A Choice of Deaths

The Last Decades of Renaissance Theater

The gradual change in dramatic presentations of death during the seventeenth century is not an easy one to trace. Chronological terms like “Jacobean” and “Caroline” are misleading; styles do not arbitrarily change on a certain date, nor does everyone agree to change. What we think of as the Caroline style, for example, began early in the reign of James I, particularly in the plays of Beaumont and Fletcher; but Webster and even Middleton continued in the old style as late as the 1620s, and consequently fell into disfavor when audiences demanded the revival of Fletcherian rather than Shakespearean drama during the Restoration. And yet, even Webster and Middleton could not easily remain completely in the Marlowe-Shakespeare tradition. Too much had already changed in their own society; and the immediate past, from which all writers draw, was for them no longer the past that had informed the work of their predecessors. In tracing the changes, then, we must deal with the past as well as the present, remembering always that the word modern changes its meaning every day, and that yesterday all too rapidly becomes last year.

Henry W. Wells has seen some of this mingling of past and present in the Elizabethans but has curiously overlooked its corollary in what I should like to call, for want of a better term, the New Wave: “While [the Elizabethan theater] combined on an
equal footing the medieval and the modern, it remained emancipated and alive. But when Jonson produced a school of realists, when Fletcher succeeded to the laurels of Shakespeare and was followed in turn by Massinger and Shirley, the period of experimentation had passed and that of decadence and imitiveness arrived. The first sentence of this judgment is undoubtedly true. But the second sentence ignores three important points: first, that the New Wave did not seem to its contemporaries “decadent and imitative” but rather so fresh and new that, by the time of the Restoration, Fletcher was considered modern and Shakespeare hopelessly old-fashioned; second, that to “combine . . . the medieval and modern” is in itself a form of imitation; and third, that what the New Wave imitated was neither Shakespeare nor his medieval sources, but rather the immediate heritage that Shakespeare had rejected in his return to the medieval.

In this sense, both *The Duchess of Malfi* and *The Atheist's Tragedy* may be seen as the last steps that a playwright could take in the old style. Both plays demand a background of unified belief, whether Catholic or Protestant; in Webster’s play, we must be able to extrapolate from the Duchess’s heroics to the “eternal Church” (whatever we think that church may be); and in Tournier’s play, we must see the good and bad characters as Just and Lust, mutually incomprehensible to each other and predestined to reward or punishment. The New Wave, returning with Tournier to the early Protestant bifurcation of man, could not return with him to the presence of God—and one can only speculate why: lack of belief, uncertainty about doctrine, fear of censure from the Established Church, rebellion against the growing Puritan faction, or simply a feeling, before the increasingly secularized upper-class audience of the private theaters, that to mention God or religion was somehow in bad taste. Whatever the reason, the New Wave split the human creature asunder and then analyzed the parts in terms of this world alone: social rather than divine sanction, and the medical determinism of the humors.

At the same time, as we have seen, death had ceased to be thought of as a threshold, the breathing space between worlds, and now permeated all of life. But although it had come so close,
one was no longer permitted to dread it, fear of death being a mark of reprobacy or cowardice. The new Arts of Dying almost uniformly cried “Rejoice!”—run to death, embrace it, long for it as for a bride. And when the New Wave translated this joy to the stage without also translating the reason for the joy, the result was a seeming love of death for its own sake.

Ronald Huebert has attempted to link this almost erotic death-wish to the baroque style in art. For “baroque man,” he says, and for Ford’s “sweetly suffering heroes and heroines” in particular, “death is the most highly charged emotional experience of all”; and death-longing is merely “an expression of the general baroque bias toward delight in emotion for emotion’s sake.” This analysis is helpful to a point, and may explain not only the luxuriant deaths of New Wave drama but also the proliferation of bombast in lieu of soliloquy. But we must remember that elaborate rhetoric is not new to the seventeenth-century stage, nor is death the only occasion for emotional outburst. There is as much emotion in Tamburlaine’s longing for “the sweet fruition of an earthly crown” as there is in any New Wave heroine’s desire for death, and Hamlet can become as overheated about a moral dilemma as the New Wave characters can be about dying. The term “baroque,” then, may be a convenient label for the symptoms, but it does not explain the disease.

But is it truly a disease? Or is it, rather, a new cure, a new way to share the nightmare and thus drive it away? Our own view of the New Wave may be colored by our preference for the old style, leading us to see only imitation where novelty exists. Indeed, many of the old symbols appear to continue in the New Wave, particularly the use of the masque as Summons. In Fletcher’s Valentinian (ca. 1611), Maximus is crowned with a poisoned wreath during a masque; in Massinger’s The Roman Actor (ca. 1629), the emperor Domitian, having discovered the empress in her attempted seduction of Paris, stages a play in which he kills Paris; in Ford’s ‘Tis Pity She’s a Whore (ca. 1631), Hippolita plans to kill Soranzo during the course of a masque, although she is foiled by the treachery of Vasques, who hands her the poisoned cup meant for his master; and, again in Ford, Ferentes’s
three cast-off mistresses in Love’s Sacrifice (ca. 1632) take the occasion of a masque to murder him:

[Enter, in an antic fashion, Ferentes, Roseilli, and Mauruccio at several doors. They dance a little. Suddenly to them enter Colona, Julia, and Morona in odd shapes, and dance. The men gaze at them, are at a stand, and are invited by the women to dance. They dance together sundry changes. At last they close Ferentes in, Mauruccio and Roseilli being shook off, and standing at several ends of the stage gazing. The women hold hands and dance about Ferentes in diverse complimental offers of courtship. At length they suddenly fall upon him and stab him. He falls down, and they run out at several doors.]

Ford, in fact, for all his late arrival on the dramatic scene, may be the closest to the old style in his use of the death masque. Note that the elaborate stage direction given for the masque in Love’s Sacrifice bears an uncanny resemblance to the folk dances called “dances of death”: the self-contained nature of the figure, limited to the dancers themselves rather than including the onlookers; the singling out of a “victim,” who is surrounded by the dancers; and the ambiguous alternation of courtship and mourning. In The Broken Heart, too, Ford seems to return to the medieval Dance, although he inverts the figure so that the victim at the center of the dance, Calantha, becomes the living receiver of news about the deaths of others: first her father, then Penthea, and finally Ithocies. Like Lydgate’s Monk, she continues to dance: “Be chere owtewarde / hard to deuyce” (Dance of Death, 391); but, as she explains later, “Al ben not meri / which that men seen daunce” (392):

Calantha: O, my lords,
I but deceiv’d your eyes with antic gesture,
When one news straight came huddling on another
Of death, and death, and death. Still I danc’d forward;
But it struck home, and here, and in an instant. . . .
These are the silent griefs which cut the heartstrings;
Let me die smiling.

(5.3.67-71; 75-76)
This acknowledgment of grief balances her earlier reaction to the news, a reaction that is orthodox, classical, and admirable, but a bit stark in context, and which in fact hovers on the brink of sounding like Macbeth's despair:

Calantha: Those that are dead
Are dead; had they not now died, of necessity
They must have paid the debt they ow'd to nature,
One time or other.—Use dispatch, my lords;
We'll suddenly prepare our coronation.

(5.2.89-93)

Macbeth: She should have died hereafter,
There would have been a time for such a word.
Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day
To the last syllable of recorded time,
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death.

(5.5.17-23)

Calantha's repressed grief, her denial that at first refuses catharsis, is not only close to what we admire in the old style, but also one of the most psychologically accurate portraits that Ford has given us. Had he left it there, we might even believe that Calantha could easily die from the combined shock and repression; although we no longer believe in broken hearts, we are familiar, in similar circumstances, with cardiac arrests. But Ford, for all his lingering fondness for the old style, was a man of his time, and Calantha must die, like other New Wave heroines, amid an elaborate scenic production that she has staged for herself. We shall look at some of these productions in a moment.

New Wave playwrights, of course, tinkered as much with the Dance of Death as they did with death's other iconography. Marie Cornelia points out that Shirley's The Cardinal deviates from the tradition by having an innocent victim slain by masquers; "it is the wrong perpetrated through the masque," she says, rather than justice (however warped) which is emphasized in the play. Even more important, in some cases the death masque begins to show
the defeat rather than the triumph of death, but a defeat by earthly love rather than by Christ. Court masques perhaps emphasized this theme more than did actual plays, but some amateur playwrights, apparently hoping for the favor of the court, embodied the popular masque in their dramas. Henry Glapthorne, for example, in *The Lady Mother* (ca. 1635), uses a death masque to save Lady Marlove and her son from execution for their supposed murder of Thurston. In this masque, Grimes, dressed as Death, invokes Despair and the Furies; but Timothy, as Hymen, chases Death away. They then reveal Thurston, who is alive and married to Clariana, and all ends happily. 9 Although a defeat of Death may seem incompatible with the death-longing then prevalent on the stage, it is significant that the conjunction of love and death remains, and that both are focused on the world of the secular. 10

To see how subtle the changes in focus can be, we may well compare two sets of star-crossed lovers, early and late. Shakespeare's Romeo, thinking that his Juliet is dead, returns to Verona to die in her tomb. On his arrival, he meets Paris, who has just finished mourning for Juliet in a suitably orthodox manner, one that suggests that Romeo's mourning is as rash as his previous actions and is part of his tragic decline. Paris tries to apprehend Romeo for violating the decree of exile, the two young men fight, Paris is killed, and Romeo drinks poison, first speculating on his other rival, Death:

Romeo:  
Ah, dear Juliet,
Why are thou yet so fair? Shall I believe
That unsubstantial death is amorous,
And that the lean abhorred monster keeps
Thee here in dark to be his paramour?

(5.3.101-05)

Note that Death here remains an ugly monster, the perpetrator of a rape—perhaps with overtones of the Persephone legend, with its implied promise of rebirth. And when Romeo dies beside Juliet, he has joined his wife, forestalling not only Paris's but also Death's claims upon her. Death, then, retains its medieval complexity: it
is a result of sin, a thing to be feared, but, in the end, a means of justice and reconciliation.

In Ford's *Love's Sacrifice*, however, there is no hint of this complex moral order. Indeed, Bianca and Fernando, the star-crossed lovers, are adulterers in all but consummation of the act. Although Bianca is married to the Duke, Fernando's best friend, she and Fernando have been maintaining a relationship apparently modeled on the fashionable version of "neoplatonism" popularized by Queen Henrietta Maria's court. They exchange vows of love, flirt in public, and, more to the point, swear to die together. When the Duke kills Bianca in a jealous rage exacerbated by her defiant assertion that she loves Fernando, we may therefore expect another Romeo tomb scene, and Ford does not disappoint us. As the repentant Duke approaches Bianca's tomb to mourn for her, up pops Fernando, who has not only brought poison with him but has also dressed for the occasion: "[One goes to open the tomb, out of which ariseth Fernando in his winding-sheet, only his face discovered; as Caraffa is going in, he puts him back.]" (S.D. 5.3.54).

The winding-sheet here is a symbol without a referent, a bit of grue for stage effect, much like the poisoned corpses that we saw earlier. Since Fernando must step out of his burial garment to push the Duke back, and since there is no evidence that nudity was acceptable on the Caroline stage, we must assume that Fernando had wrapped himself up fully clothed—an unorthodox method of laying out a corpse. Either he or Ford has determined to create a pictorial effect for the audience; Romeo's real passion has been translated into an outward show of passion.

It is true that the winding-sheet had become an alternative to the skull as a memento mori by this time; John Donne had ordered his portrait done in a winding-sheet before *Love's Sacrifice* was produced on stage. But neither Fernando nor Bianca seems to be animated by religious impulse; they are merely giving a last gibe at the Duke, the now standard "checkmate" to the tyrant. And Fernando, to complete his pictorial representation, enunciates the progress of his pain as he dies:
Fernando: It works, it works already, bravely, bravely!
Now, now I feel it tear each several joint.
O royal poison, trusty friend, split, split
Both heart and gall asunder, excellent bane!
Roseillia, love my memory.—Well search’d out,
Swift, nimble venom; torture every vein.—
I come, Bianca—cruel torment, feast,
Feast on, do—Duke, farewell. Thus I—hot flames!—
Conclude my love,—and seal it in my bosom!

(5.8.86-94)

This graphic description of the physical pain of dying is one of the curious innovations of the New Wave. It, too, may be associated with the growing masochism of death on the stage, and in Fernando’s case may remind us of the mingled anguish and sexuality that runs through the works of such nineteenth-century writers as Flaubert and Swinburne. But Fernando is one of the few “good” characters to die in such vocal pain; normally, it is the bad or expendable figure who entertains us with his or her shrieks of agony. The young Duke in Robert Gomersall’s The Tragedy of Lodovick Sforza (ca. 1628) spends the better part of the first act screaming on his deathbed. In ’Tis Pity She’s a Whore, the dying Hippolita cries out for eleven lines about the “heat above hell fire / . . . cruel, cruel flames!” that she feels (4.1.90-100), and Bergetto exclaims on the pain in his belly for ten lines (3.7.18-34). In Shirley’s The Maid’s Revenge (ca. 1639), Catalina goes half crazy with pain:

Catalina: Oh, I must walk the dark foggy way that spits fire and brimstone! No physic to restore me? Send for Sharkino [the physician]; a cooler, a cooler; there’s a smith’s forge in my belly, and the Devil blows the bellows! Snow-water! Berinthia has poisoned me; sink by my own engine; I must hence, hence, farewell! Will you let me die so? Confusion, torment, death, hell! (5.3; pp. 66-67)

And even at the beginning of the New Wave, Fletcher’s Aretus, in Valentinian, poisons himself before he poisons the Emperor,
so that he can let the Emperor know what pains to expect at any given moment. Thus we hear not one but two screams of pain throughout the death scene, in a bizarre sort of echo effect.\textsuperscript{13}

If we are tempted to say that the violence of death is as common to the old drama as to the new, we may find it useful to review the manifestations of the violence. We see the pain on stage, but we hear something different. Humanum Genus and Everyman feel the death signs, but they lament their isolation and spiritual danger more than their pains. Marlowe's Edward II, who undergoes perhaps the most protracted physical torture of any stage figure until the horror films of the twentieth century, is more conscious of mental than of physical torture. Shakespeare's dying characters are more concerned with their states of mind and the workings of their societies than with physical pangs; even Cleopatra, at the beginning of the New Wave, experiences her dying pain as a "lover's pinch" or a lullaby (5.2.298–99; 412–13), and Goneril and Regan, precursors of Shirley's Catalina and Berinthia, confine themselves to understatement before they go offstage to die:

\textit{Regan}: Sick, oh, sick!
\textit{Goneril}: [Aside] If not, I'll ne'er trust medicine. . . .
\textit{Regan}: My sickness grows upon me.
\textit{Albany}: She is not well. Convey her to my tent.

\hspace{1cm} (Lear, 5.3.95–96; 105–06)

And the grim villains of Webster's plays, so conscious of their vile bodies while they live, think little of them as they die.

Why, then, did the New Wave become so obsessed with physical pain? To speak again of imitation and jaded palates is not entirely fruitful, although we have seen the growth of imitative sensationalism in other shopworn symbols of the day. Again, I think we must look to the source of the imitation: not the medieval or Shakespearean, but the Protestant Morality, in which Moros, Worldly Man, and Lust agonized under God's visitation, to show that the reprobate were more liable to, and less able to cope with, earthly suffering than their elect counterparts. But, again, this explanation does not account for Fernando, the romantic hero
who screams as loudly as the wicked, nor can we simply write him off as one of the many anomalies in Ford, who frustratingly refuses to fit into our literary classifications. Before attempting to show how stage agony fits into another New Wave convention, therefore, I should like to indulge in speculation about New Wave society and some of its similarities to our own.

The closing of the theaters in 1642 was not a spur-of-the-moment idea; Puritan leaders had been railing against the immorality of the stage since the 1560s. And if we read the continuing debates between the pro- and anti-theater factions, we may begin to notice how familiar they sound. The prosecution says that seeing immorality onstage will make spectators immoral; the defense replies that, on the contrary, seeing the immoral punished will act as a deterrent to immorality. The prosecution charges that the unreality of the stage warps the spectators' view of reality; the defense counters by pointing to the increasing realism, if not of plot or characterization, then at least of carnage. Thus, the defense can use the prosecution’s attack as an excuse for excess, and the more vehement each side becomes, the more delight the opposing side takes in doing what it knows will anger its enemy.

In addition, during this period, the whole composition of the audience began to change. Starting with the leasing of Blackfriars by the King’s Men in 1608, serious drama came increasingly to be written for the private theaters and therefore for wealthier audiences; and by the reign of Charles I, all playwrights seem to have written with one eye fixed firmly on the court, where Henrietta Maria not only delighted in seeing plays but even ventured to act in them occasionally, at a time when actresses were unheard of in England. If, as L. G. Salingar claims, the heroes and heroines of New Wave drama “are dwellers in a charmed circle, touchily defensive towards their privileges, but free from any responsibility outwards,” they are merely a reflection of the “charmed circle” of their audiences, what we may call the Beautiful People of their own day. Such people do not see themselves as “decadent”; rather, they consider themselves the avant-garde, freed from the dull restrictions—legal, moral, and aesthetic—of the boorish masses. It is not that they are trying harder and harder to satisfy increasingly
jaded palates; rather (they say), they are more able to “take” reality, to accept with equanimity what would merely inflame the masses. And if the masses fail to be inflamed, the Beautiful People must increase the effort. One must, after all, maintain the image.

And yet, even this societal explanation, so analogous to our own world, does not completely serve. We may begin to see more of the pattern if we examine the New Wave portrayal of soldiering, a glorification of death that paradoxically serves to deny its object. Sanseverin, the Good Soldier of Gomersall’s *Tragedy of Sforza*, epitomizes the new feeling about war. Speaking of men who avoid warfare and, by implication, of all civilians, he says:

Sanseverin: And why like these run we an idle race
Of threescore years, and then sneak to a death?
While soldiers master their mortality
And die by men, if that at all they die.

(11. 593-96)

This is more than Hotspur’s exaggerated view of military honor, or Tamburlaine’s inflicting of death so that he may avoid it himself. Moreover, Sanseverin is not proven wrong at the end, as Hotspur and Tamburlaine are. Rather, implicit in these lines is a fear of life—the horror of growing old as so dreadful a thought that one must kill and be killed rather than face decay. Sanseverin’s last clause, “if that at all they die,” would have been a challenge to Death in the old drama; but here the challenge is not answered, and one can only speculate whether or not Gomersall’s 1628 audience, like Sanseverin himself, is even more afraid of the ravages of Time than of a violent and sudden death.

Equally significant about the New Wave soldier is that, unlike the patriots and conquerors of earlier times, he is not concerned with fighting for a cause, or for a particular leader, or even for booty. He is fighting for the sake of fighting, for the sake of creating an eternal moment of violent life. He is fighting, although neither he nor his creator seems to realize it, against Death. And, in most cases, he wins.

Caratach, the hero of Fletcher’s *Bonduca*, is one of the most elaborately portrayed of these fighting men. A Coriolanus run
amok—and, more important, one approved of by his author—he has not even Coriolanus's excuse of national pride to spur him on. He simply loves a battle. Although he is a Briton, he has little sympathy with his own people and almost seems to prefer the Romans because they are the better fighters. Indeed, his praise of them so far exceeds the accepted verbal homage due an enemy that Bonduca suspects him of treason; but he explains to her, in what amounts to the only love lyric in the play:

Caratach: I love an enemy: I was born a soldier;
   And he that in the head on's troop defies me,
   Bending my manly body with his sword,
   I make a mistress. Yellow-tressed Hymen
   Ne'er tied a longing virgin with more joy
   Than I am married to that man that wounds me.

   (1.1.57-62)

The eroticism of this passage is immediately evident, and it is the only eroticism sanctioned by the play. The two Roman soldiers who fall in love are seen as dupes and fools, who ultimately repent of their folly and return to their proper mistress, war. Caratach himself is so misogynistic that he cannot abide even Bonduca, the leader of his own people, and frequently rails at her for fighting on her own and thereby spoiling his war. But again, we are not meant to see this perversity as a tragic flaw in the manner of Coriolanus; it is meant to be honorable and glorious, admired by the gods themselves. During the act 3 sacrifice scene, for example, Bonduca and her priests are unable to elicit a response from the gods to their prayers for victory and safety, but when Caratach addresses the gods in his own way, smoke immediately rises from the altar:

Caratach: Give us this day good hearts, good enemies,
   Good blows o' both sides, wounds that fear or flight
   Can claim no share in; steel us both with angers,
   And warlike execution fit thy viewing...
   ... [W]ho does best,
Reward with honour; who despair makes fly,  
Unarm forever, and brand with infamy.  

(3.1.64-67; 71-73)

We may think that any general who prays for a strong enemy and heavy casualties among his own troops should be relieved of command as soon as possible, but within the context of the play, his prayers are seen as admirable. And lest we think that Caratach seeks personal rather than national glory in the battle, we are disabused of this idea in our encounter with Penius, a Roman soldier who temporarily falls prey to martial despair. Sick of the endless trench warfare in Britain, Penius complains that even in victory there is no “fame” to be gleaned from this miserable little war at the ends of the civilized earth, where “one is smother’d with a multitude, / And crowded in amongst a nameless press” (2.1.37-38):

Penius: Who but fools,  
That make no difference betwixt certain dying  
And dying well, would fling their fames and fortunes  
Into this Britain-gulf, this quicksand-ruin,  
That sinking, swallows us?

(2.1.46-50)

The art of “dying well” has made a long journey from its original meaning; here, what Penius means is earthly fame. But even fame in this sense, a sense that the sixteenth century would certainly have understood, is no longer sufficient for Fletcher. Penius, after all, represents the bad example; in what amounts to a travesty on the three views of “honor” in 1 Henry IV, both Bonduca’s and Penius’s views of war (national and personal glory) are to be seen as the wrong views, offsetting Caratach’s which is the right one. And the ultimate irony is that Caratach, the proponent of “dying well” in this newest sense, does not die; like the elect in a Tudor Morality, he comes through the test and is awarded Consolation: an offer to join the Roman army, which he happily accepts. The purpose of the fight does not matter, so long as one can keep fighting. What was a character flaw in Coriolanus is a reward for Caratach.
These professional soldiers appear frequently in New Wave drama: Aecius in Valentinian, Sanseverin in Sforza, the soldiers who act as chorus in such Roman tragedies as Nero, and so on. We no longer have the glory-seeking armies of Marlowe and his imitators, or the patriotic armies (with their complement of malcontents, philosophers, and ordinary men) of Shakespeare; we have only professional warriors who are proud of their trade and surly when they are idle. Much of this new development may be attributed to the enforced peace during the period; it is easy to be a warhawk during an unpopular peace, particularly since one knows that one will not have to do any of the fighting that one is glorifying. Conversely, since there is no war to observe at first hand, it is difficult to become familiar with actual military behavior or individual reactions to war. One must fantasize instead—or imitate.

But again, topicality is only part of the explanation. Paradoxically, in the very plays where bloody war is glorified we begin to see a rise of pathos, seemingly the direct opposite of the warlike mood intended by the playwright. Increasingly, we are shown protracted and sentimental deathbeds of the helpless; increasingly, New Wave dramatists tell sad stories, not (like Richard II) of the death of kings, but rather of women, children, and mental defectives. In Bonduca itself, the mighty Caratach is provided with a young nephew, Hengo, who holds off soldiers with his little sword (much like Coriolanus's son tearing butterflies with his teeth), learns the arts of war, and even absorbs some of his uncle's misogyny. When Hengo dies, taking all of act 5, scene 8 to do it, the scene is so awash with sentimentality that we may imagine ourselves at the bedside of Paul Dombey or Little Nell.

Hengo has been under siege in a cave with Caratach, manfully bearing starvation, but at last he ventures out to find some food and is treacherously slain by a Roman soldier. Earlier, he has catechized his uncle on the meaning of death and has been told that, if we are very good and kind, we will go to the peaceful land of the gods, where we shall meet all our loved ones. (Fletcher does not seem to notice how incongruous this sounds on Caratach's lips.) Now, on his deathbed, Hengo is catechized in
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Caratach: My dear boy, what shall I lose?

Hengo: Why, a child,

That must have died however: had this scap’d me,

Fever or famine; I was born to die, sir.

Caratach: But thus unblown, my boy?

Hengo: I go the straighter

My journey to the gods. So I shall know ye

When you come, uncle.

(5.3.147-53)

And so on for twenty-five more lines. Nor are we meant to see Hengo’s acceptance of death as a rebuke to Caratach; it is shortly after this scene that Caratach goes over to the Romans so that he can continue fighting.

Hengo is certainly not the first innocently wise child in drama; there are a host of them in Shakespeare alone: Arthur, Rutland, Macduff’s son, and the two princes of Richard III. But Hengo is one of the first who longs to die. Here again we can see a departure from the old style, in which even children hung back from Death, resenting his too early arrival, or puzzled at the idea of pain and separation. Children—and other innocents—in New Wave drama become the exemplars of joyful dying, and by looking at another of Fletcher’s plays we may begin to see why.

In Thierry and Theodoret, Thierry has been told that in order to cure his impotence, he must kill the first woman he sees leaving the temple of Diana. It is all a plot, of course; his impotence has been caused by a drug, and the astrologer, one of the plotters in disguise, has arranged for Ordella, Thierry’s bride, to be the first to leave the temple. Ordella, however, is veiled, so that Thierry does not know whom he is addressing. He tells her that she must die for the good of her country, and when she agrees to do so, he tests her virtue by delineating the pangs of annihilation:

Thierry: Suppose it death . . .

and endless parting
With all we can call ours, with all our sweetness,
With youth, strength, pleasure, people, time, nay, reason;
For in the silent grave, no conversation,
No joyful tread of friends, no voice of lovers,
No careful father's counsel, nothing's hard, [heard?]
Nor nothing is, but all oblivion,
Dust, and an endless darkness.

(4.1.95-102)

Thierry is here proposing the main temptation of the secular: attachment to worldly goods and companions—attachment even, in the manner of Everyman’s second trial, to the self. Although it is a test of Ordella’s virtue, there is a hint, too, that Thierry himself wants reassurance: Ordella must contradict him, not only to assuage his guilt over killing her, but also to comfort him about his own mortality. In the old style, she might have given this comfort by speaking of an afterlife or the glory of dying for a cause, but instead, she speaks in words perilously close to those of Spenser’s Despayre:

Ordella: 'Tis of all sleeps the sweetest,
Children begin it to us, strong men seek it,
And kings from height of all their painted glories
Fall, like spent exhalations, to this center;
And those are fools that fear it, or imagine
A few unhandsome pleasures, or life's profits
Can recompense the place; and mad that stays it
Till age blow out their lights, or rotten humours
Bring 'em dispers'd to the earth.

(4.1.103-11)

“To die, to sleep— / No more.” What Hamlet rejected (3.1.60-61) Ordella accepts. Significantly, she begins by invoking the child, and ends by deploring old age. And if her “Till age blow out their lights” reminds us of Macbeth’s “Out, out, brief candle,” her whole praise of death may remind us of another of Macbeth’s speeches:

Macbeth: Better be with the dead,
Whom we, to gain our peace, have sent to peace,
Than on the torture of the mind to lie
In restless ecstasy. Duncan is in his grave,
After life's fitful fever he sleeps well.
Treason has done his worst. Nor steel, nor poison,
Malice domestic, foreign levy, nothing
Can touch him further.

(3.3.19-26)

But Macbeth was the voice of evil, and Ordella is the voice of virtue. Nor is she alone. Picinino, the good courtier of Sforza, agrees with both Ordella and Macbeth, and, in what amounts to a refutation of Hamlet's most famous soliloquy, comes down firmly on the side of "not to be." During a memento mori exercise, he says of the skull before him:

_Picinino:_ Then let me think
What loss I have when I am made like this:
This fears no French: a piece of ordnance
Can break but not astonish this; no force
Can draw a tear, no, not a sigh from hence;
And can it be a loss to be like this?
O Death! why art thou fear'd? why do we think
'Tis such a horrid terror not to be?
Why, not to be is not to be a wretch;
Why, not to be is to be like the heavens,
Not to be subject to the power of Fate:
O, there's no happiness but not to be.

(2063-74)

Was New Wave society so irreligious that it saw only Nothing on the other side of the grave? To all appearances, no. Playwrights and playgoers alike continued to attend church regularly, and to buy and read the devotional handbooks that were coming off English presses in ever-increasing numbers. Indeed, one of these handbooks, Henry Montagu's 1631 _Contemplatio Mortis et Immortalitatis_, flatly contradicts Picinino: "To the wicked the best thing of all were not to have beene. . . . His next best were to liue long. It was ill with him that hee was borne, worse that hee must die: for hee not being sure of a better, would faine bee sure of this. . . . With good men it is otherwise; to them the best thing
of life is to have been, for this leads the way ad beatitudinem patriae, to the fruition of their faith.”

Religious poetry, too, flowered again in the hands of Donne, Herbert, Vaughan, and Crashaw. And in the later years, when Queen Henrietta Maria arrived from France with her entourage of priests and friars, there seems to have been a religious revival on three fronts: the Puritans, becoming more vocal against not only the episcopal system but also the papistry of the court; the Anglicans, bent on suppressing the Puritans, variously delighted with or suspicious of the new high-church party, and upset by the increased tolerance shown toward papists; and the Roman Catholics themselves, who, counting on the protection of the Court, flocked to the queen’s chapel by the thousands to attend Mass openly for the first time in nearly a century. But what is evident even in this apparent intensification of religious fervor is a lack of centrality; that is, belief, however sincere, had become less a matter of internal reality and more a matter of party. We have seen, in the early Sicke Mannes Salve, the insecurity that can grow from such doctrinal splintering and its consequent defensiveness. Now, as the splintering increased, so did the insecurity.

In addition, the new “arithmetic” of life—the single reality of the always disappearing moment—can have done little to soothe people’s insecurity. It is not, as Philippe Ariès claims, that New Wave society was “less loving of things and people” than were older societies; rather, the love intensified as it was transformed into a desperate clinging to something that was always being snatched away, a sense that the beautiful things themselves were riddled with death. And all the beautiful things that carried the seeds of their own destruction, the most beautiful was self—the self that one must watch disintegrating before one’s eyes.

Of all the fears of death, this is perhaps the closest to the fears of our own society; not merely the decay that happens after death, but also the decay that happens before it. We may look at a skeleton as le mort, the remnant of someone else who no longer is, and we may even make a joke of it; but we cannot look at it as la mort, an impersonal force beckoning to us, because we may take on its form before it seizes us. We may revel in stage
violence—the enunciation of pain, the glorification of war—because it is, as Lupset says, such a violent pain that it is soon over—and besides, it is the exception, something that will not happen to us; but we cannot watch someone dying of old age or plague (in our day, perhaps, heart disease or cancer), because it is the rule, and will happen to us.

Significantly, the Arts of Dying in the seventeenth century begin administering a caution undreamed of in the old treatises: not to be afraid of the dead or dying; not to turn from another’s deathbed in aversion, but to approach it in Christian hope and charity. Such a caution implies almost a fear of contagion—not of death itself, perhaps, but of predeath disintegration—a fear of seeing the self grown old and helpless. Obviously, the warning of Elde is unsuitable to such a society in which one covers one’s ears and turns one’s face from the elderly. Any warning, any comfort, must come from the young, who must give an example not only of dying well but also of dying beautifully. We must be assured that even if we become dead, we will not become ugly.

Furthermore, to increase the distance between Death and the audience, New Wave playwrights took pains to make the relationship between Death and the dying innocent a highly individualized one. Because death was an escape from a private sorrow, or an intensely personal encounter between the dying individual and Death the bridegroom, the audience was removed from the circle of participants, becoming only spectators of another’s sorrow or joy. The increasingly situational nature of the drama assisted in this distancing; the more bizarre a situation in which death occurs, the less likely we are to recognize in it our own death. Fletcher’s plots, based (as Eugene M. Waith has shown) on Senecan controversiae, those outlandish moral problems designed more to show off the skill of an orator than to analyze the normal problems of life, remove even the individualized encounter still further from the audience; and Ford’s psychological anomalies—the incestuous, the obsessed, the humor-driven—almost demand that the audience reject them as portraits of the self.

Safely cushioned, then, from the dangers of our own decay—both before and after death—we may weep happily over the romance of the lovely brides and bridegrooms who go to meet
their betrothed, Death. Indeed, many of the deathbeds are planned with the elaborate care normally given to weddings, and are often conjoined with weddings. During Evadne’s preparations for her nuptials in The Maid’s Tragedy, the jilted Aspatia wanders about in tears, delivering no less than three “when I am dead” speeches: one in the form of a song, one in a general address to the bride and assembled bridesmaids, and once in an encore to Amintor, who has entered too late to hear it the first time. Significantly, both her song and her address to the bridesmaids suggest parallels between the ministrations given to bride and corpse alike:

Aspatia: This is the last time you shall look on me:
Ladies, farewell. As soon as I am dead,
Come all and watch one night about my hearse.
Bring each a mournful story and a tear
To offer at it when I go to earth;
With flatt’ring ivy clasp my coffin round;
Write on my brow my fortune; let my bier
Be borne by virgins that shall sing by course
The truth of maids and perjuries of men.

(2.1.99-107)

In Shirley’s The Traitor, too, a jilted woman interrupts wedding preparations to announce her own forthcoming nuptials. Amidea, whose ex-lover, Pisano, is now leading Oriana to the altar, informs the company that she, too, is about to be wed:

Amidea: To one whom you have all heard talk of.
Your fathers knew him well. One who will never
Give cause I should suspect him to forsake me.
A constant lover, one whose lips, though cold,
Distill chaste kisses. Though our bridal bed
Be not adorn’d with roses, ’twill be green.
We shall have virgin laurel, cypress, yew,
To make us garlands. Though no pine do burn,
Our nuptial shall have torches, and our chamber
Shall be cut out of marble where we’ll sleep
Free from all care forever. Death, my lord,
I hope shall be my husband.

Ironically, Oriana is no happier than Amidea about the marriage; she is in love with Cosmo and faints when he appears on the scene. The ironies increase as Pisano tries to revive her, perhaps unconsciously ringing changes on the old image of death as a divorce from life:

Pisano: Will heaven divorce us ere the priest have made
Our marriage perfect? We in vain hereafter
Shall hear him teach that our religion binds
To have the church's ceremony. She returns.

Oriana: Why were you so unkind to call me from
A pleasing slumber? Death has a fine dwelling.

And Penthea, in The Broken Heart, prefaces her plea to Calantha, a plea that Calantha accept Ithocles's love, with a fifty-line "legacy" speech (3.5.30-78), in which she announces that she is about to die and bequeath to Calantha three "jewels": her youth, her fame, and her brother. Surprisingly in this play of the New Wave 1630s, Calantha becomes the commonsense voice of the old style, sympathizing with Penthea's pain but trying to put it into a realistic perspective. We might almost be listening to a conversation between Elinor and Marianne Dashwood in Jane Austen's Sense and Sensibility as Calantha gently tries to extricate Penthea from her romantic gloom, even suggesting that if Penthea will "exert herself" (to use Elinor's words), there may be some "remedy" (Calantha's word) for the problem. In a startling inversion of the traditional meaning of the term, however—"Is there no remedy?" was once asked of death, not life—Penthea insists, like Shakespeare's Angelo, that there is no door out but death: "That remedy / Must be a winding-sheet, a fold of lead, / And some untrod-on corner in the earth" (3.5.31-33).

Calantha listens patiently, allowing Penthea the catharsis of speech but always keeping such speech in perspective by treating it as a bit of poetry or a theatrical performance:
Calantha: How handsomely thou play'st with harmless sport
Of mere imagination. Speak the last;
I strangely like thy will.

(3.5.66-68)

I do not think that we are meant to see Calantha, here, as an unfeeling woman (although, as in Austen’s novel, Penthea may see her so because Calantha will not lend herself completely to unbridled death-longing), or even as a woman as yet untutored in sorrow. Even as Penthea speaks, Calantha is torn between her love for Ithocles and the dynastic necessity of marrying Nearchus, a conflict not unlike Penthea’s own. Calantha’s father, too, is ailing, and her friends are quite volubly suffering; but Calantha, like Elinor, must maintain her equanimity in order to keep those around her from falling apart.

But “Al ben not meri / which that men seen daunce.” There is a hint, even in Calantha’s “I strangely like thy will,” that she, too, is capable, not only of being crushed by sorrow, but also of giving it vent in words. In her final scene, she is careful (like Elinor—or Hamlet) to explain her self-control and provide for the future well-being of her people; but having exerted herself to the extent necessary, she allows herself to die as theatrically as Penthea. In fulfillment of the oracle’s prediction that “The lifeless trunk shall wed the broken heart” (4.1.134), she places her mother’s wedding ring on the hand of the dead Ithocles and, kissing him, prepares to die:

Calantha: One kiss on these cold lips, my last—crack, crack!—
Argos now’s Sparta’s King.—Command the voices
Which wait at th’ altar, now to sing the song
I fitted for my end.

(5.3.77-80)

And yet, even in Calantha’s apparent submission to New Wave sensibility, she pays homage to old-style sense. Although the first and last sections of her death lyric are allied to Penthea’s “Love’s martyrs must be ever, ever dying” (4.3.152), the middle section looks beyond the love-death nexus to the whole human
condition and echoes the laments of Nashe, Shakespeare, and Spenser:

Glories, pleasures, pomps, delights, and ease
Can but please
Th’ outward senses when the mind
Is not untroubled or by peace refin’d.
Crowns may flourish and decay,
 Beauties shine but fade away.
Youth may revel, yet it must
Lie down in a bed of dust.
Earthly honors flow and waste;
Time alone doth change and last.
Sorrows mingled with contents prepare
Rest for care;
Love only reigns in death, though art
Can find no comfort for a broken heart.

(5.3.81–94)

To the last, Calantha retains the mixed nature of the old Dance of Death, in which the audience is forced to look at itself as well as at the dancers. And it is probably Calantha’s blend of Elinor and Marianne—or, we might almost say, of Hamlet and Ophelia—that has earned The Broken Heart critical approval through centuries of critical change, being lauded for its realism in ages that rejected romanticism, and for its sentiment in ages that rejected insensibility. It is not merely, as Charles Osborne McDonald has claimed, that “Calantha’s actions are certainly meant to set those of all the other characters in a firm moral perspective, to indicate clearly their lesser nobility of action and soul”; McDonald, after all, is of the sense party, whereas other critics, of the sensibility party, have taken Penthea as the true heroine and moral exemplar. Rather, Calantha is one of the last of the universal characters of a previous age, an Everywoman of mixed emotions who prevents The Broken Heart from slipping over into a drama of types, the deterministic mode of the late Morality in which Just and Lust are immediately recognizable as themselves and therefore unrecognizable as ourselves.
A Choice of Deaths

And yet, in spite of Calantha's mixture of old and new, restraint and emotionalism, Ford does place her in the context of his time: the marriage with death that is inextricably linked with earthly marriages. Indeed, it is noteworthy that the death-marriage nexus in these plays is usually presented to the disadvantage of earthly marriage. In all the weddings overshadowed by literal death—the fatal wreath at Maximus's wedding, Aspatia's lament at Evadne's, Amidea's at Oriana's, and so on—there is a core of emotional or spiritual disease. Maximus has murdered his way to the throne and the Empress; the bride Evadne is the king's paramour and forces Amintor to accept an unconsummated marriage bed; Oriana's betrothal is the result of a double betrayal; Thierry is rendered impotent on his wedding day; and Calantha goes to a marriage that has been doomed by a frustrated love before her own.

It is this feeling of doom that pervades both the earthly loves and the death-longings of New Wave drama. In fact, Dorothy Farr has compared The Broken Heart to the Oresteian cycles of Greek tragedy, in which all suffer from a crime that has been perpetrated before the play begins. But if we listen to Ithocles's admission of his "crime," the forced marriage of Penthea to Bassanes despite her love for Orgilus, we may hear echoes of something beyond the specific transgression of a cruel brother:

Ithocles: I did the noble Orgilus much injury,
    But griev'd Penthea more. I now repent it;
    Now, uncle, now. This "now" is now too late.

There is only one place in which repentance is too late: Hell.

Realistically speaking, it is not "too late" for the characters of Ford's play, at least not in the sense that Ithocles and Orgilus mean it. Ithocles has repented, and during the course of the play, he offers to amend his life and make whatever restitution he can to those whom he has injured, a resolution made more striking by the fact that his apology to Penthea takes place on his sickbed, a variation on the old deathbed repentance scene. But in Ford's world, the value of deathbed repentance had long since been
rejected; Judgment, in the predestinarian sense, had preceded birth. 31

Whether Ford himself accepts the idea of fate—either in its classic or its Calvinist form—is a moot point. Giovanni, in 'Tis Pity, claims that his actions are determined by fate; but Giovanni is an incestuous brother, and both the Friar's exhortations and Annabella's repentance suggest that what Giovanni calls "fate" is only passion controlling will. The lovers in Love's Sacrifice speak of their fate; but their downfall is occasioned by well-motivated human machinations. And in The Broken Heart, both the oracle's prophecy and Ithocles's "too late" are offset by Tecnicus and Calantha, who speak consistently of free will, control of the passions, repentance, duty, and "remedy." What, then, causes us to accept the determinism of the villains rather than the determination of the heroes? The answer may lie in the very bond that is forged between love and death in New Wave drama—or, rather, the merging of one with the other.

To a certain extent, the attempt to turn the death of beauty into beauty is a healthy acceptance of death and (as some have said) the driving force behind art. It is a sign that Good is more powerful than Non-good, because beauty can remake ugliness in its own image, whereas ugliness cannot do the same to beauty. But there comes a point at which acceptance of death, even beautification of death, turns into a rejection of life; as though in purifying contaminated water, we should drink off the poison and pour the water out on the ground. The pivot, as T. S. Eliot pointed out centuries later, is the reason for welcoming death: not for its own sake but for the "right reason." 32 I cannot, therefore, agree with Ronald Huebert, who cites George Herbert's "Death" as another instance of baroque death-longing; 33 the reason for Death's being so "faire and full of grace, / Much in request, much sought for as a good" in this poem is that Death has now become Christ's servant, the porter at the gateway to Heaven. And Herbert's poem concludes, not with an exhortation to run to death, but with an acceptance of whichever pillow God gives: "Downe or dust." 34 This, then, is the precise point of balance, the old refuge between despair and presumption, which
Milton's Michael was to delineate to the fallen Adam: "Nor love thy life, nor hate; but what thou liv'st / Live well, how long or short permit to Heav'n."

But New Wave heroes and heroines seldom permit the choice to Heaven. With the possible exception of Shirley's Sciarrha in *The Traitor*, who is willing to consider an honorable way out of death even after his stoic speech of welcome to martyrdom (4.2.146-59), the new protagonists do not accept death; they long for it, clamor for it, and, if necessary, force others to give it to them. In fact, despite all the sweet melancholy of their "when I am dead" speeches, many of the heroes and heroines are in remarkably good health throughout their plays and must devise elaborate stratagems in order to die. Penthea, it is true, starves herself to death—a relatively simple method of suicide, if, as Huebert suggests, one well calculated to prolong the show of dying and to inflict as much pain as possible on the observers. But Aspatia must dress up as a young man in order to trick Amintor into fighting with her and killing her (*Maid's Tragedy*, 5.3). Philaster, coming upon Arethusa and Bellario in the woods, demands that they kill him, and when they refuse, offers to kill Arethusa, who begs him to do so (*Philaster*, 4.5). When Soranzo discovers Annabella's pregnancy, she goads him into a rage, meanwhile singing, "Che morte piú dolce che morire per amore?"—"What death more sweet than to die for love?" (*'Tis Pity, 4.3; Bianca similarly enrages the Duke in *Love's Sacrifice*). Ordella, reprieved from the death-stroke by Thierry's compassion, is so disappointed that she offers to kill herself (*Thierry and Theodoret*, 4.1). And even the rough soldier Aeclius, when Pontius dies rather than carry out the sentence of execution on him, runs about the palace bellowing for death in a manner that is almost comic (*Valentinian*, 4.4).

This lust for death at another's hand easily spills over into the eroticism of lust itself. Both Bellario and Arethusa beg for Philaster's touch, if only the touch of his sword—Bellario, as suits her hopeless love, in the old images of release from a doleful life; and Arethusa, a Philaster's betrothed, in a duet with Philaster that is almost purely sexual:
Bellario: 'Tis less than to be born; a lasting sleep,
A quiet resting from all jealously;
A thing we all pursue; I know, besides,
It is but giving over of a game
That must be lost.

(3.1.254-58)

Arethusa: If my fortune be so good, to let me fall
Upon thy hand, I shall have peace in death.
Yet tell me this, there will be no slanders,
No jealousy in the other world, no ill there?
Philaster: No.
Arethusa: Show me then the way.

(4.5.65–69)

And Aspatia, too, in her “duel” with Amintor, claims that “there is no place so fit / For me to die as here” (5.3.106–07). Conversely, Giovanni, by kissing Annabella as he kills her and then tearing out her heart and ripping up her womb, combines the images of Death the bridegroom and Death the rapist, bringing to flower the seeds of death contained in his incestuous love for his sister and fulfilling the prophecy of the Friar:37

Friar: O, Giovanni, hast thou left the schools
Of knowledge to converse with lust and death?
For death waits on thy lust.

(Tis Pity, 1.1.57–59)

Sin being made perfect, as Saint Paul or William Perkins might observe, brings forth death. But in New Wave drama, even virtue made perfect brings it forth; there is a sense that love, like life, “smelleth with the salt of death.”38 The moment of Judgment is every moment; it is always “too late”; the nightmare is always there. The New Wave solution, then, is to turn the unwelcome guest into a welcome one; to pretend, even, that he has been invited; but to be sure that the invitation has clearly come (in the words of the Duchess of Malfi) from the “mad folk” next door.