While all these changes were taking place in the dramatic representations of deathbed counseling, another tradition of death was also undergoing a transformation on the stage, sometimes in subtle, sometimes in more blatant ways. At first glance, the proliferation of skulls, skeletons, and dressed-up corpses on the Jacobean and Caroline stages might seem to indicate a return to the iconography of the Middle Ages: the Dreary Death who beckoned all to the grave. But beginning in the early Jacobean years, we can see something disturbingly different happening to the parade of bones and rotting flesh; the fearful pursuer is becoming a puppet in the hands of the living, and in many cases, a joke.

To be sure, the element of jesting was never entirely absent from the old iconography. In the Dances of Death, grinning skeletons kicked up their heels in grotesque good cheer, although their victims seldom joined in the fun; and a certain amount of badinage seems to have been expected even from devout practitioners of the memento mori exercise, the meditation on a dead man's skull. In Petrus Luccensis's Dialogue of Dying Wel, for example, a man addresses the skull of a dead youth in words that seem more mocking than fearful:

Where bee thy fine yealow heares? where is thy faire white forehead? where is thy cleare shyning eyes? where is thy tongue that so well
could speak? where be all the liuelie sences of thy bodie? where is thy face so goodlie and so faire? where is thy trim delicate skin and flesh? Thow arte now without a nose, without eyes, without eares, thow haste not so much as one haire left vpon thy head: what rasor hath bene so cruel that it hath shauen away all thy haire and flesh, euen to the very bone? who hath taken away thy beautie? who hath made thee so monstrous and ill fauored? whereof cometh so great deformitie? Thow arte to vs that be liuing so horri-ble and vglie to beholde, that thow puttest euerie one in feare.¹

The mockery of the old tradition, however, was a form of self-mockery. Like Chaucer's Troilus looking down from Heaven and laughing, the medieval and early Renaissance Christian laughed at the skull because he saw in it the absurdity of human pretensions before the throne of God. Such a concept cannot be stressed enough. It is not the sense that everything is ridiculous because it will one day collapse into Nothing, but rather a sense that it is absurd to care so much for an inferior product—both the skull and the flesh that clothes it—instead of the Everything that lies beyond it. In the first view, one looks into the skull's empty eye-sockets and sees only the bone at the back of the head; in the second, one looks beyond the bone into infinity.²

One of the last orthodox uses of the memento mori on the Renaissance stage is the famous graveyard scene in Hamlet. In fact, the progressive focusing of Hamlet's attention on the dead is in many ways similar to the progress of thought in Everyman: each time, the mode of thinking draws closer and closer to the self, and each time, it is more forcibly directed there by circumstances outside the self. Hamlet, however, begins in a more receptive frame of mind than Everyman did. Although his initial discourse is almost purely social satire on various estates—those of the politician, courtier, lady, lawyer, and landowner—in the midst of his satire he draws a moral that applies to himself, something that later, less orthodox playwrights will fail to do:

Hamlet: And now my Lady Worm's chapless, and knocked about the mazzard with a sexton's spade. Here's fine revolution, an we
had the trick to see 't. Did these bones cost no more the breeding but to play at loggats with 'em? Mine ache to think on't. (5.1.96-101)

And each time Hamlet tries to avoid "thinking on't," someone or something will bring the message home to him again, much like the old warning of the Legend.

First, Hamlet attempts to engage the gravedigger in a discussion of his trade: For whom is he digging this grave? How long has he been a gravedigger? "How long will a man lie i' the earth ere he rot?" (5.1.141-79). Such questioning is a means of distancing the subject of mortality; it proceeds from the current death to the living worker and finally to abstract scientific inquiry. But the gravedigger almost incidentally hands Hamlet the skull of Yorick, and Hamlet must suddenly face the mortality not of a social "type" but of someone intimately associated with his own childhood. Small wonder that his next words are more emotionally charged than his previous satire, comprising a highly personal mixture of regret, fear, laughter, and disgust:

Hamlet: Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him, Horatio—a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy. He hath borne me on his back a thousand times, and now how abhorred in my imagination it is! My gorge rises at it. Here hung those lips that I have kissed I know not how oft. Where be your gibes now? Your gambols? Your songs? Your flashes of merriment that were wont to set the table on a roar? Not one now, to mock your grinning? Quite chopfallen? Now get you to my lady's chamber and tell her, let her paint an inch thick, to this favor she must come—make her laugh at that. (5.1.202-14)

Forced to face the dissolution of the beautiful things that he knew in more innocent days—not merely Yorick, but his father,
his mother's virtue, Ophelia's love, the courtiers' friendship, and the whole society of Denmark—Hamlet again tries to turn his meditation outward. He moralizes first on the anonymous lady of ll. 212–14, and then on Alexander the Great, a figure distanced by time and emblematic usage: "Why may not imagination trace the noble dust of Alexander till he find it stopping a bunghole?" (5.1.225–26). But again he is interrupted by mortality closer to home: Ophelia's funeral. This is a much more recent and an unexpected loss. And now all efforts at moralizing end, as Hamlet reacts with the elementary emotions of anger and grief. It is only in the next scene, after he has achieved the catharsis of looking death progressively closer in the face and evaluating his own responses to it, that Hamlet is able to reach acceptance even of his own death:

Hamlet: Not a whit, we defy augury. There's special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, 'tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come. The readiness is all. Since no man has aught of what he leaves, what is 't to leave betimes? Let be. (5.2.230–35)

This is a reversal of Hamlet's two earlier soliloquies on death: the first, in which, although rejecting suicide as contrary to God's law, he viewed death as an escape from pain (1.2.129–59); and the second, in which he extrapolated the problem of being and not-being (the Aristotelian on kai me on that Faustus so cavalierly dismissed) to humanity in general, with the observance that the "dread of something after death . . . puzzles the will" and leads to an impasse where neither life nor death seems acceptable (3.1.56–88). Although we have seen Hamlet working out the solution to this problem throughout the play—that the human "will" should not presume to make decisions on life and death at all, such decisions being the jurisdiction of God—it is significant that Shakespeare has used the old iconography of the graveyard to lead to the "Let be" that echoes Horatio's observation in act 1:
“Heaven will direct it” (1.4.91). Ironically, although our own iconography often pictures Hamlet with a skull to show that he is the “Melancholy Dane,” it is through contemplating the skulls of the graveyard that Hamlet banishes his melancholy forever. We will seldom see such usage of the skull again in the drama of the seventeenth century.

And yet, oddly enough, there is one graveyard scene during this period that is, if possible, more orthodox than the one in Hamlet; but its orthodoxy derives from a completely different tradition. Cyril Tourneur’s The Atheist’s Tragedy (ca. 1611) is essentially a revival of the Protestant Morality play of the 1560s and 1570s, in which the all-good hero is given the self-assurance not to come to terms with death but almost to ignore it.

Although critics like Michael H. Higgins have noted the Calvinistic bifurcation of humankind in Tourneur’s play, with its ineluctably good characters on the one hand and ineluctably bad ones on the other, these critics have for the most part overlooked the dramatic heritage of their theme. D’Amville himself, the atheist of the play’s title, often bears a striking resemblance to the reprobate of the late Morality. At the beginning of the play, he is a compendium of Worldly Man and Lust, propounding from the first his disbelief in divine providence and a determination to make his heaven in this world:

D’Amville: Then if death casts up
Our total sum of joy and happiness,
Let me have all my senses feasted in
Th’ abundant fullness of delight at once,
And with a sweet insensible increase
Of pleasing surfeit melt into my dust.

Here are my sons...
There’s my eternity. My life in them
And their succession shall for ever live.

(1.1.16-21; 123-25)\(^5\)

Like the morality reprobates, too, he is given a warning of doom, which he chooses to explain away in quasi-scientific terms: “Dost
start at thunder? Credit my belief, / 'Tis a mere effect of Nature" (2.4.141-42). And like the Morality reprobate, he is warned again in his sleep, waking only to scoff at something so contrary to fact:

[Ghost off Montferrers: D’Amville, with all thy
wisdom th’art a fool,
Not like those fools that we term innocents,
But a most wretched miserable fool,
Which instantly, to the confusion of
Thy projects, with despair thou shalt behold.

[D’Amville starts up.]

D’Amville: What foolish dream dare interrupt my rest
To my confusion? How can that be . . . ?

(5.1.27-32)

The echoes of The Longer Thou Livest are immediately apparent in this passage, both in the emphasis on blind folly and in the prediction of earthly confusion:

God’s Judgment: Thy wicked household shall be dispersed,
Thy children shall be rooted out to the fourth degree. . . .

Confusion: So at length evermore it cometh to pass
That the folly of fools is openly blown,
And then in this world they have confusion,
That is, reproof, derision, and open shame.

(Longer, 1792-93; 1829-32)

Even in the execution scene, D’Amville, like Moros, thinks that a cup of wine will drive away the strange sickness that he feels in the presence of death (AT, 5.2.201-05; Longer, 1803-04).

Other resemblances to the Protestant Morality are almost too numerous to mention here, but a particularly interesting one is the counseling that Languebeau Snuffe gives the ailing Montferrers. Although the bad counselor is now, significantly, a Puritan rather than a Catholic, it is almost impossible not to recognize in his speech the will-making scene in Enough Is as Good as a Feast:

Languebeau: All men are mortal. The hour of death is uncertain.
Age makes sickness the more dangerous, and grief is subject to
distraction. . . . In my understanding, therefore, you shall
do well if you be sick to set your state in present order. Make your will. (2.1.131-36)

And the execution scene itself is much like the end of Trial of Treasure: Charlemont and Castabella (Just), having come through the trial of God’s Visitation with the aid of trust in God, are given consolation in this world, while D’Amville (Lust) trembles in fear and watches his worldly hopes crumble into rust and dust before he himself is borne off by a providential accident.

In this context, the graveyard scene becomes a series of emblems on the two opposed spiritual states. When Charlemont enters, his meditation centers on the equalizing nature of death, and the peace of the grave:

Charlemont:

That man with so much labour should aspire
To worldly height, when in the humblest earth
The world’s condition’s at the best!

(4.2.17-20)

Later, to hide from his pursuers, he takes refuge in a charnel house, and is even able to draw a moral from the slipping of a skull:

Charlemont: I’ll hide me here i’th’ charnel house,
This convocation-house of dead men’s skulls.

[To get into the charnel house he takes hold of death’s head; it slips and staggers him.]

Death’s head, deceiv’st my hold?
Such is the trust to all mortality.

(4.2.76-79)

Unfortunately, this moral, like the skull, has slipped from Tourneur’s control. In the other graveyard imagery it is life, not death, that is uncertain. But later in the scene we return to the comforts that the righteous find in mortality: Charlemont and Castabella, suddenly drowsy in the midst of murder and attempted rape, go placidly to sleep “with either of them a death’s head for a pillow” (S.D. 4.2.204). And there the two innocents remain,
upheld by trust, as Languebeau, in his amorous pursuit of Soquette, stumbles on the body of Boracchio:

    Languebeau: Verily thou liest in a fine premeditate readiness for the purpose. Come, kiss me, sweet Soquette.—Now purity defend me from the sin of Sodom! This is a creature of the masculine gender.—Verily the man is blasted.—Yea, cold and stiff.—Murder, murder. [Exit.] (4.2.206-10)

There they remain, too, when D’Amville returns and “starts at the sight of a death’s head” (S.D. 4.2.210):

    D’Amville: Why dost thou stare at me? Thou art not the skull of him I murder’d. What hast thou To do to vex my conscience? Sure thou wert The head of a most dogged usurer, Th’art so uncharitable.

(4.2.211-15)

The emblematic contrasts are immediately obvious. Languebeau, the fleshly hypocrite, finds in the corpse two sexual perversions: sodomy and necrophilia. D’Amville, the moneylender and murderer, finds in the skull an accusing nemesis and a self-portrait which he refuses to recognize. Both turn in horror from what they have seen—and the Jacobean audience might have noticed that the horrifying visions are similar to contemporary sermons on Hell, which threatened sinners with the most violent extremes of their earthly sins for all eternity, not as a reward but as a punishment. Meanwhile, Charlemont and Castabella sleep on peacefully, finding rest in death because of their blameless lives.

Although we can hardly compare The Atheist’s Tragedy to Hamlet in merit, we can see in both the culmination of an older memento mori tradition: in the latter, a recognition and acceptance of one’s own face in the skull; and in the former, an ability to disregard the skull altogether as a mere interruption between the good life and the good afterlife. But in the ten years between these two plays, something had already happened to make the symbols on which they relied virtually obsolete.\(^5\)
In *Hamlet*, Horatio says of the gravedigger's occupation: "Custom hath made it in him a property of easiness" (5.1.75-76). And indeed, preachers of the memento mori exercise had warned that it was not to be overdone for this very reason. Petrus Luccensis delivers the caution along with his initial instructions:

And the better to print this remembrance in themselves, some have taken a dead manne's head, and kept it in a secret place, and certaine tymes in the week set it before their eyes, and verie wel and diligentlie considered it, and by way of imagination kept long talk with it, and this not euery day but once or twice a week, because it so moueth, more our affection, then it would do yeuerie day wee should see the same: for by long custome being once made familiar vnto vs, it would moue vs nothing at all. (C3r)

It is a tribute to both Shakespeare's and Tourneur's dramatic skill that they were able to move their audiences by means of the overfamiliar, without having to add new gimmickry to do so. In fact, Shakespeare, as we have seen, was even able to capitalize on the overfamiliarity of the tradition by having his characters misuse or misunderstand, not the symbol itself, but an allusion to the symbol. Richard II exhibits his character flaws through the flaws in his description of the Dance of Death; and Falstaff, for all his jesting, brings the death's-head briefly before the audience out of the smeared countenance of Doll Tearsheet:

*Doll*: Thou whoreson little tidy Bartholomew boar pig, when wilt thou leave fighting o' days and joining o' nights, and begin to patch up thine old body for Heaven?

*Falstaff*: Peace, good Doll! Do not speak like a death's-head. Do not bid me remember mine own end. (2 HIV, 2.4.250-55)

The effect of this passage is similar to that elicited by Hal's
reply, "I do. I will," to Falstaff's "Banish plump Jack and banish all the world" in Part I (2.4.526-27); the audience is suddenly aware that Falstaff is joking dangerously with forces beyond his control—like the old allegorical figures who declared, "Death, I defy thee!" and then died.

By the 1590s, of course, Doll Tearsheet was probably wearing a death's-head on her middle finger; and had she exhibited her ring instead of unconsciously speaking its message, Falstaff (and his audience) would most likely have dissolved into laughter. Such laughter was not uncommon in the decades to follow, when the association of bawds with death's-head rings had become standard comic fare. In Marston's The Dutch Courtesan (ca. 1604), Cocledemoy says of prostitutes: "As for their death, how can it be bad since their wickedness is always before their eyes, and a death's head most commonly on their middle finger?" (1.2.49-51); Bellamont, in Northward Ho (Dekker et al., 1607), declares: "as if I were a bawd, no ring pleases me but a death's head" (4.1.157-58); and in Massinger's The Old Law (ca. 1616), Gnotho tells his discarded wife: "Sell some of thy clothes to buy thee a death's head, and put upon thy middle finger: your least considering bawd does so much" (4.2; 583). In chapters 1 and 2, I have outlined some of the causes for this raillery; now let us look at some effects.

Two of the pivotal scenes in Thomas Dekker's The Honest Whore, Part 1 (ca. 1604) are the mock-funeral of Infelice in act 1 and Hippolito's address to a skull in act 4 (significantly, the other two are Bellafront's whorehouse and the madhouse confrontation that ends the play). In the first of these scenes, it is obvious that Dekker understands the growing obsolescence of his imagery. To open a play with a funeral had long been a way of predicting doom—a dramatic memento mori, one might say—but Dekker immediately undercuts the effect by placing traditional sententiae on death in the mouth of an unsympathetic character, and then by having the hero's best friend reject them:
Duke: Na, na, be but patient:
   For why death's hand hath sued a strict divorce
   'Twixt her and thee: what's beauty but a corse?
   What but fair sand-dust are earth's purest forms?
   Queens' bodies are but trunks to put in worms.
Matheo: Speak no more sentences, my good lord, but
   slip hence.

(1.1.53-58)

We will later discover, too, that the Duke is uttering not only
platitudes but lies; Infelice is drugged, not dead, and the whole
funeral is a charade to rid the Duke of a distasteful potential
son-in-law.

The ploy works temporarily. Hippolito, convinced that his
Infelice is dead, rants in grief and anger over his loss and vows
that he will henceforth spend every Monday—the day on which
Infelice supposedly died—locked up in solitary meditation. But
the order of his vow is significant:

Hippolito: I swear to thee, Matheo, by my soul,
   Hereafter weekly on that day I'll glue
   Mine eyelids down, because they shall not gaze
   On any female cheek. And being locked up
   In my close chamber, there I'll meditate
   On nothing but my Infelice's end,
   Or on a dead man's skull draw out mine own.

(1.1.121-27)

The memento mori exercise, coming almost as an after-
thought to what sounds perilously like a misanthropic (or, more
accurately, misogynistic) sulk rather than genuine grieving, is as
much of a platitude as the Duke's words. But here it is not certain
whether Dekker is in complete command of his subject, whether
he or Hippolito is about to skew the iconography into what Theo-
dore Spencer sees as sensationalism rather than symbology. Since
Hippolito continues his rounds of worldly pleasures on days other
than Monday, and in Part II will become a quasi villain who tries
to lead Bellafront back into the sin that she has abandoned,
Dekker does seem to recognize the perversities in Hippolito's frame
of mind. But material to the plot of Part I is the fact that the skull scene does convert Bellafront from sin in the first place; so the scene remains an uneasily transitional one, its efficacy looking back to an old tradition and its perversity looking ahead to a new.

The very nature of Hippolito's meditation has begun slipping from the norm. Of its fifty-four lines, the first twenty-one are an address to Infelice's portrait, rather than to the skull. Hippolito contrasts Infelice's natural beauty with two kinds of "painting": first, the cosmetics used by "fond women," and next, the inadequate representation of true beauty in portraiture. In effect, Hippolito must make a transition from the trope of true and false beauty into that of life and death, not through the de contemptu mundi tradition, but through the new secular debate on ut pictura poesis:

Hippolito: Nothing of her but this? This cannot speak;
It has no lap for me to rest upon,
No lip worth tasting: here the worms will feed,
As in her coffin. Hence, then, idle Art;
True love's best pictured in a true-love's heart.

(4.1.48-52)

When Hippolito finally does turn to the skull, he turns not only from Infelice's picture but from Infelice herself. "What's here?" he exclaims. "Perhaps this shrewd pate was mine enemy's" (55-56). And for seven more lines, he points out such as enemy's inability to harm him, all the ploys of the living being "picked away! to the bare bone!" (63). Although this passage is obviously modeled on the social satire of the old tradition, it is seriously weakened by Hippolito's relish in triumphing over a fallen enemy, as well as by the absence of specific allusion to a particular type or class. Finally, thirty-one lines into his meditation, Hippolito acknowledges that all flesh will come to this; but even here, his words have grown out of a new secularity:

Hippolito: What fools are men to build a garish tomb
Only to save the carcass whilst it rots,
To maintain 't long in stinking, make good carrion,
But leave no good deeds to preserve them sound,
For good deeds keep men sweet, long above ground.

(4.1.71-75)

Note that the “good deeds” here are not Everyman’s means to salvation, but Renaissance man’s means to good fame. The whole concept of otherworldly immortality has disappeared, and because Hippolito has specified the skull as an “enemy,” he almost seems to be holding himself up as an exemplar of those good deeds.

Hippolito’s meditation ends, as it began, on art: “Draw me my picture, then, thou grave neat workman, / After this fashion, not like this” (78-79)—that is, like the skull, not the picture. The colours of a portrait wear off, he explains, “But here’s a fellow: that which he lays on, / Till doomsday alters not complexion. / Death’s the best painter, then” (81-83). It is a clever summation, with two more rhymed couplets to come (like the Duke’s remarks earlier in the play), but its very cleaverness runs contrary to the orthodox meditation on death. Instead of seeking solace, or a lesson on his own mortality, Hippolito has set himself up as Death’s patron, giving an approving nod to the artistry of “the best painter” and a disparaging scowl to human portraiture. He has not accepted death; he has put himself in control of it.

The Honest Whore, then, is an uneasy compromise between the old and the new: still half-convinced that the old tradition ought to work, but no longer quite sure how it ought to work. There will be a few more such compromises as we go along, but they will become more infrequent and far more uneasy. Like Hippolito, a new generation of dramatic figures will make the skeleton dance to their own tune—and the music, accordingly, will jar.

Perhaps the most extensive example of this new tune can be found in a nondramatic work published some two years after The Honest Whore: Samuel Rowland’s A Terrible Battell Betweene Time and Death (1606). Beginning and ending as a traditional Dance of Death, the poem degenerates halfway through into a slapstick farce in which Time and Death become more ridiculous than their victims. At first, the two vow cooperation; Time reminds Death
that “My Sythe cuts downe; vpon thy dart they die, / Thou hast an houre glasse, and so have I” (5), and Death joins Time in laughing about how mortal creatures waste their time, giving their “finest corne” of youth to the devil; “And when the night of age brings painfull grones, / Then in Gods dish they cast their rotten bones” (6). Death even jokes about the way people try to use a memento mori to forget death rather than remember it:

Death: Some make my picture a most common thing,
As if I were continual in their thought,
A Deaths hed seale vpon a great gold ring,
And round about Memento Mori wrought:
Which memory with gold cannot agree,
For he that hates the same best thinks on me.

After some ten pages of social satire on their victims, however, Time and Death begin to resent each other’s claims to importance. Time announces that it is he who is “Gods agent in affaires, / And hath bin so, euer since the creation” (28). He alone seats and deposes kings, and he alone orders the sun, moon, and stars. Death replies that there is no need to brag, because “At least thy selfe knowes I am full as good, / Being Gods steward, sinnes reward to pay” (29). Surely all men recognize this, he adds, because everyone fears Death, “but prethee tell me, what is he fears Time?” (32). Obviously, men have not the slightest respect for Time, and “euery hower neglect thee” (32). Time then gives Death the lie direct, and the battle is on:

Death: What (Father gray-beard) doth your choler rise?
Can you so ill digest to heare your crimes?
Time: Why goodman bone-face, with your vaulty eies,
What is’t to me if men abuse their Times?
Where learnd your dry and empty pate the skil,
That Time should answere for mens doing il.

It is fairly obvious what will happen from here on, and in fact the invective that follows is comical in the extreme. The following passage is particularly interesting:
Time: Thou lookest like the inside of a tombe,  
All rotten bones, with sinnews bound together,  
Thy guts are gone, for they lack belly roome,  
And al thy flesh is lighter than a feather:  
Thy head is like an empty drie oil iarre,  
Where neither teeth, nor nose, nor eies there are.

From eare to eare thou hast a mouth vnshut,  
With armes and hands like to a Gardners rake,  
Thy ribs shew like a leather terkin cut,  
Thy voice resembles hissing of a snake:  
Thy legs appeare a paire of Crane-stilts right,  
And al thy formes more vgly than a sprite.

Thy picture stands vpon the Ale-house wall,  
Not in the credit of an ancient story,  
But when the old wiues guests begin to braule,  
She points, and bids them read Memento Mori:  
Looke, looke (saies she) what fellow standeth there,  
As women do, when crying Babes they feare.

(35-36)

Time has transformed all the frightening aspects of the old iconography into absurdities by comparing them to household objects used by members of the lower or servant classes, and has thus made not only the imagery but death itself laughable. In the third stanza, too, Time has taken Death's previous mockery of those who disregard the true meaning of memento mori, and has shifted it to the memento mori itself, making it meaningless. The alewife to whom he refers so slightingly has, after all, attempted to rectify men's behavior by calling their attention to their destined ends; but because Time heaps such scorn on her and her kind, the reader is forced to view the whole exercise as a childish or "womanish" thing. The tension of Shakespeare's Doll-Falstaff scene has no place here.

Time and Death eventually make up their quarrel and go about their business, and the poem ends with the ominous tolling of a bell. But the reader is left with an impression different from that inspired by the old Dance of Death: through laughter at a physical image of death, he has been able to forget death's
physical pangs. Much of this effect comes from Rowland's choice of speakers. In the old literature, Death or the dead spoke seriously of their horrors, and any jesting on the subject was allowed only to a Vice, who was obviously and dangerously mistaken, or to a living creature mocking human pride through the medium of a skull. Thus, la mort—Death itself—could be mocked only at one's peril; and le mort—the dead person—was a vehicle for mockery of le vif, the living. However, in the Terrible Battle, because the ridicule is placed in the mouths of Time and Death, the final effect is very like that of the battles between Morality Vices: the audience sees the quarreling figures as ineffectual rather than all-conquering.

This analogy is not altogether an empty one. Just as the medieval playwrights had made the Vices comic to show that vice is not insuperable, so seventeenth-century religious poets often ridiculed the allegorical figure of Death to point up Christ's victory over death. Both the familiarity of overuse and the religious search for new comforts, then, have seized on the comic grotesque of the skeleton, and danger now lies in two directions: first, in taking the outmoded symbol seriously without providing a serious framework that will explain it; and second, in confusing the symbol with reality—the dead body with Death—and then mocking the wrong one. Both dangers can lead to mere sensationalism; and in addition, the first carries seeds of unintentional comedy, the second, of moral schizophrenia.

It is this second danger that is illustrated in The Revenger's Tragedy (ca. 1607), although, unlike other plays that succumb to the danger, here the error lies not in the playwright's mind but in the mind of the revenger-hero, who jests at the dead until he no longer fears Death. But by then, he has gone mad.

The Revenger's Tragedy is unquestionably a play about death. Daniel J. Jacobson has pointed out that the play contains "over eighty-five references to death and dying, and the word death itself is the most frequently occurring noun in the play. . . . [E]ven Hamlet does not contain as many references to death." Samuel Schoenbaum sees the "essence of The Revenger's Tragedy" as "the blending of the motif of lust and the motif of death." And Una
Ellis-Fermor, adapting the imagery of the play to her description of its characters, says:

[The horror] comes to us . . . from the aroma of evil with which Tourneur by the aid of diction and verbal music surrounds these walking anatomies, these galvanized laboratory subjects, and from the very fact that, being dead, they do so adequately mimic life.17

Ellis-Fermor's metaphor of "walking anatomies" is well chosen, and, in fact, as the playwright is to his characters, so Vindice is to the skull of Gloriana, which Marjorie Garber has likened to "a ventriloquist's dummy" in Vindice's hands.18

But Vindice is not just a ventriloquist. He is a vaudeville impresario of death. His very opening lines, as he stands with skull in hand watching the procession across stage of the Duke, the Duchess, Spurio, and Lussurioso, are reminiscent of the Mystery Judgment plays—the consigning of "types" or "characters" to hell:

Vindice: Duke! royal lecher! Go, gray-hair'd adultery,
And thou his son, as impious steep'd as he,
And thou his bastard, true-begot in evil,
And thou his duchess that will do with devil:
Four exc'len't characters.

(1.1.1–5)19

Vindice will use the imperative mood again and again in staging his productions, assuming in turn the roles of prompting devil, sender of death, tempting Vice, and Dance of Death choreographer; until at last he will look up to Heaven and order his own applause. But in taking up these roles, he will turn all the iconography upside down.

Directly after his apostrophe to the damned souls, Vindice turns his attention to the skull in his hand. His opening address to it is worth quoting at length:

Vindice: Thou sallow picture of my poisoned love,
My studies' ornament, thou shell of death,
Once the bright face of my betrothed lady,
When two heaven-pointed diamonds were set
In those unsightly rings—then 'twas a face
So far beyond the artificial shine
Of any woman's bought complexion
That the uprightness man (if such there be,
That sin be seven times a day) broke custom
And made up eight with looking after her.

(1.1.14-25)

The very first line is full of ambiguities. Before the audience discovers that the skull is that of a real "love"—that is, Vindice's lady—"poisoned love" sounds like an abstract phrase, loving that has in some way been thwarted, disappointed, or turned from its ideal purpose. The "sallow picture" then sounds like an emblematic representation: "Thou metaphoric symbol of my disappointed hopes (or warped nature)." Ironically, that is what the skull really is, although Vindice will never realize it; but the third line of his address, meant to clarify and provide exposition, obscures the deeper truth that lies behind the more immediate one.

The ambiguities continue in Vindice's description of the "bright face" with its "heaven-pointed diamonds." In neoplatonic imagery, light is associated not only with beauty but also with virtue and truth—all pointed heavenward to the One. Diamonds are perhaps an unusual jewel to mention in connection with eyes, but even here, the brightness of the many-faceted gem suggests a many-faceted reflection of the One. Unfortunately, the next lines shatter the whole neoplatonic image. Vindice contrasts Gloriana's natural beauty with the "artificial shine" of "bought complexions," a standard poetic figure that leads us to expect an orthodox meditation on the flesh as mask for mortality, as cosmetics are masks for flesh. But instead, Vindice speaks of his lady's beauty only as a temptation to vice. Unlike the neoplatonic ideal, this beauty is not allied to truth; it does not raise men's eyes to Beauty and then to God, but rather pulls the most righteous men down to lust and then to Hell.

In the next passage, even the sacramental kiss of neoplatonism is brought down to the level of dross:
Vindice: O she was able to ha' made a usurer's son
Melt all his patrimony in a kiss
And what his father fifty yeares told
To have consum'd, and yet his suit been cold.

(1.1.26-29)

We have here not only an image of prostitution (and an exor­bitantly priced prostitute at that), but an echo of Helen's succubus-kiss in Doctor Faustus, further emphasized by the sexual conno­tations of "melt" and "consum'd." The Gloriana of Vindice's perception, then, emerges as a progressively more corrupt travesty on the ideal love; Vindice's "love" is indeed "poisoned" in more ways than one.

Disgust with the flesh, of course, is standard in the memento mori exercise. But Vindice has transferred his disgust from passive corruption (the decay of the flesh and transience of earthly delights) to active corruption (the turning of the will to sin). As a result, he has lost the traditional sense of contrast between the seemingly beautiful things of the world and the end product of human mortality, from which contrast one concludes that the worldly is insufficient and only the eternal truly beautiful. Instead, he has led the audience to expect an entirely different moral: "The wages of sin is death." It comes as a shock, therefore, to discover in the next passage that Vindice's lady has died because she would not sin, because she has rejected the lustful advances of the Duke.

Vindice has inverted all the traditional imagery of love and death, and has drawn all the wrong conclusions from his evidence. He will have everything both ways: Gloriana is both a courtesan and a virgin martyr; her skull is both a murder victim and a murder weapon; for Vindice, these are not contradictions but poetic justice. And in his colloquy to the skull, he continues to miss the point of what he is dealing with. Turning the skull outward, and thereby thrusting death away both literally and metaphorically, he declares his intent to have revenge and falls once more into the imperative mood: "Advance thee, O thou terror to fat folks, / To have their costly three-pil'd flesh worn off / As bare as this" (1.1.45-47). Like Tamburlaine, he will make Death his
puppet—but in doing so, he will turn his whole world upside down. Skulls and corpses will become for him the only reality: he will create them in order to mock them. But because he has first made a skull live for him, life and death will become hopelessly confused in his mind.

Vindice is obsessed with the skeletonic symbol that he substitutes for reality, and, as Peter B. Murray notes, by a dramatic sleight of hand the playwright keeps the audience attuned to this obsession even when Vindice is offstage: “Repeated allusions to human brows, faces, and heads keep the image of the skull ever before our minds, as it is constantly before the mind of Vindice.”

We are therefore prepared to read a third meaning into his words when, in the guise of Piato, he tells Lussorioso that he is a “bone-setter” (1.3.42). His punning explanation, of course, is that he is not a surgeon but “A bawd, my lord. / One that sets bones together” (1.3.43-44); but we know, too, that he is planning to create corpses, and in act 3 we shall discover that he means to play games with the corpses, to “set” them in postures of his own choosing.

It is in the pivotal scene of the play, the killing of the Duke, that we see what this obsession leads to. Vindice, to trap the Duke, has promised him an assignation with a lady, and to keep his promise, he dresses up the skull of Gloriana in a dress and mask. His second address to the skull, then, begins as a pander would speak to a whore:

Vindice: Madame, his grace will not be absent long.—
Secret? ne’er doubt us, madam. ’Twill be worth
Three velvet gowns to your ladyship.—Known?
Few ladies respect that disgrace: a poor thin shell!

(3.5.43-46)

This brief, sarcastic speech is filled with echoes. The “poor thin shell” recalls Vindice’s earlier “thou shell of death”; the “Three velvet gowns” is a similar numerically specific offer as the “nine coaches waiting” that he offered to his sister in order to test her virtue (2.1.202); and the very manipulation of the helpless puppet is like the rape of Antonio’s wife:
Antonio: Then with a face more impudent than his vizard
He harried her amidst a throng of panders,
That live upon damnation of both kinds,
And fed the ravenous vulture of his lust.

(1.4.41-44)

Vindice, too, wears a “vizard”—the alias of Piato—and has earlier called on “Impudence! / Thou goddess of the palace” for inspiration (1.3.5-14). In effect, he is helping the Duke commit a rape. But what a rape! The skeletal whore to whom he speaks so insultingly is Gloriana, the woman he once loved. Othello’s similar manner of speaking to Desdemona (4.2.24-94) is shocking because deliberate, but since Vindice has focused his attention on the skull rather than on reality, he hardly notices what he is doing, and the audience is liable to overlook it as well.

Vindice’s perversity becomes more obvious in his words just prior to his memento mori address proper. Hippolito, echoing Vindice’s own praise of Gloriana’s beauty, in both Faustian and neoplatonic terms, asks: “Is this the form that, living, shone so bright?” (3.5.66). And Vindice replies:

Vindice: The very same.
And now methinks I could e’en chide myself
For doting on her beauty, though her death
Shall be reveng’d after no common action.

(3.5.67-70)

This is the height of self-deception. Her death, in fact, will not be avenged; it will be made into a piece of mockery—and mockery not only of the Duke but also of his innocent victim. Gloriana, whose virtue and natural beauty were earlier contrasted with the painted complexions of evil women, has been painted in the cosmetics that she once despised, and with poison on her “lips” will be subjected to the embrace of a man whom she died to avoid embracing. But Vindice has almost forgotten Gloriana in his intoxication with skulls; and in this context, his memento mori speech should be all the more chilling, not because it is less orthodox than the first, but because it is more orthodox:
Vindice: Does the silkworm expend her yellow labors
For thee? for thee does she undo herself?
Are lordships sold to maintain ladyships
For the poor benefit of a bewitching minute? . . .
Does every proud and self-affected dame
Campfire her face for this? and grieve her Maker
In sinful baths of milk, when many an infant starves,
For her superfluous outside?—all for this? . . .
Thou may'st lie chaste now! It were fine, methinks,
To have thee seen at revels, forgetful feasts,
And unclean brothels. . . .
Here might a scornful and ambitious woman
Look through and through herself.—See, ladies, with
false forms
Your deceive men, but cannot deceive worms.

(3.5.71-97)

The words of this speech are worthy of Petrus Luccensis or Hamlet. But the meaning that should animate them is absent. Hamlet, following the medieval tradition, saw in the dissolution of the flesh a message that the eternal is all important; that one must reform oneself and abide the end; that "Heaven will direct it. . . . Let be." Dekker's Hippolito, in his Renaissance secularism, drew the natural corollary that if there is a corruption, there must be an ideal state from which it is corrupted; and that since "good deeds keep men sweet, long above ground," one must work toward establishing those good deeds, even if only by reforming others. But Vindice neither absorbs the moral into himself nor directs it outward to others. Like his real-world counterparts of the seventeenth century who tried to imitate the Dance of Death without seeing beyond the skull to the spirit, he has come to view the human creature simply as part of the food chain: a dish for worms. But also like those writers, he exempts himself from the vision; all human endeavor is absurd—except his own. Failing to see the paradox that he has created, he then condemns himself in terms of his own meditation: "Now nine years' vengeance crowd into a minute!" (3.5.121). He has already forgotten his laughter, barely fifty lines earlier, at mortals who ignore their mortality
in “the poor benefit of a bewitching minute.” And, tragically, he no longer cares.

From the moment when Vindice positions the skull to kill (his “poisoned love” now truly bearing poison), his preoccupation with creating more skulls grows to hysterical proportions. He can hardly wait for the caustic poison to eat the flesh off the Duke’s skull, and must offer to help it along:

Vindice: What! Is not thy tongue eaten out yet?
Then we’ll invent a silence.

[To Hippolito:] . . . Now with thy dagger
Nail down this tongue.

If he but wink, not brooking the foul object,
Let our two other hands tear up his lids
And make his eyes like comets shine through blood.
(3.5.190–99)

Almost, this sounds like an address to a potential skull: “Where is thy cleare shyning eyes? where is thy tongue that so wel could speak?” And pleased with the skull that he is making, Vindice, like God looking upon His created universe, finds it good: “When the bad bleeds, then is the tragedy good” (3.5.200).

The self-appointed revenger has become a self-appointed God—a God of corpses. Whereas in the first part of the play he disguised the living (himself) and tempted them to lust and murder (Castiza, Lussurioso), now his mind turns to disguising the dead (Gloriana, the Duke) and performing all the murders himself. It is as though he must himself respond to the petition in the Book of Common Prayer: “Prevent us in all our doings”; he alone must supervise the revels of the dead.

Now his parodie shows come thick and fast. To Lussurioso, he delivers an emblem straight out of the illustrations in the medieval Ars moriendi:

Vindice: Why, to think how a great rich man lies a-dying, and a poor cobbler tolls the bell for him. How he cannot depart the world and see the great chest stand before him; when he lies speechless, how he will point you readily to all the boxes; and when he is past all memory, as the gossips guess, then thinks
he of forfeitures and obligations; nay, when to all men's hear­nings he whurls and rottles in the throat, he's busy threat'ning his poor tenants. (4.2.68-75)

Several medieval traditions are jumbled up in this speech: the Morality souls dying in avarice, the Mystery devils triumphing over their prey, and the Death Signs lyrics ("when the throte roteleth"), with, however, the wrong response of the sinner rather than the "Miserere" of the penitent. In his own way, Vindice is giving the warning of the Legend; but again he has perverted the tradition. He does not want his listener to repent; evil is now necessary to him as a rationale for creating more corpses.

Unfortunately, Vindice does not notice when the universe that he is laughing at begins to laugh back; if he hears anything at all, he assumes that the laughter is with him, not at him. When Lussurioso departs, Vindice calls upon the Heaven of his own making for a sign of vengeance but does not notice that in again using the word *impudent* he may be giving Heaven an ambiguous command. Only Hippolito, for a moment, seems to hear an equivocal message in the thunder:

\[\begin{align*}
\text{Vindice: } & \text{O thou almighty patience! Tis my wonder} \\
& \text{That such a fellow, impudent and wicked,} \\
& \text{Should not be cloven as he stood,} \\
& \text{Or with a secret wind burst open!} \\
& \text{Is there no thunder left, or is't kept up} \\
& \text{In stock for heavier vengeance? [Thunder.]} \\
& \text{There it goes!}^{22} \\
\text{Hippolito: } & \text{Brother, we lose ourselves.}
\end{align*}\]

The phrase "we lose ourselves" is itself ambiguous, and in more ways than Hippolito imagines. To him, it may mean, "we are straying from the purpose," "we have overestimated our ability," or "we are getting hysterical." But to the old audiences of the Mystery and Morality plays, it would also have meant, "we are causing our own damnation." And, indeed, even modern criticism is almost unanimous in sensing that, from this moment, Vindice
has slipped the bonds of all reality and begun to charge headlong
to his own destruction.

The final scene of the play is Vindice's final mockery: a parody
on the Dance of Death. He and Hippolito will impersonate the
masquers at the revels for the new Duke Lussurioso and, enter­
ing before them, will kill Lussurioso. The Dance, like so many
of Vindice's productions, will have a comic encore. But now fate
(or the playwright) is beginning to parody Vindice. Spurio, Ambi­
tioso, and Supervacuo—the masquers to be impersonated—the­
selves have planned a masque of death for Lussurioso; it is only
a question of who gets there first.

Vindice arrives first, of course, and the would-be murderers
of the second group fall on each other in suspicion and kill each
other. Although the script has run away from Vindice, who had
hoped only for the execution of the masquers and an alibi for
himself, he has what he wanted: eight corpses at the revels, includ­
ing four attendant lords. Why, then, having successfully manip­
ulated Death through parody, and thus having emerged safe from
death, does he confess to the murder of the Duke and call down
death on himself after all?

The most obvious answer is that, like any showman, Vindice
requires the applause of an audience. His original response to the
thunder indicated such a need—and when the thunder speaks
again during his death masque, he delightedly takes another verbal
bow:

\[
\text{Vindice: Mark, thunder!} \\
\text{Dost know thy cue, thou big-voic'd crier?} \\
\text{Dukes' groans are thunder's watchwords. . . .} \\
\text{No power is angry when the lustful die;} \\
\text{When thunder claps, heaven likes the tragedy.}
\]

(5.3.42-44; 47-48)

Therefore, when Antonio evinces wonder at the "strangeliest
carried" murder of the "old duke" (5.3.90-93), Vindice may be
expected to step forward and preen himself again. And so he does:
Vindice: We may be bold to speak it now.
’Twas somewhat witty carried though we say it:
’Twas we two murder’d him.

(5.3.94–96)

It is a rather cavalier confession, and one can hardly blame Antonio for wanting to rid himself of such a casual murderer. But even as he is being led off to be executed, Vindice remains the showman, speaking his curtain line much in the manner of an epilogue to a comedy:

Vindice: We have enough,
’Faith, we’re well: our mother turn’d our sister true,
We die after a nest of dukes—adieu.

(5.3.122–24)

And yet, Vindice’s showmanship is only part of the reason for his smiling exit. To understand what else has happened to him, let us look at three other characters’ variations on the art of dying.

Lussurioso is, of course, the standard Bad Example. We have seen him reject Vindice’s blockbook emblem of the dying miser, and before the fatal masque, he denies Death again by encouraging his flattering courtiers to vie with each other in wishing him long life (5.3.30–36; the winner is Third Noble, who hopes that Lussurioso will never die). For both Vindice and the audience, then, Lussurioso has been set up as the classic Herod-figure who must be struck down at the moment of proclaiming his immortality. Vindice knows this, and accordingly strikes him down.

The Duke is another case. When Lussurioso breaks into his room, thinking to find and kill Spurio there, the Duke bargains for his life in words that are patently hypocritical:

Duke: O take me not in sleep!
I have great sins; I must have days,
Nay, months, dear son, with penitential heaves,
To lift ’em out, and not to die unclear.
O, thou wilt kill me both in heaven and here.

(2.3.9–13)
This is the plea of Everyman and Faustus: more time, more time. But Faustus would not repent, no matter how much time he was given, and everyone on- and offstage knows that the Duke will not repent. Vindice in particular knows it, and accordingly strikes the Duke down.

But then there is the odd case of Junior. Condemned to death for the rape of Antonio's wife, he expects to be released by his brothers. But they are tricked into bringing the warrant for his execution, and Junior dies cursing them. His plea is also for more time—but time for curses:

First Officer: The hour beckons us,
The headman waits; lift up your eyes to heaven.
Youngest Son: I thank you, faith; good, pretty-wholesome counsel!
I should look up to heaven, as you said,
Whilst he behind me cozens me of my head.
Ay, that's the trick.
Third Officer: You delay too long, my lord.
Youngest Son: Stay, good Authority's bastards; since I must
Through brothers' perjury die, O let me venom
Their souls with curses.

(3.4.68-76)

This is straightforward impenitence that rejects good counsel at the Summons and mocks Death even at the last moment. The result, however, is unexpected: Junior's amorality leads him not only to a brave death, but to one very like Vindice's in its perverse insistence on his innocence:

Youngest Son: Must I bleed then, without respect of sign?
Well—
My fault was sweet sport, which the world approves;
I die for that which every woman loves.

(3.4.77-79)

Because of the trickery involved in this death, and Junior's banter at its approach, the impression left is one of almost accidental death, even though, in the strictest sense, Junior's overconfidence has set him up for a fall like Lussurioso's.
But Vindice does not see this last scenario, which plays itself out without his assistance, or the mocking, Vindice-like bow that Junior takes at the end of it. Thus, as far as Vindice can tell, he alone has played the role of Death. He has arranged the bodies, set out the stage, given all the directions, waited for his own cue, and stepped in as Death, to the wild applause of heaven and earth. Like many other actors acclaimed for long-running performances in a single role, Vindice has gradually confused his real identity with his stage identity; to give still another meaning to Hip pollito's observation, he has too thoroughly “lost himself” in his role. He does not believe that he can die.

Vindice, then, has overreached himself in staging his Dance of Death—not just the masque but the whole series of comic turns with skulls and corpses. And here I should like to take issue with two important critics who have added much to our understanding of the play, but who, I think, have missed the playwright’s culminating irony. Samuel Schoenbaum has compared The Revenge’s Tragedy to a Dance of Death, but implies that the whole play is a dance staged by the playwright, and Vindice only one of the human dancers: “For in the background of the revels lurks always the leering figure of Death, ever ready to join the dance.”

To some extent this is true; Vindice certainly does not notice the “leering figure” who waits at his shoulder while he is choreographing his own dance. Again, L. G. Salingar has compared the play to a Morality, in which “The contrast between the skeleton and the specious overlay provided by wealth and sensuality is fundamental.” This, too, has some foundation, and I have certainly had enough occasion to note both the playwright’s and Vindice’s use of medieval tradition. But I should like to suggest that the dance and the morality alike are primarily Vindice’s domain, and that the playwright has used Vindice to tell another Pardoner’s Tale.

We remember that in Chaucer’s tale, the three revelers showed both too much respect and too much disrespect for a personified figure of Death; in seeking to kill the “theef,” they forced Death into a finite shape outside themselves and ignored the seeds of death within themselves. Vindice, too, in his obsession with
and mockery of dead bodies, fails to see the true death that lies within his corrupt society, exemplified by the playwright in the comedies of errors beyond Vindice’s control: Junior’s accidental death at the hands of his attempted rescuers, and the melee of sequential killings during the death-masque. Therefore, in arrogating to himself the role of Death (like Chaucer’s revelers trying to inflict death on Death), Vindice becomes part of his corrupt society and is subject to the corruption of death. Like the revelers, too, he ignores the supernatural warning—the voice in the thunder—but, with an additional fillip of dramatic irony, he also misses the warning in the skull.

Both The Revenger’s Tragedy and Rowland’s Terrible Battle, then, work to the same end, although one makes us shudder and the other makes us laugh. Both reject the literality of skull and skeleton—and The Revenger’s Tragedy, in addition, rejects the too obsessive rejection. There comes a point in every iconoclastic movement, after all, when the obsession with tearing down idols becomes as superstitious as the idol-worship itself; neither the iconoclast nor the idolator, one might say, can exist without the idol. And yet, it is difficult to depict internal struggle on the stage without recourse to some sort of symbol. How some seventeenth-century dramatists coped with this problem I discuss in my next chapter. Let us now look at others who did not cope very well: those who struggled too hard to abandon the idol and fell into Vindice’s traps of beating (as it were) a dead skeleton; and those who, not realizing that the idol had fallen, continued to use a symbol that had become only a bogey—with disastrous results.

Such a result may be seen in a play like Chettle’s The Tragedy of Hoffman (ca. 1603). Hoffman’s father has been killed (whether justly or unjustly is never quite established) by having a “burning crown” set on his head and then his flesh stripped from his bones; Hoffman has been allowed to take the skeleton with him only under a vow not to bury it. As the play opens, we see Hoffman apostrophizing the skeleton, which, with a perverse sort of fidelity to his vow, he has hung from a tree until he can exact vengeance on his dead father’s enemies. When he does find one
one of them, he takes pains to use the same methods that killed his father—burning crown, hanging skeleton, and all.

We now have two skeletons hanging from the tree, and we may wonder how Hoffman will tell them apart in the future. In the old iconography, nonindividualized skeletons symbolized equality in death. Will Hoffman now either love or hate both dead men equally? Obviously not. Nor can we assume that Chettle is proposing a moral invisible to Hoffman alone, because when the victim’s mother, the “virtuous” Martha, discovers her son’s skeleton, she reacts just as Hoffman had—leaves it hanging on the tree as a spur to her own revenge. And when Hoffman himself is killed with a burning crown at the end of the play, we may begin to wonder whether we will now see three skeletons hanging from the tree. We can barely see the forest for the bones.

But in spite of all the grinning skulls, what is missing from The Tragedy of Hoffman is an acknowledgment of mortality. By manipulating the symbols of death, the characters create the illusion that they are in control of death; but in the process, they must also deny their own human response to it. Hence, we see no grief or consolation for grief, no indication that the living or dead are part of the universal human family. The skeletons, symbols that are no longer symbolic, hang from the tree until they are carried off by the stagehands, and the spectators, both on stage and off, go home secure in the thought that such symbols have nothing to do with them.

It is interesting to note that in some later variants, the skull and skeleton almost seem to have nothing to do with their plays. At the wedding that opens Middleton’s The Witch (1609? 1615?), for example, the Duke toasts the bride and groom in a skull, and then passes the skull around to the rest of the party, excepting only the governor, who has been ill, and the bride “whose health it is”—an unfortunate pun. The women are horrified, the men think the exercise an “ill omen,” and everyone except the Duchess refuses to drink, although we discover that the Duchess, of all people, should be the most unwilling:
Duke: Our duchess, I know, will pledge us, though the cup
Was once her father’s head, which as a trophy,
We’ll keep till death in memory of that conquest.
He was the greatest foe our steel e’er struck at,
And he was bravely slain: then took we thee
Into our bosom’s love: thou mad’st the peace
For all thy country, thou, that beauty did.

(1.1; p. 124)

Such a gruesome bit of quasi cannibalism is hard to understand in the context of the play. The “ill omen” never comes to pass, except for some expected plot complications; no one thinks to moralize on the skull as a “skeleton at the feast”; the Duchess has enough grounds on which to resent her husband without the aid of gratuitous macabre; and, in fact, no one mentions the skull again at all until the last few lines of the play, when the Duke, reconciled to his wife, offers to give her father’s remains decent burial. Since everything ends happily, why is the skull introduced in the first place? Middleton seems to have no more idea than the audience does; it is simply a clever and popular piece of scenery.

Middleton, of course, did better than this elsewhere; The Changeling and Women Beware Women are masterpieces of psychological horror. But that was after he had stopped trying to imitate what had worked for his predecessors, and what could no longer work for him.\(^{31}\)

Ironically, many scholars credit either Middleton or Tourneur with The Second Maiden’s Tragedy (ca. 1611), depending on whose hand they have seen in The Revenger’s Tragedy. And to be sure, the use of a dead lady (in the later play, a corpse rather than a skeleton) to poison a tyrant who has lusted after her might almost be a gloss on the earlier play’s implication that overconcern with the relics of the dead is a form of self-deluding idolatry. To a point, in the later play, the device works well.\(^{32}\)

Govianus’s Lady has killed herself rather than accede to the wishes of the Tyrant, and the Tyrant, in grief and frustration, has had her body removed from its tomb, dressed in fine clothing,
and brought to his chambers. Here, he subjects it to a grotesque imitation of neoplatonic courtship, bordering on idol-worship:

[They bring the body in a chair, dressed up in black velvet which sets out the paleness of the hands and face, and a fair chain of pearl 'cross her breast, and the crucifix above it. He stands silent awhile, letting the music play, beckoning the Soldiers that bring her in to make obeisance to her, and he himself makes a low honour to the body and kisses the hand.] (S.D. 5.2.13)

Such a pageant would strike many chords in the Jacobean mind: the Herod and Mariamne story, Tamburlaine's veneration of Zenocrate's body, and, because of the Lady's enthronement and the crucifix that she wears, Catholic veneration of the Blessed Virgin. Significantly, one of the kneeling soldiers, whose words make it clear that he is a Catholic, draws attention to this last implication by his instinctive recoil from it:

1 Soldier: [Aside] By this hand, mere idolatry. I make curtsy To my damnation. I have learned so much, Though I could never know the meaning yet Of all my Latin prayers, nor ne'er sought for't. (5.2.20-23)

As the Tyrant and his soldiers kneel, music plays “within” and a chorus intones the traditional memento mori:

Oh, what is beauty that's so much adored? A flattering glass that cozens her beholders. One night of death makes it look pale and horrid; The dainty preserved flesh, how soon it moulders. To love it living it bewitcheth many, But after life is seldom heard of any. (5.2.14-19)

Anne Lancashire has suggested that “the song is perhaps sung not at the court and for the Tyrant but outside the action of the play, to the theatre audience, as a moral commentary on the action” (5.2.13.7n.). The moral commentary would indeed have been obvious, particularly since the Lady's true beauty—her soul—
has been “heard of” in act 4, when her ghost appears to Govianus. But it is also possible that the Tyrant has ordered the song without realizing what he has ordered. Such an irony would make an even greater moral commentary.

Had the anonymous playwright left his commentary here, the symbol would have worked splendidly. But the temptation to imitate the success of *The Revenger’s Tragedy* was apparently too much for him, and so we are treated to another poisonous death-kiss. The Tyrant orders a cosmetician for the Lady’s corpse, whose color is rapidly deteriorating, and Govianus enters disguised to do the job. Here again, we have standard themes: the denial of death evinced in a desire to pretend that the dead are still alive, and the use of cosmetics to symbolize the artificial nature of worldly beauty. But Govianus cannot rest with the command of his Lady’s ghost, simply to rescue her remains; he poisons the lips of the corpse so that the Tyrant’s own wickedness will kill him in the midst of his idolatrous necrophilia. And so it does.

The Lady’s ghost returns during the killing to give approval to Govianus’s actions (perhaps the playwright’s attempt to show that we are not dealing with an evil Vindice here); the courtiers enter, and, rejoicing that the usurping Tyrant is dead, proclaim Govianus as rightful king; and when all is done, the Lady’s ghost comes back one last time to make sure that her body will now be suitably interred. The play closes with the only veneration proper to the dead body: a funeral procession to the tomb.

Actually, the final act, for all its macabre, is rather touching, and is easily the most skillful and affecting part of the play; but it just misses being truly great. The playwright, in working out his dramatic irony of the idolator struck down by this own idol, has unfortunately had to use the idol itself as a symbol, and so has diffused his own message. It is all too likely that he has done so for box-office rather than dramatic necessity; significantly, when Govianus formulates his plan, he changes his stated purpose from “rescue” to “revenge.” *The Revenger’s Tragedy* appears to be heavy on his creator’s mind.

The box-office attraction of such a dramatic device cannot be denied; nor, unhappily, can its overuse. By the time Massinger
uses it in *The Duke of Milan* (1623), it has degenerated into such a piece of sensationalism that Massinger must wrench his plot and characterization completely out of shape to accommodate it. Toward the end of this play, which is even more obviously modeled on the Herod and Mariamne story than is *The Second Maiden's Tragedy*, Sforza (in utter disjunction with his earlier depiction as a reasonable man and devoted husband) falls prey to jealousy and stabs his wife Marcelia (who, though innocent, encourages his jealousy in a fit of pique contrary to her earlier characterization). Overcome with remorse, he refuses to believe that she is dead, forcing the court physicians to play out a charade of nursing her dead body back to health. But this charade cannot go on much longer, as the First Doctor points out: “The body, too, will putrify, and then / We can no longer cover the imposture” (5.2.135-36). Hence they must seek out a way to preserve the body and make it appear alive, at least until they can bring Sforza out of his melancholy.

Enter Francisco, whose character has also changed since the beginning of the play from devoted friend of the Duke to vengeful brother of Eugenia, intent on avenging the Duke's betrayal of her many years before. It was he who first caused Sforza's jealousy and Marcelia's death, and now he has come back in disguise to finish his revenge. Although, as he tells the Doctors, “I am no God, sir, / To give new life to her” (5.2.140-41), he offers to paint the corpse in a way that will simulate life, including a “strange vapor” for her mouth that will give her “a seeming breath” (5.2.142-49). The strange vapor, although the Doctors do not know it, will be poison.

Dismissing the Doctors, Francisco goes to work, his patter an echo of Vindice's, but much more consciously malicious:

**Francisco:** [Y]our ladyship looks pale  
But I, your Doctor, have a ceruse for you.  
See, my Eugenia, how many faces  
That are ador'd in Court borrow these helps,  
And pass for excellent, when the better part  
Of them are like to this. Your breath smells sour, too,  
But here is that shall take away the scent,
A precious antidote old ladies use
When they would kiss, knowing their gums are rotten.
These hands, too, that disdain'd to take a touch
From any lip whose owner writ not Lord,
Are now but coarsest earth, but I
Am at the charge, my bill not to be paid, too,
To give them seeming beauty. So, 'tis done:
How do you like my workmanship?

(5.2.183-97)

Francisco's satiric disgust with the body, however, is not part of his natural bent. Furthermore, the Duke, whom he will poison, is not really a necrophile but will be tricked into acting like one, thinking that he is embracing a live woman. Nor has the Duke been the kind of tyrannical ruler who deserves to be killed in this gruesome way; he has been acclaimed as just and rational even by his enemies, and his one (admittedly enormous) sin of stabbing Marcelia almost appears to have been introduced into the play to lead to this coffin-trick of Francisco's. In effect, the poisoned corpse is neither a comment on mortality nor poetic justice, but merely a circular argument.

To be sure, poisoned skulls and corpses are not entirely new to the seventeenth-century stage; Kyd had used one in the early Soliman and Perseda. But it has progressed from a tactical ploy in a series of murders to an obsession on the part of a murderer and finally to a seeming obsession in the playwright himself. Its culmination may be seen in a particularly revolting variation on the Thyestean feast, the anonymous The Bloody Banquet (1639).

In this gruesome tale, the Tyrant has his wife's dead lover quartered—not, as one would suppose, in the normal way with traitors, to display as a warning to the populace, but rather for ease in butchering. Like sides of beef, Tymethes' quarters will hang in the royal larder, and each night the queen will eat a chop or two until the supply is gone:

Tyrant: Lady, you see your cheer, fine flesh, coarse fare.
Sweet was your lust, what can be bitter there?
By heaven, no other food thy taste shall have
Till in thy bowels [this] corpse find a grave.

(ll. 1718-21)

It is not even enough for the playwright to describe this horror; he must exhibit it as well:

[Soft music. Enter the Tyrant with the Queen, her hair loose. She makes a curtsey to the table. Sertorio brings in the flesh with a skull all bloody. They all wonder.] (S.D. 1919-22)

Well may they wonder; we may wonder, too. Something more than Senecan horror has occurred here. The whole attention of an age has swung from the moment of death—the separation of soul from body—to the process of causing death and the physical remnant after death. More creative energy (however misplaced) is being spent on the corpse than on the living human creature, until we may suspect the playwright himself of the necrophilia that he describes with such relish.

To some extent, the trend may remind us of the oldest forms of the Legend, in which the corpse beckoned living men to the grave. But in the Legend, the corpse was self-animated; it did not require a human puppeteer to dress it up and shake its limbs at the living. Rather, I think, we are watching one aspect of a growing tendency to deny the moment of death by appropriating Death to one's own uses. In fact, as we shall see, a whole generation of dramatists, in confronting the universal nightmare, took the reins of the nightmare into their own hands and rode it into new territory: a dramatic land of pleasurable dying, gruesome dying, erotic dying, and self-inflicted dying—but very little enlightened dying, and almost no normal death.