter being but the least part of it.  

We may be inclined to agree with Lust when he tells Just: “I think thou hast drunk of Morpheus seed. / Thou goest like a dromedary, dreamy and drowsy” (3:264). But that is beside the point.

Although Lust’s wrestling match with Just, and Just’s declaration that “Inordinate lust with the just may not dwell” (3:266), would seem to make Lust one of Just’s tempters, Lust is obviously the reprobate soul in this play. He himself is tempted by “Inclination the Vice,” is drawn to his damnation by Lady Treasure and her brother, Pleasure, and is taken away by an interesting Death-figure: Time the Destroyer, whom I shall discuss shortly. But before Lust dies, he is “vexed with pain” by God’s Visitation, not a punisher in this play, but an even-handed giver of pain to just and unjust alike, sent to try men’s souls.

Theologians such as Richard Greenham did indeed speak of the “crosses” that the elect were given in order to humble them before God and thus bring about their regeneration; under such crosses, the elect would feel the strengthening power of God’s grace, and, having come through the trial, would be comforted both spiritually and—Greenham hints—materially. The reprobate, denied this grace, would sink under the tribulation. So God’s Visitation, although he refers to himself as “God’s minister,” makes it plain that he is a trial for the soul rather than God’s “mighty messenger,” Death:
God’s Visitation: Even now I am come from visiting the Just,  
Because God beginneth first with his elect;  
But he is so associated and comforted with Trust,  
That no kind of impatience his soul can infect.  

(3:294-95)

We may begin to recognize, here, the deathbed temptation to impatience, to which even the medieval Moriens was subjected. Moriens was supported in his trial by the saints and angels; Just is supported by Trust (that is, in God). But Moriens died; Just is given his Consolation in this world, and lives:

Consolation: Consolation is my name, even as Trust hath said,  
Which is joy or comfort in this life transitory. . . .  
Trust: Receive this crown of felicity now at this space,  
Which shall be made richer at the celestial place. . . .  
Just: Now praised be God for this riches of renown;  
Felicity, in this world, the just doth enjoy.  

(3:298)

This, of course, is the crucial point of divergence in the new moralities. We never see Just struggling through his deathbed temptations; we do not see him emerging triumphant in Heaven; nor do we see Lust and Just confronting each other at the Last Judgment. In fact, the medieval Ars and Doctrynall would most likely have considered Trial of Treasure a dangerous play, in that it might encourage the sick to hope for life as a reward for their patience. Everyman, we remember, was rebuked by Death for hoping to “come again shortly” to life if his reckoning was accounted good (146-52).

Part of the departure from tradition may be theological; that is, Just’s recuperation is actually the process of regeneration, the dying of the old man and the rebirth of the new, helped by the visitation of humbling tribulation (although Just has seemed quite regenerate enough during the earlier scenes). Perhaps we are also witnessing an allegorization of the injunction that he who would gain his life must be willing to lose it, here to be interpreted (ironically enough) in earthly terms. And in addition, we may be dealing with a sense of community among an increasingly alienated
group of believers. That is, when one sees oneself as a member of God’s elect among a nation of reprobates, it is tempting also to project oneself as being lovingly protected from the evils that beset the rest of erring mankind. Therefore, although we (as the elect) know that all must die, to preserve our elect image we may want to posit a greater longevity for ourselves in which to enjoy God’s blessings as an example to the evil. The Just, in other words, will inherit the earth—if only on stage.

All these considerations, undoubtedly, came into play in shaping the survival of the good on stage during the 1560s and 1570s. But as explanations they cry for explanations themselves. Above all, what we are seeing is the same shift of emphasis that we noticed in the death literature of the century: the truncation of the stages of dying. When fear of death is forbidden as a sign of damnation (or of cowardice), the human creature is expected to proceed immediately to the psychological stage of acceptance, bypassing denial, anger, bargaining, and despair completely.\(^1\) And yet, such immediate acceptance is dramatically unrecognizable as death; and unless it is accompanied by a heroic gesture such as martyrdom, battle, or death-before-dishonor, it is especially unrecognizable as a victorious death. The simple, uncomplaining death of the innocent, in fact, gives the audience a sense not of triumph but of pathos; and to achieve a dramatic contrast between the all-good and the all-bad we cannot afford to present the good as pathetic.

In effect, the denial of death here has been transferred to the audience as well as to the villain. And we should not be surprised; we have seen the beginnings of this trend in Dürer’s Knight riding confidently past Death and the Devil, in the transformations of the Dance of Death into the Hidden Death, in the broadsides and ballads threatening only malefactors with Death, in the substitution of the Triumph of Christ for the Triumph of Death, and in the growing use of the memento mori as a lucky charm to ward off death. Nor should we condemn the new practice of dealing with death anxiety any more than we condemned the ubiquitous skeleton of the Middle Ages; every
society, as we have seen, has its own mental shorthand about its fears, and the prevalence of this particular convention at its time indicates that, for its time, it assuaged its inventors’ fears. In the 1580s it would come to be rejected, but by then it had served its moral purpose and could afford to give way to a new, dramatic one.

And yet the anonymous playwright of *Trial of Treasure* seems to have had trouble with his shorthand at the end of the play. Just survives his tribulation conventionally, but Lust’s demise is almost in the nature of a retreat from the hypothesis of the play, transforming as it does the reprobate into a cast-off property of the elect. Lust has been struck down by God’s Visitation, and we expect to see him lose his Pleasure and Treasure and be carried off to Hell—but something goes awry. God’s Visitation does take Pleasure away, but only because the godly deserve Pleasure whereas the ungodly have forfeited it. And Treasure? Unlike the Goods who forsook Everyman, Treasure refuses to leave Lust, even when Time enters and declares that they both must perish:

*Time: I am ent’red in presently for a certain purpose—
   Even to turn Treasure to rust and slime,
   And Lust, which hath long disdained the Just,
   Ensuing his filthy and vile inclination,
   Shall immediately be turned to dust,
   To the example of all the whole congregation.*

(Dodsley, 3:296)

It appears, oddly enough, that Lust can take his Treasure with him, and the two go off hand in hand with Time, who returns shortly “with a similitude of dust and rust” (S.D. 3:299). Although Time still speaks of Lust as one of the ungodly—that is, a personage in his own right—Just’s question, “What foolish man in them [Lust and Treasure] will put trust / If this be the final end of their bliss?” (3:299), suggests that either he or the playwright is beginning to confuse Lust with one of the Vices of the play. What we finally have, at the end of *Trial of Treasure*, then, is the same warning that Everyman, Humanum Genus, and all their kind once received—that worldly things will pass away. Time and
Just, in spite of their original roles, emerge in their last speeches as our old friend the Dreary Death, the audience-directed warning; and Time himself gives voice to the words that we will hear again in *The Faerie Queene* and all the laments for faded flowers:

*Time:* You know that all such things are subject to time;  
Therefore me to withstand is no reason or rhyme;  
For like as all things in time their beginning had,  
So must all things in time vanish and fade.

(3:296-97)

Although we are quickly reassured that “Just, possessing Trust, remaineth constantly” (3:300), the formula has already begun to slip, and Time the Destroyer takes Death’s place on the stage, as he will do in the poetry of the next hundred years.\(^{19}\)

For W. Wager, on the other hand, the formula does not slip. Heavenly Man and Worldly Man, in *Enough Is as Good as a Feast*, remain human to the end, and Worldly Man’s death is exactly what it should be: panicky, angry, sniveling, and damned. Worldly Man, indeed, may be considered either as a direct descendant of the medieval Humanum Genus or as a forerunner of the tragic heroes of the next several decades, in that he is presented with a series of choices that determine his fate. But his tragic flaw is here construed as his predestined nature, so that his choices are seen not as free will but as the fruits of his pre-birth damnation. As Enough, the Virtue of the play, says:

*Enough:* But it is an old saying and true certainly:  
It will not out of the flesh that is bred in the bone verily.  
The worldly man will needs be a worldly man still.

(861-63)

One of the marks of Worldly Man’s reprobacy is the fact that he does undergo a seeming conversion at the beginning of the play but is then lured back to sin by Covetous, the same Vice who once caused Humanum Genus to backslide in the *Castle*. Humanum Genus was given his second chance; but for Wager’s audience, there could be no second chance: Calvinist doctrine taught that any falling away from faith or godliness showed that
no conversion had existed in the first place. Furthermore, those
who had been so attracted to the truth of God’s ways that they
could make even a temporary show of conversion were doubly
convicted when they fell away from it: “I say, therefore, that they
sin against the Holy Spirit who, with evil intention, resist God’s
truth, although by its brightness they are so touched that they
cannot claim ignorance. Such resistance alone constitutes this
sin.” Or, as God’s Plague tells Worldly Man before his death:

God’s Plague: [Thou] once on the plow had’st taken hold,
But willingly again thou rannest in the dike;
Therefore, thy plague shall be doubled sevenfold.

(1248-50)

Before Worldly Man is struck down, he is given fair warning
by a Prophet, a figure who begins speaking offstage in the man-
ner of the Hidden Death. Unlike the oblivious Moros, Worldly
Man hears and trembles at the warning, uttered in “the words
of the prophet Jeremy” and also in those of the Legend and of
Time the Destroyer:

Prophet: O thou earth, earth, earth! hear the word of
the Lord;
Know thyself to be no better than clay or dust.
[Let the Worldly Man look suddenly about him.]
See that thy life to God’s truth do always accord:
For from earth thou camest and to earth thou must.

(1185-88)

Worldly Man is frightened by the warning, but he demonstrates
his lack of grace and inability to repent by the quality of help
that he summons in his confusion. His chaplain, whom he knows
as Devotion, is actually Ignorance, a Roman Catholic priest who
speaks in country-clown dialect and macaronic Latin, and who
enters the scene boasting about how he has confounded the
“Genevians” with his brilliant Latin tags. As Pineas has noted,
Ignorance is one of the many anti-Catholic figures used in the
polemical Moralities of the day (169), but he is more than that
in *Enough*; he is also an allegory of the deathbed temptation to infidelity, a temptation into which Worldly Man readily falls. While Worldly Man's henchman, Covetous, is offstage summoning Ignorance, Worldly Man begins to feel the death signs, and as he lies down to sleep, God's Plague enters and stands over him in the threatening posture of the Hidden Death: "[Enter God's Plague and stand behind him awhile before he speak]" (S.D. 1220). Worldly Man remains asleep throughout this scene, but when Covetous and Ignorance wake him, we are told that he has heard every word as in a nightmare—an early instance of the warning dreams attributed to later Renaissance stage figures such as Clarence and Richard III. The message that God's Plague brings is in part a traditional one, the same that Death gave to Humanum Genus and Everyman:

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God's Plague: Thy life thou shalt lose even out of hand,
   And after death thy just reward receive.
Thy ill-gotten goods shall not thee deliver,
Thine costly buildings nothing shall prevail,
Thy odors, thy sweet smells and thou shalt perish together,
Thy rings, thy bracelets, and gold chains shall fall.
Strangers and those whom thou didst never know
Shall possess that which by fraud thou hast got.
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(1229-36)

Indeed, the specificity with which God's Plague lists the things of the world that must pass away at death may remind us of the picturesque language of Lydgate's *Dance of Death*. But God's Plague is Death with a difference, the late sixteenth-century Death who, although he moves through walled cities like the invincible Triumph, strikes down only the evil:

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God's Plague: I am the plague of God properly called
   Which cometh on the wicked suddenly;
I go through all towns and cities strongly walled,
Striking to death, and that without all mercy.
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(1243-46)

There is no question, in this play, of contrasting Worldly Man's behavior in tribulation with Heavenly Man's, with all the ensuing
complications; Worldly Man is simply coming to a deservedly bad end, and we are asked to watch (with terror if not with pity) as he and his friends do everything wrong around the deathbed.

In his illness, Worldly Man calls for a physician, and although contemporary tracts on dying could not agree on the propriety of summoning physical comfort before spiritual, this Master Physician also turns out to be a preacher. But Worldly Man does not like the news the Physician brings—that he must die—and not only refuses to repent (which would mean accepting the fact of his impending death) but refuses to pay the bill. It is difficult to know which refusal piques the Physician more; at any rate, he departs with the standard predestinarian observation that “Belike it is too late to amend; / In wickedness thou hast lived, even so thou wilt end” (1375-76).

Covetous knows better (he thinks) how to comfort Worldly Man. Against all the injunctions of the deathbed manuals, he tries to convince his friend that he will live:

Worldly Man: O Policy, sick, never so sick. O, hold my head. O sirrah, what shall become of my goods when I am dead? Covetous: Dead? body of me, do you reckon to die this year? Hold your peace, I warrant you, you need not to fear.

(1319-22)

But Worldly Man continues to sicken, and with intermittent cries of “O must I needs die?” and “Is there no remedy?” he decides to make his will. His original audience must have been chilled by the legal words that he almost speaks as he begins to dictate the will, words that also open prayer:

Worldly Man: In the name, first of all do thou indite.

Ignorance: In the name—in, in, in—in the name what more?

Worldly Man: Of—[Fall down.]

(1401-03)

Having failed to turn his mind to death, Worldly Man is unable to turn his voice to God and dies on the verge of uttering His name. Covetous and Ignorance laugh over Worldly Man’s end, bid farewell to the audience, and leave. And onto the empty stage
capers Satan, rejoicing like the fiends of the Mystery cycles and warning the audience about its own doom in the very words of those fiends:

Satan: O, O, O, O—all is mine, all is mine!...
Spare not, nor care not, what mischief you frequent,
Use drunkenness, deceit, take other men’s wives,
Pass of nothing—one hour is enough to repent
Of all the wickedness you have done in your lives.

[Bear him out upon his back.]
(1428; 1456-59; S.D. 1471)

To see the Devil carrying away a soul to Hell is nothing new; the convention looks backward to the Castle, Herod, and Pride of Life, and ahead to Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay, Doctor Faustus, and The Devil’s Charter. Even the Vice of Like Will to Like, Nichol Newfangle, is carried off by Lucifer, and Confusion performs the office for Moros in The Longer Thou Livest. But Worldly Man’s passage is a particularly effective one, in that the portage to Hell comes after a humanly physical death and occurs when the dead hero is alone on stage, abandoned by his earthly companions. We have here the isolation theme that pervades medieval death literature, a theme that will be recaptured in Marlowe’s Doctor Faustus and the great tragedies of the Elizabethan and Jacobean stage.

It is evident, too, that even the Protestant Morality playwrights could hardly help going to the old Mystery cycles for inspiration when they wished to make a particularly telling effect on their audiences. Wager’s Satan leaps out at the up-to-date Worldly Man with words that are as old as the N-Town Herod; and Courage, the Vice of The Tide Tarrieth No Man (ca. 1567), tells the audience about his hell-bound “Barge” of fools in a one-hundred-and-two-line catalogue quite obviously indebted to the Wakefield Master’s demons of the Judgment:

Courage: Crafty curpurses,
Maidens, milknurses,
Wives of the stamp
Who love more than one,
For lying alone
Is ill for the cramp.
Husbands as good
As wigs made of wood
We have there also,
With servants so sure
As packthread most pure
Which men away throw... 23

The Tide, it must be noted, is structured almost entirely on
the theme of Time, and specifically on the “strange arithmetike”
later calculated with such excruciating detail by Richard Green-
ham. Throughout the play, the good and bad characters live out
their opposing interpretations of the proverb that gives the play
its name; the good stress the old contemptus mundi and the short-
ness of time for repentance, while the bad or flighty ring changes
on the carpe diem:

Wantonness: Yea, but husband I say consider in your mind
 That now we are young, and pliant to play,
 But age, approaching, makes us lame and blind,
 And lusty courage doth them draw away.

(1163–66)

But Tide has already begun to follow the more moderate theo-
logy of the developing Anglican church. Although it retains the
standard anti-Rome polemics and gives the regenerate consola-
tion in this life instead of the next, it does not insist on a strict
predestinarianism. Wastefulness, the husband of Wantonness, is
allowed to live a sinful life, to be subject to despair, and then
to repent and live.

In this sense, Wastefulness may be considered the obverse
of Lust, who was also struck by tribulation. Wastefulness enters
“poorly,” bemoaning his fate; and, realizing (as Lust did not) that
he has wasted his life’s “arithmetike,” he falls prey to Despair,
who enters “in some ugly shape” (S.D. 1582). There follows a
long dialogue between the two, much in the manner of the death-
bed temptation scenes in the arts of dying, and finally Despair
persuades Wastefulness to commit suicide. But Faithful Few
arrives in the nick of time and saves Wastefulness from this
desperate act by reminding him of Christ's promises. The two
kneel and pray, and Despair, now overpowered by Wastefulness's
faith, flees the stage.24

This scene may be a sign of the discomfort that some play­
wrights were beginning to feel with the approved formula for the
stage: the all-good (elect) and all-bad (reprobate) figures whose
knowledge of their eternal destination is neither presumption nor
despair but rather an acknowledgment of God's foreordained plan.
True, both Luther and Calvin had spoken of a grief resembling
despair that even the elect must go through before regeneration,
but on the stage a conflict arose between showing the elect regen­
erated and demonstrating the fruits of election. That is, if the
elect are upheld by grace, how can they be shown as sinners?
And if the reprobate are doomed to sin and perdition, how can
they be shown as overcoming Despair and becoming regenerate?
Furthermore, as the writers of the older Moralities had discovered,
if we really wish to reclaim sinners in the audience, how can we
do so without showing them one of their own kind reclaimed?

The problem would later be solved by the reintroduction of
the complete human creature on stage—the man or woman com­
posed of both good and bad, whose salvation could be worked
out with fear and trembling by actor and audience alike. With
the whole person reassembled, it would then also become pos­
sible to show a "good" death without giving scandal or inducing
the wrong emotion in the audience; as in the older plays, the
sinful part of man could earn its death, while the regenerate part
could earn its reward in heaven.

One of the early indications of the changing trend—if only
in the audience's demands—is Nathaniel Woodes's Conflict of Con­
science (ca. 1581), a play important for the influence that it seems
to have had on Doctor Faustus,25 but also for the fact that Woodes
felt it necessary to change his play's ending almost as soon as the
pages were off the press. Originally, the play was based on the
life, apostasy, and suicide of Francesco Spira, who had succumbed
to the blandishments (or threats) of Rome and had fallen away
from his Protestant faith. Afterward, convinced that he had
forfeited Heaven by his apostasy, and equally convinced that
the apostasy itself was the unpardonable sin, he fell into a state
of despair and killed himself. The first version of Woodes's play
follows the historical pattern fairly closely, although he adds for
the public delectation a set of comic priests and Vices, as well
as the serious Vice, Horror, who leads “Spera” into despair. But
almost before the first version had been printed, Woodes changed
the prologue and conclusion of his play to rename Spera
“Philologus,” in order to advise the audience that this was a play
about every man rather than a historical figure and—most impor­
tant of all—to allow Philologus to repent, die a good death, and
be saved.

Philologus’s condition is indeed a serious one. Having fallen
away from his faith into the clutches of Rome, he cannot expect,
by the very terms of his abjured faith, to be accepted back into
the “Christian” community, that is, salvation according to Calvin,
who had said that “return to the communion of Christ is not
open to those who knowingly and willingly have rejected it” (Instit­
tutes, III.iii.23). His friends, Theologus and Eusebius, try to reason
him out of his despair by speaking of God’s infinite mercy and
the salvation of others in his plight, but Philologus is too firmly
convinced of his damnation to listen, insisting that all the others
were special exceptions: “King David always was elect, but I am
reprobate.”

Eusebius and Theologus, in the manner of the arts of dying,
attempt to help Philologus overcome temptation by having him
recite first the Lord’s Prayer and then the Creed, but Philologus
insists that even while he is speaking the words, his heart is blas­
pheming, a sign that he is “secluded clean from grace” and that
he is damning himself even further by mouthing words that he
does not feel in his heart. Calvin would have agreed with Philo­
logus: “[I]t is fully evident that unless voice and song, if interposed
in prayer, spring from deep feeling of heart, neither has any value
or profit in the least with God. But they arouse his wrath against
us if they come only from the tip of the lips and from the throat,
seeing that this is to abuse his most holy name and to hold his
majesty in derision.”
Interestingly enough, while Philologus continues to insist that his faith is gone, he preaches a strict predestinarian interpretation of Calvinist doctrine and truly believes it, so much so that when his friends point out that he has returned to faith, he uses the familiar double bind of his faith to deny it: if he did have faith, he says, he would not be in despair of having faith. At their wits' end, Eusebius and Theologus finally let him go, assuring him that they will pray for him, and with the equivalent of "Don't bother" Philologus runs off to—what? In the first version, to "hang himself with cord" (2078); but in the second version, to repent and to die "exhorting foe and friend / That do possess the faith of Christ to be constant to the end" (2082-83). This is rescue at the last moment, the likes of which we have not seen since Humanum Genus's cry for mercy in the Castle.

I shall examine the dynamics of such despair more fully in my discussion of Doctor Faustus; what concerns us here is the radical change in Philologus's end between the first edition and the second of The Conflict of Conscience. It can hardly be that Woodes himself underwent such a drastic change of heart in the space of a few days. We must probably look more to his audience for explanations, an audience that had been undergoing a change both of heart and of taste over the space of two decades.

During the 1560s and 1570s, despite the political and religious questions that remained unanswered, England was experiencing the same (perhaps illusory) return to normality that it had experienced after the Wars of the Roses. Moderation and stability were the order of the day as Elizabeth attempted to bind together a country torn by two successive religious revolutions, and the atmosphere (if not the actuality) of greater tolerance encouraged the same explosion of intellectual and cultural inquiry that had accompanied the early years of the Tudor dynasty. Among the many "Englishings" of classic and contemporary continental authors in this new renascence of the arts, Euripides, Seneca, Plautus, and Terence came out of the classrooms and onto the public stages, which were well prepared for them by the increasingly limited selection of licensable plays dealing with "matters of religion or of the governance of the estate of the common
weale." Although, as we have seen, the Protestant plays about "matters of religion" did obtain their licenses and continued for many years, audiences were becoming more and more accustomed to the sight and sound on stage of "real" people, violent action, and—perhaps most insidious of all—the political and religious beliefs of cultures other than their own.

Meanwhile, the Elizabethan religious compromise was having an equal and opposite reaction on the increasingly alienated extreme Calvinists, who were gradually forming what we now know as the Puritan party. Although their beliefs had been given space in the Articles of Faith, it was not an exclusive space, allowing as it did those loopholes for less strict interpretation of Calvin's doctrines. And organizationally, the Church of England remained obdurately opposed to the reforms in church structure that the Puritans demanded. Consequently, a rift began to widen between Puritan and Anglican, and since Puritans were, for the time, a minority party, we should not be surprised that they began showing their disapproval by withdrawing from the mainstream of English society—not just in worship but in dress and daily life. And one of the societal customs from which they withdrew was playgoing.

In the snowball effect of rejection and counterrejection that should be familiar to us in the twentieth century, the rejected playhouse audience came more and more to reject "Puritan" (that is, extreme Calvinist) sentiments on stage, until the Puritan himself, by the turn of the seventeenth century, became a stock figure of fun or, in plays like Measure for Measure, as great a potential evil as the Catholics of old.

In 1581, mutual aversion had not yet progressed so far, but Nathaniel Woodes was already faced with an audience less open than before to the rigidly Calvinist formula for damnation. Which version of his play was closer to his own beliefs we shall never know—although Theologus and Eusebius seem, to our modern sensibilities, to have the best of the argument—but it is quite likely that between one printing and another Woodes came to the realization that audiences would no longer pay to see a man brought so close to the edge of redemption and then cast into the pit of
damnation. In fact, since Theologus and Eusebius do argue so well—better even than the consolers in Doctor Faustus—and since the play can be so easily changed by a simple alteration of prologue and epilogue, it is my own opinion that Woodes first wrote almost against his will for an audience that he thought still existed and was relieved to discover his miscalculation.

There are several indications in the text itself of Woodes's preference for the new style. First, the Conflict is written in fourteeners, those ungainly heptameter couplets popular among Seneca's translators and imitators, and more common to the transitional plays like Horestes and Appius and Virginia (both about "real" life but retaining the Morality Vices) than to the outright Moralities. Second, Philologus is a "mixed" rather than a predestined character. Unlike Worldly Man, he does not start off bad, have an illusory conversion, and then relapse into his true evil nature; rather, he begins as a stalwart defender of faith and truth, and then falls because of human weakness: fear for his family and a temporary infatuation with worldly goods. And finally, in the new version, Philologus does not survive his repentance, as the Protestant Morality heroes are wont to do, but dies in a state of acceptance, giving good counsel from his deathbed and redeeming his evil life through his holy death.

This type of redemptive death will become a hallmark of the great tragedies of 1590–1610, when the classic, medieval, and Renaissance ideas of anagnorisis all combine to make the deathbed experience a last splendid chance for the dying creature to reclaim his own lost worth and to give meaning to the seemingly meaningless destruction that has followed in the wake of his hamartia. It is an earthly reward, to be sure, often associated with the Renaissance ideal of fame; but the religious hope for salvation beyond the earth is usually hinted at as well, if only by the onlookers.

Of course, not all the deaths on the late sixteenth-century stage were redemptive ones. Bloody potboilers such as Soliman and Perseda or Selimus often seem to have been created for the sole purpose of eliciting a lively curiosity as to who would be killed next, or how many at one blow. Indeed, Soliman sometimes seems to order executions for want of other sport; and Abraham, the
physician in Selimus, poisons himself in addition to his two victims for no discernible reason except (we may say from our modern sense of superiority) that it seems like a good idea at the moment:

Abraham: Faith, I am old as well as Bajazet
And have not many months to live on earth;
I care not much to end my life with him.

But before we indulge our sense of superiority, we should remember the hundreds who die in Tamburlaine, the stage strewn with corpses in Hamlet, and our own western and war films, in which men drop like flies. For the Elizabethans, as for us, Theodore Spencer observes, “death was a fascinating subject for reflection” (180).

Thomas Kyd (if he was indeed the author of Soliman and Perseda) may unwittingly have given the best explanation for the impetus behind the revived dramatic interest in death. At the end of this gruesome tragedy, Love, Fortune, and Death (who have been acting as Chorus to the play) step forward and vie for credit for what has happened. And Death silences the other two by pointing out that although they have taken part in the action, it is he who has resolved everything:

Fortune: I give world’s happiness and woe’s increase.
Love: By joining persons, I increase the world.
Death: By wasting all I conquer all the world;
And now, to end our difference at last,
In this last act note but the deeds of Death...

Pack, Love and Fortune! play in comedies:
For powerful Death best fitteth tragedies.

(Dodsley, 5:372-73)

We may recognize here the 1580 broadside, one of many variations on its theme, in which men and women boast of their roles in life until Death tops them with his “I kill you all.”

If Death best fitteth tragedies, it is because true tragedy must deal with the universal; and the only thing universal to poor fragmented humankind is death. Or as Henry W. Wells has put it so cogently: “Ideal tragedy evokes sadness rather than hate,
sympathy rather than unmixed horror. Such art becomes universal in that it brings home to the spectators tragic elements ever present in their own lives." The difference between Soliman and Perseda and The Duchess of Malfi is a difference of degree rather than of kind, the difference between a bid for popularity and a quest for universality. And when the great tragedians of the Elizabethan and Jacobean stages went in quest of universality, they found themselves back in the fullest of the fields full of folk—the crowded field across which moved the Dance of Death.

As we have seen, the Dance itself is the most nearly perfect drama; by its nature, it shows the strengths and weaknesses of each dancer who responds to the common Summons, each in a necessarily individualized way. But the literal Dance, with grinning skeletons and souls in tow, had outlived its original shock effect by the 1590s and was reduced to the commonplace: friezes that one saw every day in churches and broadsides that needed continually new gimmickry in order to work. What the late Elizabethan dramatists had to do, then, was take the familiar literality and translate it into a new metaphor, one that would unfailingly bring the old to mind but dress it in new clothes.

To be sure, the bones showed through the clothing; but that was part of the effect. In many ways, the death imagery of late Elizabethan drama is far more emblematic than has been credited. Each time a character uses the old conventions to describe death, he or she in effect presents a picture to the audience, one that will then be interpreted in the "real" language and action of the play. Richard II may serve as an example. Observe how the different pictorial conventions are laid before the audience in Richard's most famous speech:

For God's sake, let us sit upon the ground
And tell sad stories of the death of kings—
How some have been deposed, some slain in war,
Some haunted by the ghosts they have deposed,
Some poisoned by their wives, some sleeping killed,
All murdered.

(3.2.155-60)
This is a panorama in brief of one of the Dances, done in the manner of the de casibus tradition: the fall of princes. But Richard's overview has glossed over some of the individual vignettes: his dancers have all been murdered; there is not one of them who has died the natural death that comes to all princes and commoners alike. What Richard has left out is as telling as what he has included, and by his omission he shows the weaknesses of his own character and his inability to see himself as a mortal human creature responsible for his own actions. For those in the audience who have missed the point, however, Shakespeare allows Richard to zoom in, as it were, on a detail of the panorama; and in this detail the ubiquitous Death of the Dances appears in his sixteenth-century shape, hiding in disguise until the moment for the Summons arrives:

K. Rich: . . . For within the hollow crown
That rounds the mortal temples of a king
Keeps Death his Court, and there the antic sits,
Scoffing his state and grinning at his pomp,
Allowing him a breath, a little scene,
To monarchize, be feared, and kill with looks,
Infusing him with self and vain conceit,
As if this flesh which walls about our life
Were brass impregnable, and humored thus
Comes at the last and with a little pin
Bores through his castle wall, and farewell King!

(3.2.160-70)

The contradictory pictures presented to an audience who could be expected to know them both are indications of Richard's vacillating mind. The first picture, with its omissions, is a denial of universal mortality; the second is an acceptance of it, made even more commonly human by the touch of folklore in the image of the "little pin," a fairy-tale motif representing the triumph of seemingly humble things over the seemingly powerful. And when Richard later rejects the second picture to concentrate on the first—"all murdered"—the audience knows that he cannot come to good.
It is not the purpose of this discussion to summarize all the
metaphors used by Renaissance stage figures in speaking of Death:
the cold hand, the empty eye-sockets, Death the bridegroom, the
fell sergeant strict in his arrest, and so on. Indeed, Theodore
Spencer has covered that field so comprehensively that even to
recapitulate his work would be to diminish it. Rather, I should
like to examine briefly the aliases under which Death himself
appeared onstage to issue the Summons, and then, in subsequent
chapters, to examine in depth Death’s leading role in representa-
tive plays.

In some early attempts to give Death a role of his own, he
is allowed to act as Chorus. He appears, as we have seen, with
Love and Fortune as Chorus in Soliman and Perseda; and he rea-
ppears as Homicide (with Avarice and Truth) in Two Lamentable
Tragedies. But in the latter, he is the truncated Death that
Richard II imagined—“all murdered”—and is more an emblem
of the Vices loose in the world than a reminder of mortality. As
Tragedy (with Comedy and History) in A Warning for Fair Women,
he focuses more on critical theory than on death itself, and as
Revenge in The Spanish Tragedy, he (or, rather, she) summons
to judgment after death, to Elysium or Tartarus rather than to
the grave. In all these plays, Death stands apart from the action,
the most hidden of Hidden Deaths, and by his association with
and commentary on only murder, serves to distance himself from
the audience instead of bringing home to them their common
lot. It is only when he steps inside the play and puts on the cos-
tume of someone else that he becomes most like himself.

Not all Death’s costumes are realistic ones, however. In
Dekker’s Old Fortunatus, for example, Fortune becomes the Sum-
moner. An unabashedly allegorical figure in this quasi folktale,
she offers Fortunatus a choice of gifts: wisdom, strength, health,
beauty, long life, or riches.35 The audience that knows its old
Morali ties will immediately be alerted to the trap here: except
for wisdom, all the proffered gifts are illusory and transitory. And
indeed, Fortunatus seems to remember his Moralities as he muses
on the offer:
Fortunatus: I will be strong; then I refuse long life,
And though mine arm should conquer twenty worlds,
There's a lean fellow beats all conquerors;
The greatest strength expires with loss of breath.
The mightiest, in one moment, stoop to death. . . .
Beauty is but a painting, and long life
Is a long journey in December gone,
Tedious and full of tribulation.

(1.1.268-72; 282-84)

But unfortunately, Fortunatus mistakes wisdom for one of
the transitory gifts, not recognizing it as our old friend Knowledge,
the only true conductor to temporal and eternal happiness. He
chooses, instead, riches (our old enemy Goods), and in the manner
of the King of Life, issues his defiance to Death—not realizing
that she is standing, listening, in the wings in the guise of Fortune:

Fortunatus: If that lean, tawny-face Tobacconist death, that
turns all into smoke, must turn me so quickly into ashes,
yet I will not mourn in ashes, but in music—hey, old lad,
be merry! Here's riches, wisdom, and strength, health,
beauty, and long life. (If I die not quickly.) Sweet purse,
I kiss thee; Fortune, I adore thee; care, I despise thee;
death, I defy thee.

(1.1.336-41)

It would be interesting to know how this was staged; Fortu­
tune might have frowned behind Fortunatus's back—or, more
ominously, she might have glanced back over her shoulder at
him, given him a ghastly smile, and plucked back part of her
costume to show the audience a skeleton.36 But even without such
a palpable hammering home of the point, the audience should
have recognized Fortunatus's “asking for it” in issuing such a chal­
lenge. And, indeed, his good son, Ampedo, tries to give his father
the warning of the Legend, the message of Elde:

Ampedo: The frosty hand of age now nips your blood,
And strews her snowy flowers upon your head,
And gives you warning that within few years
Death needs must marry you. . . .
Could you survey ten worlds, yet you must die;  
And bitter is the sweet that's reaped thereby.

(2.2.138-45)

Fortunatus, however, pays no attention, and, as we might expect, Fortune later returns to strike him down in the midst of plenty. He cries out the last desperate plea of all his kind—“Oh, let me live but till I can redeem!” (2.2.244)—but receives the implacable “too late” of the Judgment, and a moral not on how he might have escaped death but how he might have met it bravely: “Hadst thou chosen wisdom... /... death's stern brow could not thy soul affright” (2.2.248-49). Interestingly enough, of the two sons to whom he leaves his ever-filled purse and wishing hat, Ampedo—the good son who destroys the hat in an attempt to exorcise from the sons the sins of the father—dies an undeserved but stoically accepting death, and with his last breath utters the familiar Greek tag, “No man before his death is truly blessed” (5.2.154). Andelocia, on the other hand—the bad son who, like his father, puts his trust in riches—remains a coward to the end.37

Such direct allegory as Old Fortunatus, however, became increasingly rare on the stage after 1600; meanwhile, Death was establishing other aliases. One of these was a direct descendant of the Dance of Death: the masque or play that culminates in death or death-tidings. Hieronomo’s revenge in The Spanish Tragedy is based on such a Dance, in which the audience becomes a participant; and Calantha, dancing on and on in The Broken Heart as people bring her word of her loved ones’ deaths, is herself learning to die in the rounds of the Dance.

A variant on the convention is the final masque in Marston’s The Malcontent; although Altofronto/Malevole’s masque is meant to unmask, to bring himself and his court back to life instead of to death, the treat of revenge hangs over the revels (at least for the audience) until Altofronto dispels it. And, as both W. E. Slights and Brownell Salomon point out, Altofronto’s masque is the last step in his attempt to bring the wicked to anagnorisis—a
step, we may say, that is dependent on the threat of impending death, a chance at deathbed repentance.38

But the masques of death are seldom this benevolent. The revelers in Tourneur’s *The Revenger’s Tragedy*, Middleton’s *Women Beware Women*, and Shirley’s *The Cardinal* are bent on murder and accomplish it. The masque in *Women Beware Women*, in fact, represents another of the guises of Death: the seemingly random or accidental death that kills without looking at its victim; a variation on the Triumph, or on Dame Death who killed fifteen hundred “at a flap.” In Middleton’s play, during the masque, Isabella wafts poisoned incense toward Livia, who at the same time showers flaming gold on Isabella; Guardiano falls through the trapdoor that he has prepared for Hippolito; Hippolito is fatally wounded by the arrows fired by the “Cupids” of the masque, hired by Livia; and Hebe and Ganymede, unexpected additions to the masque who have been hired by Bianca to poison the Cardinal, accidentally mix up the goblets and poison Bianca’s lover, the Duke, instead. Confusion reigns, and although there cannot be said to be any innocent bystanders among the heaps of corpses (in Middleton, there is little unblemished innocence), the sheer haphazardness and rapidity of the carnage emphasize the confusion in the moral life of the Duke’s court.

Too often, however, innocent (or nearly innocent) bystanders are included in the carnage. In *The Duchess of Malfi*, Antonio, who is on a perhaps ill-advised mission to be reconciled with Ferdinand and the Cardinal, is accidentally cut down in the dark by Bosola, who has arrived on the scene to kill Ferdinand. In *Hamlet*, Gertrude, who for all her incestuous activity has had no hand in Claudius’s murder plots, accidentally drinks from the poisoned cup meant for Hamlet.39 In many historical plays, fathers accidentally kill sons, or sons fathers, to dramatize the senselessness of war (see especially *3 Henry VI*. 2.4), or innocent children may be slain to show a tyrant’s brutality. In most of these accidents, the meaningless death is meant to point a moral about the corruption of specific lives; Hippolito, noting significantly before he dies that “man’s understanding / Is riper at his fall than all his lifetime,”40 states the moral for *Women Beware Women*: 
Hippolito: Lust and forgetfulness have been amongst us,  
And we are brought to nothing. . . .  
. . . vengeance met vengeance  
Like a set match, as if the plagues of sin  
Had been agreed to meet here all together.  

(5.2.146-47; 157-59)

But, as we shall see, by the end of the Caroline years, the meaninglessness of death will come to exemplify the meaninglessness of life itself.

Closely allied to the accidental or wholesale death that builds on the emblem of the Triumph is the death by the least likely suspect (to borrow a term from detective fiction). Two examples from Shakespeare should suffice. Macduff, although perhaps more accurately termed a revenger (another alias of Death's, after all), brings death much in the manner of the old Death who never failed to answer a personal challenge, whether laid down by Herod, Humanum Genus, the King of Life, or the revelers in the Pardoner's Tale:

Macbeth: I bear a charmed life, which must not yield  
To one of woman born.  
Macduff: Despair thy charm,  
And let the angel whom thou still has served  
Tell thee Macduff was from his mother's womb  
Untimely ripped.  

(5.8.12-16)

The effect of this entrance of Death depends upon taking both the victim and the audience by surprise; it is not to be confused with murders committed from ambush or in disguise, where the audience knows what the victim does not. The audience must be made to feel the same shock of fear as the victim, as though the victim had cried (like Fortunatus), "Death, I defy thee!" and some familiar figure already on stage had thrown back his hood to reveal skeletonic features and replied, "You called?"

In King Lear, too, this least likely suspect appears, this time in the person of one who is given no name but "I Servant." Here, as Cornwall is putting out Gloucester's eyes and is seemingly in
control of other men’s lives, the lowliest of the faceless intervenes, and Cornwall’s servant controls the life of his master:

Servant: Hold your hand, my lord.
I have served you ever since I was a child,
But better service have I never done you
Than now to bid you hold.

[They draw and fight. Cornwall is wounded.]

(3.7.72-75; S.D. 78)

But not all Death’s aliases are earthly ones. Ghosts of the already dead also bring threats of vengeance or warnings of impending doom. Although at first a Senecan chorus (much like the Death, Homicide, and Tragedy that we have discussed), the ghost began a gradual infiltration into the play itself, occasionally, as in Locrine, taking rather more active measures than necessary to bring about the death that it had come to predict. At times, indeed, the ghost may be a protective one, like Charlemont’s father in The Atheist’s Tragedy, the echo in The Duchess of Malfi, or the Friar in Bussy d’Ambois: it may even be a spurious “ghost,” like the lady who masquerades both as her own ghost and as the medium who has raised it, in The Lost Lady. But more often it is a ghost who brings ominous tidings: a command to revenge or a command to die. Andrugio’s ghost in Antonio’s Revenge not only calls for the revenge but also becomes an unnamed co-conspirator in it. Brutus, visited by Caesar’s ghost, knows that he will die. And the series of eleven ghosts who visit Richard III in a dream bid him not only to die, but to “Despair and die” (5.3).

Devils, too, retain their foothold on the stage, bearing away souls already contracted to them (as in Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay, Doctor Faustus, and The Devil’s Charter), but also tempting living creatures to suicide, and thus to damnation. Elizabethan experts on ghostlore indeed saw this temptation to despair as one of the signs that an apparition might be the devil in “a pleasing shape,” and King James himself, before his accession to the English throne, warned about the danger in his Daemonologie: “It is [the devil’s purpose] to obtaine . . . the tinsell of their life, by inducing them to perrilous places at such time as he either followes or
possesses them which may procure the same." It is just this possibility of the Summons to suicide that Horatio fears when the Ghost beckons to Hamlet:

Horatio: What if it tempt you toward the flood, my lord,  
Or to the dreadful summit of the cliff  
That beetles o'er his base into the sea,  
And there assume some other horrible form  
Which might deprive your sovereignty of reason  
And draw you into madness?

(1.4.69-74)

And in the Dover Cliff scene of King Lear, Edgar tries to show Gloucester the better way of life and death alike by describing in devilish terms the companion who has led Gloucester to the "cliff":

Edgar: As I stood here below, methought his eyes  
Were two full moons, he had a thousand noses,  
Horns whelked and waved like the enridged sea.  
It was some fiend . . . .

(4.6.69-72)

Interestingly enough, there is at least one devil who trapped his prey not through despair but through presumption. In Barnabe Barnes's The Devil's Charter (ca. 1607), Pope Alexander has relied too much on his assurance of salvation to believe that the devil can ever claim his soul; but in the conventional "undeceiving" scene, just before Alexander is dragged off to Hell, the devil disabuses him of such notions:

Alexander: My soul is substance of the living God,  
Stamp'd with the seal of heaven, whose character  
Is his eternal word, at which hell trembles.  
Devil: And what of that? Thou therein hast no part.  
I do confess thy soul was first ordain'd  
To good; but by free will to sin thou, slave,  
Hast sold that soul from happiness to hell.44

Alexander then points out that God must have created the soul for salvation, because He has given it so much power, and has
added to it a "mind intelligent," something that the animals cannot claim (M1r). The devil admits part of the point: yes, the soul began "lily white," and yes, man is more than an animal because of his mind; but he is supposed to use that mind to seek the higher things, not to debase it to the level of an animal's by thinking only about the trivia of the present moment (Mlr-v).

Even allowing for the absurdities of plot in this multiple-murder play (which owes more to The Jew of Malta than, as has been claimed, to Doctor Faustus), it is a fascinating document in what has happened, dramatically, to the soul's response to itself and to death. Unlike the Calvinist assumptions that the soul is created from a "corrupt mass," that the will is not free but depends on God's plan for it, and that the mind is an obstacle rather than an aid to attaining salvation, Barnes's devil (who, in the convention of the "undeceiving" scene, must be understood as finally telling the truth) points a moral that would have been accepted by medieval Catholic and seventeenth-century Anglican alike. In fact, the only reason Pope Alexander cannot repent appears to be simply that he has fallen out of the habit of thinking, and too much into the habit of giving orders:

Alexander: Mercy, mercy, mercy; arise, arise; up, up; fie, fie; no, no? Stir, stubborn, stony, stiff, indurate heart! Not yet up? Why, what? Wilt thou not, foul traitor to my soul? Not yet?

[The Devil laugheth.]
Help, help, help, above; stir, stir, stupidity! (Mlv)

We should not be deceived by Pope Alexander's use of the word indurate; Barnes by no means wishes to show that deathbed repentance is impossible or that a bad life figures forth predestined reprobacy. Earlier in the play, the wicked Lucrezia Borgia, poisoned by her brother/lover Caesar, has undergone a deathbed repentance so sincere and so convincing that her handmaid is drawn to repentance as well:

Lucretia: Ah, Moticilla, whom I trained up
In cunning sleights and snares of filthiness,
Forgive me for that sin; live and repent.
Moticilla: Oh, God forgive me, for my sins are great,
And if his goodness lend my life some space,
I will with penance call on him for grace,¹⁵
And spend the remnant of my life in prayer.

(H2v)

The Devil's Charter, of course, can hardly be counted as one of the “great” tragedies of the period, but the bad that imitates the good may show the thought and character of a time better than the good alone can do; the greats of any age, after all, may be exceptions. And in the two and a half decades surrounding the turn of the seventeenth century, the hallmark of tragedy (and often of comedy and tragicomedy as well) was this varied response to the Summons of Death.

What makes the response to death so much more expressive than a response to love, honor, or any other part of life is not only that death is universal (some may say that love, too, is universal), but that, as Samuel Johnson observed, “Depend upon it, Sir, when a man knows he is to be hanged in a fortnight, it concentrates his mind wonderfully.”⁴⁶ If it is true that at the moment of death a person’s whole life flashes before his eyes, it is true, too, that in the Dance of Death his whole life flashes before the audience’s eyes. This sharing of Everything at the moment when it is about to become Nothing unites actor and audience, so that, paradoxically, only the moment of death unlocks the secret of life.

It is, in fact, this knowledge of the community of death that makes us recoil in horror from the deathbed of one whose secret does not unlock. Critics since Coleridge, for example, have puzzled over Iago’s “motiveless malignity,” trying to find a motive for the malignity or to explain Iago’s actions in terms of dramatic types: the Vice, the Devil, the complicating factor. But Iago’s motives are not that impenetrable; any spectator who has military experience will recognize in him a certain type of shifty career man who has advanced so far and can advance no further, who blames everyone else for his own failures and hardly cares in the end what becomes of himself, so long as he can ruin the ones who
have what he does not. It is not Iago's life, with all its deception and self-deception, that finally puzzles us; it is his death. "Demand me nothing," he says; "What you know, you know. / From this time forth I never will speak word" (5.2.303-04). And in spite of all that he has already told us, we feel that he is taking some dreadful secret to the grave, something so dreadful that neither he nor Shakespeare can share it with us.

But in the main, we do come to know the figures who die before our eyes on the Renaissance stage. We see the good in all their human weakness: the mild Henry VI venting his first and last outburst of anger; the heroic Byron, before he composes himself, screaming in fear. We see the bad redeeming their lives at death: Edmund trying to countermand his order for Cordelia's death; Laertes asking forgiveness not only of God but of Hamlet. We see regret for what might have been: Tamburlaine, arrested in mid-career, agonizing over the map of lands that he has not yet conquered; Hamlet appointing others to do what he cannot do tomorrow for Denmark. We see Death turning the mighty wretched and the wretched mighty: Edward II and Richard II ennobled in death, not because they have suddenly turned good, but because in their suffering they have rejoined pitiful, suffering, noble humanity. Even the monster Richard III stands forth at the end as a poor, tortured creature crying out, in the isolation of his death, at the isolation of his life:

K. Rich: I shall despair. There is no creature loves me,
    And if I die, no soul shall pity me.
Nay, wherefore should they, since that I myself
    Find in myself no pity to myself?

(5.3.100-03)

At the communal moment of the deathbed, actor and audience may speak to each other in the words of the dying Summer to his good steward, Solstitium, in Thomas Nashe's Summer's Last Will and Testament:

I grieve no more regard was had of thee;
A little sooner hadst thou spoke to me,
Thou hadst been heard, but now the time is past.
Death waiteth at the door for thee and me;
Let us go measure out our beds in clay:
Nought but good deeds hence shall we bear away.47

From Nashe's play, too—part masque, part lament, part satire,
part sermon, itself performed before a frightened private audience
during the plague year—comes one of the most poignant and most
often quoted death lyrics of English literature:

Beauty is but a flower
Which wrinkles will devour,
Brightness falls from the air,
Queens have died young and fair,
Dust hath closed Helen's eye.
I am sick, I must die:
    Lord, have mercy on us.

Strength stoops unto the grave,
Worms feed on Hector brave,
Swords may not fight with fate,
Earth still holds ope her gate.
Come, come, the bells do cry.
I am sick, I must die:
    Lord, have mercy on us.

(283)

Like the infinitely varied Dance of Death on which it (perhaps
unconsciously) modeled itself, the late Elizabethan and early
Jacobean stage bodied forth the infinitely varied elements of the
human soul and ranged them before the onslaught of the com-
mon enemy, Death. And, as in the Dance, among the infinite
variety and the universality we are sure to recognize the most
important of individuals—ourselves.