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"Remembering Death: Deathbed Scenes in Shakespeare's Plays and the Visual Tradition

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Death in its various forms is a frequent visitor to the Shakespearean scene. Old Mors is much more common in tragedy and history than in comedy, of course, but his osseous figure is not unknown even there—consider the arrival of Marcade at the end of *Love's Labour's Lost*, Jaques' moralizing on the dying deer in *As You Like It*, or the pretended death of Hero in *Much Ado About Nothing*--, and he celebrates a real or imagined triumph in each of the romances. Such a common motif has naturally drawn scholarly and critical attention, and in addition to hundreds of local references in books and articles on the genres already mentioned, on particular plays, on particular characters and scenes, there have been several substantial studies of the topic, although, oddly enough, no book-length treatment of death in Shakespeare has yet appeared. [1. The foundation text is Theodore Spencer, *Death and Elizabethan Tragedy* (1936), which digests a diligent survey of many plays into a lucid and graceful outline of the principal categories under which early modern playwrights handled the topic. Spencer's wide-ranging model apparently influenced the design of more recent and more specialized treatments which nonetheless look at early modern English drama generally rather than Shakespeare in particular. These include Roger Stilling's investigation of the close relation of *Love and Death in Renaissance Tragedy* (1976). Phoebe S. Spinrad has looked at the particular moment when the cold hand falls on the living shoulder, *The Summons of Death on the Medieval and Renaissance Stage* (1987), and Michael Cameron Andrews has surveyed the living mouth's response by looking particularly at final speeches from dying mouths and at speeches about the final moments of life, *The Action of Our Death* (1989). Arnold Stein, *The House of Death* (1986), although its particular applications concentrate on 17<sup>th</sup>-century non-dramatic works, has useful introductory materials.] It must be noted, however, that none of them has any pictures: despite a few references to visual materials, they are logocentric. That is natural enough, for despite the labors provoked by the renewed interest in Shakespeare on the stage over the last couple of decades, we cannot know much about the actual physical presentation of Shakespearean death scenes in his own time. Yet the theater is a visual as well as a verbal medium; successful playwrights necessarily have strong visual imaginations. In fact, study of the visual as well as the verbal traditions and conventions for the representation of death turns out to illuminate and invigorate all the Shakespearean death scenes, and although the argument that follows necessarily concentrates on what survives to us of the Shakespearean construction of death—that is, the text—it will, I hope, become clear that the visual element is continuously active in and behind the scene.

At the outset, a problem of focus appears. Most Shakespearean deaths are "unnatural," sudden and violent—murder, suicide, the battlefield. Such deaths may well communicate to spectators and readers one of the principal messages of the tradition of *memento mori* that surrounds the entire topic, that death might call at any moment, in any place: "from battle and murder, and from sudden death, Good Lord deliver us," as the litany put it. The visual background certainly included many representations of violent death. Still, its dominant imagery expresses the dominant fact, that most early modern Europeans died as most people die now, in bed, of "natural" causes, disease, old age. For that reason I wish to concentrate here on those scenes that come closest to the norm, to scenes of death in bed. [2. In order not to exclude some of the most interesting and important scenes, I recognize that the sheer weight and bulk of the normal early modern bed (no such thing as the modern hospital bed on wheels) meant that many dying characters were carried on and off stage in chairs, and extend my range to include such scenes.] However, for reasons that will, I hope, seem sufficient at the time, I will pay attention to some deaths in which human agency has summoned death to the stage before his natural time.

Studies of texts in connection with representation in the visual arts sometimes forget that the visual environment of a writer will almost always comprise a farrago of modes and styles, a mixture of old and relatively new, sophisticated and coarse, modest and elaborate. Such was certainly the case for an early modern writer like Shakespeare as regards the representation of death. This is particularly the case because one of the most important and inescapable loci for the figuration of death was also one of the most aggregative and most durable: the funerary sculptures of churches, built up by accretion, decade by decade, style by style, over several centuries, and often constituting within a single edifice a fairly comprehensive anthology of the standard images. Nor should it be surprising that a writer who used the symbolic materials available to him as eclectically as Shakespeare did should have ranged widely over the available visual sources when it came time to represent death on the stage.

As Philippe Ariès has shown in his trans-European study of the visual imagery of death, styles and emphases changed periodically over time, and substantial traces of each development survived into the next. The swings were generally cyclical: periods in which death took explicit physical form, as cadaver or skeleton, gave way to periods in which the absence of such forms was the norm. During the time whose traces would have most deeply and widely marked the early modern English visual environment, death initially worked in absentia. In the high Middle Ages, the dominant funerary convention is the gisant, the reclining figures, peacefully asleep atop their tombs, clothed as in life, that line the aisles of the great cathedrals. In the mid-fourteenth century, however, perhaps in response to the ravages of the plague, physical death emerges. Initially it is the cadaver, the decomposing corpse, crumbling before the onslaught of the worm. [3. Lawrence Stone's account of the progress of English funeral sculptures seconds Ariès, although he observes that the representation of cadavers, although it continued throughout C15 and well into C16, was never common, only about 20 C15 instances being known to him (213-14).] (Figures 1 and 2.) (It will be important for my argument to notice that these figures, and the figures of death in general, tend to blend into those of the devil, death's close ally. (Fig. 3) Shakespeare has Hamlet recall this tradition as he shows Rosencrantz and Guildenstern the way to that particularly dusty death, the body of Polonius. Later, the cadaver gave way to the skeleton, in sculpture, but especially in painting and the graphic arts. Here, the popularity of the Dance of Death brought representations of Bone Man in his antic guises onto the walls of many churches—including the one in Stratford-upon-Avon—and the pages of many books. (Fig. 4) Of these, the most significant for our purposes is one of the most popular of all Elizabethan books, the *Christian Prayers and Meditations* published by John Day and others in at least seven editions from 1569 to 1608, in which the monitory solemnity of the prayers and meditations is pointed up by the lively antics of the skeletons in the borders to each page. (Fig. 13). The skeleton, whether whole, or reduced synecdochically to the skull—"Alas, poor Yorick"—remained a standard feature of the iconography of death throughout the period. (Figs. 2-5, etc.)

According to Ariès, however, humanistic emphasis on this world rather than the next meant that the prevailing mode of funerary representation shifted back to the sense of death as a kind of sleep, and then to a kind of waking dream—many sixteenth-century English tombs show their occupants not prostrate, but lying with the head and upper torso meditatively propped on an elbow, with the implication that they may rise again at any moment and return to active life. [4. See also Spencer 54-59. Arnold Stein proposes that this development involves increasing emphasis on the death of a particular and unique person, as distinct from a view of any given death as only an instance of the general mortality that is the lot of all (13).] (Fig. 10) A similar emphasis informs those painted or engraved portraits (not all that numerous, in fact) that served as memorials of their dead subjects, such as the well-known picture of the Earl of Surrey (1547), vigorously erect, in an encadrement of classical rather than Christian figures, albeit with what appears to be a sarcophagus silhouetted behind him. [5. Of the hundreds of portraits reproduced in Roy Strong's *Tudor and Jacobean Portraits*, there is a remarkable absence of the standard imagery of death.

Only one item, a full-length standing picture of Sir Thomas Gresham in his lusty young manliness, probably painted in Antwerp at the time of his marriage, at the age of 26 (1544), includes a skull, lying on the floor a little to one side. (Fig. 12) A picture that Strong does not include, perhaps by William Larkin (c. 1615), and said to be of the widowed Lady St. John of Bletsoe, dressed in black, standing under a tree beside a pile of dirt on which sits a skull, is now at Mapledurham House in Oxfordshire. One of the most intriguing items in this non- catalogue is the well-known portrait of Elizabeth I in her coronation robes, long supposed to have been painted in 1557 but recently shown by tree-ring dating of the panel to have been done at the time of her death in 1603, presumably to make some part of the funeral panoply.] None of these modes of representation is exclusive, however, and all could be expressed alone, or in combination; thus, toward the end of the period, the elegant tomb designed by Maximilian Colt for Robert Cecil (1612) combines a peaceful gisant of James' wily advisor on the upper table with the skeleton to which he must inevitably be reduced down below. (Fig. 5)

These conventions may or may not affect the construction of the deathbed itself. Ari s reports that the standard treatment of this scene remains stable throughout history:

. . . the setting is always the same, the center of the scene is the sick person in bed, and the room is always crowded with people. Even when the crowd is reduced to family members, the latter always appear numerous and crowded together. The deathbed abhors a vacuum; the action is a public one. (94)

This matter of fullness and vacuum, public and private, will occupy us later. For now, observe that the composition of the bedside group varies.

A normative pattern was determined by the popularity of images of the death of the Virgin Mary; her entourage always includes ecclesiastical figures (one or more bishops, one or several priests, a crucifer and other acolytes), and lay persons who may be friends or family members. (Fig. 6, 7)

An important development occurred in the fifteenth century, when increasing emphasis on that strain of the condition of *contemptus mundi* that regards life as only a preparation for death produced the *ars moriandi*, the manual of holy dying. In addition to verbal instructions for preparing to make the crossing into "the undiscovered country from whose bourn / No traveler returns," these handbooks often included pictures, which shortly took on a canonical character: a set of images of the deathbed each addressed to one of the five particular temptations most incident to death: heresy, despair, impatience, spiritual pride, and worldliness. (Figs. 7,8) In addition to human attendants—family members or servants—these included saints, angels, and demons, who made of the deathbed a battleground for the soul (Ari s 140-42, Spinrad 31- 34). (Figs. 7, 8) The great vogue for printed *ars moriandi* was around the turn of the sixteenth century; Caxton and de Worde produced at least eight editions between 1490 and 1506. But the imagery hung on, in pictures and in words, at least throughout the following century. These various modes are nicely summarized in a single familiar construction, the funeral portrait of Sir Henry Unton produced by an unknown artist around 1596. [6. The picture is discussed in detail by Strong (Cult 84-110). An odd but rich conflation of similar images occurs in the satirical picture of Edward VI and the Pope (NPG 4165), showing Henry VIII on his deathbed pointing to his son and successor while the council, including Somerset as protector and at least two ecclesiastics, look on approvingly. In the foreground the pope, with "All flesh is grass" written across the front of his robe, slumps as though struck suddenly down by death.] (Figs. 9, 10) The central figure is Unton, as he was in his prime of life, doing the kind of work that had occupied him as a courtier. The right-hand side of the picture is mostly filled by images from his life. Near the top, however, we see him on his deathbed, surrounded by friends and counsellors. (Fig. 9) At the viewer's right, but his own sinister left, Unton's head is flanked by skeletal Death moving in to strike (balanced by the guardian angel on the other side). At the bottom, the parade of mourners, as a crowd of spectators looks on, accompanies the

catafalque toward the church where Unton's funeral sermon is already being preached. At the left stands his tomb, with the kind of semi-recumbent portrait figure mentioned above as its principal ornament, overlooked by his wife, who survives to mourn. (Fig. 10) Below, the coffin awaits the moment of resurrection.

These, then, are the visual images of death that filled the experience of early modern writers, performers, and spectators. The great Elizabethan theatrical efflorescence occurred far into a period in which the visual image of death, as cadaver or skeleton or skull, was conspicuous by its absence from most funeral representations, whether in sculpture, painting, woodcut—or theatrical scene. Death had sometimes appeared in propria persona on the medieval and earlier Tudor stage. Herod in the Chester play of the Innocents sees death coming; he appears as a warning at the beginning of *Everyman*, and strikes Mankind with the dart that is his most common attribute near the end of *The Castle of Perseverance*. [7. Some medieval representations of Death show a figure like a man in close-fitting jerkin and hose with bones sewn or painted on the black cloth; some such costume was most likely used on the stage.] By the 1580s, however, a more naturalistic approach to the drama had pretty well banished old Bones from the stage: according to Michael Cameron Andrews, "death is demonstrated rather than acted" (19). In *Soliman and Perseyde*, Soliman cries out that "pale Death sits on my panting soule," with no indication that he is present for anybody else. Tamburlane has a similar experience, though expressed more eloquently:

See where my slave, the ugly monster Death,  
Shaking and quivering, pale and wan for fear,  
Stands aiming at me with his murdering dart,  
Who flies away at every glance I give,  
And when I look away, comes stealing on. (5.3.67-71)

Yet although Mors has not entered onto the stage, these moments make an obvious appeal to the visual experience of the spectators, to whom the spectacle of Death, standing with his dreadful dart beside the bedstead of a dying man, was a familiar image.

At about this time, or a little later, Shakespeare conducts his own survey of the standard motifs in one of his earliest works, *The Second Part of King Henry the Sixth*. [8. On these scenes see Andrews 131-33; he emphasizes the psychological representation of character.] Two deathbed scenes occur in this play. The first is a phony, staged by Suffolk, Cardinal Beaufort, and the Queen to cover up their murder of Humphrey Duke of Gloucester, with the body presumably arrayed on a bed in the curtained recess at the back of the stage. Death has, of course, already arrived (and left), in the person of the two murderers. He is also present, however, in the person of Suffolk, who has suborned the killers to do their work, as King Henry's response to the discovery shows:

Lay not thy hands on me; forbear, I say!  
Their touch affrights me as a serpent's sting.  
Thou baleful messenger, out of my sight!  
Upon thy eyeballs murderous tyranny  
Sits in grim majesty, to fright the world. (3.2.46-50)

[9. Shakespeare is quoted throughout from *The Complete Works*, ed. David Bevington (Glenview, IL, etc.: Scott, Foresman, 1980).] These words recall the imagery of the Dance of Death, the cold fingers dropped on shoulder or arm or hand, and the grim image of crowned death ruling the mortal world. (Fig. 4) In the play's next scene the guilty Cardinal himself lies dying, apparently of natural causes. He himself can try only to buy death off with his great wealth, indicating that worldliness, which the *Ars moriendi* identified as one of the temptations most to be feared, has strong hold on him in his extremity. Again the young king's words recall the visual tradition, in which the struggling sinner is assailed by imps and demons, while saints and angels offer succor from the other side; Warwick's comment recalls the typical rictus of the tormented wretch:

KING O thou eternal Mover of the heavens,  
Look with a gentle eye upon this wretch!  
O, beat away the busy meddling fiend  
That lays strong siege unto this wretch's soul  
And from his bosom purge this black despair.  
WARWICK See how the pangs of death do make him grin! (3.3.19-  
24)

Note that no clergy are present, except, ironically, the Cardinal himself, although such figures would normally be expected in a deathbed scene. Perhaps the King himself, notably pious, fills that office:

Peace to his soul, if God's good pleasure be!  
Lord Card'nal, if thou think'st on heaven's bliss,  
Hold up thy hand, make signal of thy hope.  
[Cardinal dies]  
He dies, and makes no sign. O God, forgive him. (26-29)

If that is the case, his final remark is noteworthy, given that the arsmoriendi was designed as a guide to effective meditation:

WARWICK So bad a death argues a monstrous life.  
KING Forbear to judge, for we are sinners all.  
Close up his eyes and draw the curtain close,  
And let us all to meditation. (30-33)

Beaufort's terrible end contrasts effectively with that of another worldly cleric at the other end of Shakespeare's career. [10. This scene is one of those customarily assigned to Fletcher; since it is no part of my purpose to argue that Shakespeare's practice in this connection differed significantly from his contemporaries, the point does not, I think, affect my argument.] Wolsey's death is not staged, only reported, by Katherine of Aragon's gentleman-usher Griffiths to his world-weary mistress, explaining how the fallen Cardinal, arrested at York and being brought toward London for trial and certain death, collapsed at Leicester and sought refuge from the abbot of a monastery there:

"O father abbot,  
An old man, broken with the storms of state,  
Is come to lay his weary bones among ye;  
Give him a little earth for charity!"  
So went to bed; where eagerly his sickness  
Pursu'd him still; and, three nights after this,  
About the hour of eight, which he himself  
Foretold should be his last, full of repentance,  
Continual meditations, tears, and sorrows,  
He gave his honors to the world again,  
His blessed part to heaven, and slept in peace. (4.2.20-30)

Although Griffith does not say so, Holinshed's account makes it clear that the room was, as usual, crowded. [11. "Then they did put him in remembrance of Christ his passion, & caused the yeomen of the gard to stand by to see him die . . . " (Arden ed. 203).] Katherine calls attention to Wolsey's overweening ambition. But Griffiths goes on to insist that in this deathbed struggle against the temptations of the world, the good angels have overcome:

His overthrow heap'd happiness upon him;  
For then, and not till then, he felt himself,  
And found the blessedness of being little.  
And, to add greater honors to his age  
Than man could give him, he died fearing God. (4.2.64-68)

Similar issues inform the next extended Shakespearean deathbed scene, that of Edward IV in Richard III. Far less saintly than his cousin Henry, Edward nonetheless strives in his final hours to die in a peace that extends not only to himself but to his subjects:

I every day expect an embassy  
From my Redeemer to redeem me hence;  
And more in peace my soul shall part to heaven,  
Since I have made my friends at peace on earth. (2.1.2-5)

He thus goes on to attempt a reconciliation between the old-line courtiers, represented by Hastings, and the upstart relatives of his Queen, represented by Rivers and Dorset. But contention soon arrives, in the person of Gloucester, bringing the news of the death of Clarence; with it comes fear, and signs of that despair that is another of the deathbed temptations:

KING O God, I fear thy justice will take hold  
On me, and you, and mine, and yours for this! . . .  
GLOUCESTER This is the fruits of rashness! (132-35)

I think we can see in Gloucester, as previously in Suffolk, a human manifestation of the metaphysical presences of the visual tradition. From the beginning of Richard III, Gloucester is associated with death, first, in the treacherous plot against Clarence, then in his bizarre wooing of Anne in the shadow of the catafalque of Henry VI, when she turns in horror from "thou dreadful minister of hell" (1.2.46) and he asks for "a glass / That I may see my shadow as I pass" (262-63), with possible reference both to the hour-glass that is one of death's standard attributes and the idea that death casts no shadow. A third early history play, King John, continues this evocative play with the visual traditions. At the end of the play, John, who has been poisoned, asks to be carried out-of-doors, where the cool air may help him die; his real struggle is less with the physical toxin than with the guilt, especially for the imprisonment and death of his nephew Arthur, that poisons his soul. The conversation that follows plays on several *ars moriandi* conventions. The opening lines and the last one evoke three of the five temptations, impatience, vanity, and despair, while the "fierce extremes" are the good and evil forces contending around the bed; in between, the speech about the invisible "outer parts" calls up the empty skeleton to which all humans will be reduced, and the "pricks and wounds" of death's dart lead to more spiritual considerations, the reference to the "legions of strange fantasies"—the demons striving to overwhelm his soul. At a more merely phenomenological level, "I am a scribbled form"—the way it shrinks in the fire of his conscience is one of the most original and brilliant figures in a richly figured play—signals the purely symbolic construction of almost all these points.

PEMBROKE He is more patient  
Than when you left him; even now he sung.  
PRINCE HENRY O vanity of sickness! Fierce extremes  
In their continuance will not feel themselves.  
Death, having prey'd upon the outward parts,  
Leaves them invisible, and his siege is now  
Against the mind, the which he pricks and wounds  
With many legions of strange fantasies . . .  
KING JOHN Ay, marry, now my soul hath elbow-room;  
It would not out at windows nor at doors.  
. . . . I am a scribbled form, drawn with a pen  
Upon a parchment, and against this fire  
Do I shrink up. . . .  
Within me is a hell, and there the poison  
Is as a fiend confin'd to tyrannize  
On unreprieveable condemned blood. (5.7.12-48)

More generally, from these instances emerges this recognition: that the Shakespearean texts produced in the early and mid-1590s generally proceed as follows: (1) typically, they recollect the physical images of the visual tradition, in their variety, in verbal constructions whose visual affinities reveal themselves on analysis but are rarely explicit; (2) typically, they assign to fully realized human characters the moral and metaphysical functions conveyed in the visual tradition by symbols such as the skeleton or the skull.

These observations prepare for developments in subsequent plays in which the connections with the visual tradition become structurally more complex—are displaced, inverted, or erased. The two most extensive and important deathbed scenes occur in the second historical tetralogy, in *Richard II* and *Henry IV Part Two*. The enactment of the death of Gaunt (its prelude, more precisely, since in this play as in the later one the actual death occurs off stage) is famous, of course, for the apostrophe to England so often taken out of context as a thing in its own right. In context, it is part of a scene in which the official purpose of the complex memento mori tradition is made explicit: the death of the dying duke offered to his nephew and king as emblem and warning. So much Gaunt himself claims at the opening of the scene:

GAUNT Will the king come, that I may breathe my last  
In wholesome counsel to his unstaied youth?  
DUKE OF YORK Vex not yourself, nor strive not with your  
breath;  
For all in vain comes counsel to his ear.  
GAUNT O, but they say the tongues of dying men  
Enforce attention like deep harmony.  
Where words are scarce, they are seldom spent in vain,  
For they breathe truth that breathe their words in pain.  
..... Though Richard my life's counsel would not hear,  
My death's sad tale may yet undeaf his ear. (2.2.1-16)

Before long he is invoking the familiar imagery of vanity and worldliness:

GAUNT. . . .He tires betimes that spurs too fast betimes;  
With eager feeding food doth choke the feeder;  
Light vanity, insatiate cormorant,  
Consuming means, soon preys upon itself. (36-39)

The image of the horse appears in many *ars moriandi* panels devoted to the temptation of worldliness, as that of the overturned table (“food doth choke the feeder”) appears in those that treat impatience. (Fig. 8) As has been noticed many times before, Gaunt himself, playing upon his name, becomes the thing that awaits him, death itself:

Gaunt am I for the grave, gaunt as a grave,  
Whose hollow womb inherits naught but bones. (82-83)

The structural inversion mentioned above now occurs; Gaunt is now *Mors*, the summoner, while Richard, not Gaunt, becomes the dying man, urged to consider the state of his soul and set his house in order:

GAUNT Now, He that made me knows I see thee ill;  
Ill in myself to see, and in thee seeing ill.  
Thy death-bed is no lesser than thy land,  
Wherein thou liest in reputation sick;  
And thou, too careless patient as thou art,  
Committ'st thy anointed body to the cure

Of those physicians that first wounded thee. (93-99)

[12. "Heal thyself" is an obvious and productive topos, and Aldred Wirthen wrote a lively study of the Dance of Death tradition with particular reference to physicians that continues far down into our own century.] Richard's reply suggests that the proposition comes closer to home than he wants to admit, for as several Shakespearean and other texts show (as well as the custom of carving funeral images in alabaster or white marble), paleness is one of the signs of death:

A lunatic lean-witted fool

. . . . .  
Darest with thy frozen admonition  
Make pale our cheek, chasing the royal blood  
With fury from his native residence. (115-19)

Gaunt's final words call up several visual images—the scythe that is another of death's iconographic attributes, the tormentors of the *ars moriandi*, the bed as antechamber to the grave:

. . . Join with the present sickness that I have,  
And thy unkindness be like crooked age  
To crop at once a too-long withered flower.  
Live in thy shame, but die not shame with thee!  
These words hereafter thy tormentors be!  
Convey me to my bed, then to my grave:  
Love they to live that love and honor have. (132-38)

Gaunt is then carried offstage to die, and Richard turns to present business, seizing his dead uncle's estates to fund the Irish wars. Yet the imagery of death initiated in this scene reverberates through the play. On his return from Ireland, when he discovers that Bolingbroke has seized most of his power, Richard makes another splendidly rhetorical speech often separated from its context: "Come, let us sit upon the ground" and so forth. The most significant feature of this reprise has been unleashed in the scene with Gaunt, when the old man warns,

A thousand flatterers sit within thy crown,  
Whose compass is no bigger than thy head. . . . (100-101)

These are the "physicians" who come with death in their hands, and they bring with them the intimation that the crown itself is the seat of the sickness.

Richard bears this out:

. . . . . for within the hollow crown  
That rounds the mortal temples of a king  
Keeps death his court, and there the antic sits,  
Scoffing his state, and grinning at his pomp . . . . (3.2.160-63)

The image of death "scoffing" and "jibing" at a king initiates the Dance of Death (Fig. 4); conflated with the tradition of the *ars moriandi*, in which one of the standard images shows imps taunting the dying man with hollow crowns (Fig. 8), it produces something like Hans Weiditz's woodcut for Petrarca's *Trostspiegel* (1532), showing a king in his deathbed with the usual assortment of counsellors, family, and friends around him, just as a grinning death bursts through the door to seize him; through a window, another skeleton can be seen beating down a disarmed guard with a strikingly phallic flail. (Fig. 11) In the deposition scene much of this imagery recurs. The word death itself resounds—five

times in the first 40 lines. Surrey, challenging Fitzwater, calls on “thy father’s skull” (4.2.69). The Bishop of Carlisle reports that the banished Norfolk “gave / His body” to the Italian earth; he goes on to prophecy that should Bolingbroke seize the crown England, ravaged by civil war, will be called “The field of Golgotha and dead men’s skulls” (145). Richard, putting off the crown, undoes himself, as though he had never been—as though, indeed, he were dead: “And soon lie Richard in an earthy pit” (220); at the end of the scene he recalls the “flatterers” that haunt the crown (306-09). The most intriguing feature in all of this is the suggestion that the crown is hollow—an O (as the Chorus in *Henry V* reminds us, like the theater in which these scenes were played), a cipher— which seems to me to carry the further suggestion that monarchy itself, contained within this “golden round,” is not a presence but an absence—no thing. As such, it must be affiliated with death, the essential emptiness at the center and end of life, visually expressed in the physical hollowness of the traditional skeletal imagery—the ribs curled like grasping or caressing fingers around nothingness, the missing nose, the empty eyes. [13. Spencer proposes that Elizabethans in general were haunted by a fear of blankness, against which the topos of literature as the way to fame was one antidote (135-36). But Ari s sees something more general, a general European swing: “The Middle Ages laid emphasis on the risks of a life that was too full. With melancholy and bitterness, the baroque sensibility”—of which these Shakespearean texts would seem to be expressions—“registers the fact that life is empty” (189).] Richard, still in the toils of worldly vanity, goes on to deny all this: it is loss of the crown, he says, that zeroes him: “I am unking’d by Bolingbroke, / And straight am nothing” (5.5.37- 38). Yet the other possibility returns with redoubled force in *2 Henry IV*. The deathbed scene of *Henry IV* is the longest and richest in Shakespeare, occupying all of one long scene and part of another, a total of 271 lines. It begins with a familiar motif, the overturned table of the *ars moriendi*: Fortune, he says, gives the likes of him “a feast / And takes away the stomach” (4.4.106- 07). He faints, and is carried to bed. Almost at once, the association of “crown” and “hollow” occurs:

KING HENRY Set me the crown upon my pillow here.  
 CLARENCE His eye is hollow, and he changes much. (4.5.5-6)

In a striking departure from the convention that the chamber of death must be full of folk, the king’s retainers leave him alone with Henry Prince of Wales. He, too, challenges the crown: “O polished perturbation! Golden care!” (22); “so troublesome a bedfellow,” indeed, for a bed of death. The Prince, mistaking his father’s sleep for death, takes the crown away, as he later says, “To try with it, as with an enemy” (166). The King awakes, discovers his loss, recalls his supporters and condemns the Prince— then sends everyone else away for a second time. Rebuking the Prince, the King mingles coronation and burial in a single ceremony:

Then get thee gone, and dig my grave thyself,  
 And bid the merry bells ring to thine ear  
 That thou art crowned, not that I am dead.  
 Let all the tears that should bedew my hearse  
 Be drops of balm to sanctify thy head.  
 Only compound me with forgotten dust;  
 Give that which gave thee life unto the worms. (110-16)

The association of “tears” and “balm” occurs in the deposition scene of *Richard II*, as well (4.2.208); age, cares, and the appearance of a youthful rival have placed Henry in the place formerly occupied by his cousin—that is, the place of death, of dust and worms. The next moment deserves special notice. Once again, the verbal imagery of a deathbed scene recalls the visual imagery of the *ars moriendi*, of mocking imps with crowns assailing a dying man, while his good advisors seem to stand helplessly by (Fig. 8):

Harry the Fifth is crown’d. Up, vanity!

Down, royal state! all you sage counselors, hence!  
And to the English court assemble now  
From every region, apes of idleness!  
Now, neighbour confines, purge you of your scum.  
Have you a ruffin that will swear, drink, dance,  
Revel the night, rob, murder, and commit  
The oldest sins the newest kind of ways? (118-26)

But the mocking imp this time is a royal prince, the heir apparent, the future hero of Agincourt. He goes on, of course, in the next speech, to redeem himself, assuring the King of his faithful love and explaining his premature seizure of the crown. The two are reconciled; the other sons and counsellors are recalled, offering the opportunity to construct a stage picture that will reassert the traditional image of royal death scenes as they are supposed to look. And amid repeated assurances that he is at peace, and thus dying a good death, Henry IV is carried off the stage to the chamber called Jerusalem to breathe his last. Logically, therefore, the Prince escapes the association. (It is worth noting that he ends his speech with an assurance that if his obligation to wear the crown is tainted with "any strain of pride. . . Let God forever keep it from my head" (170-74).) It will be a new and different man who takes the crown in Westminster Abbey and then goes out to banish Falstaff and conquer France. Phenomenologically, however, the association has been made. Harry Monmouth may no longer be the kind of tormenting imp that his loose and idle life in Eastcheap made him seem. But once crowned, he must continue to wrestle with the possibility that to be king is to be a dead man. His language to his father has suggested that in fact he sees the crown as a kind of death: "the care on thee depending / Hath fed upon the body of my father" (158-59), like worms; "an enemy, / That had before my face murdered my father" (166-67), like Old Bones shaking his dreadful dart. The idea is hardly a new one; the vanitas tradition, of which *memento mori* is only a part, argues the essential nothingness of all mortal desire, and the "the sweet fruition of an earthly crown" is only the preeminent symbol of earthly things. The argument is thus consonant with a standard strain in early modern thought.

It also, by a familiar kind of paradox, does, and does not make sense in postmodern terms. Putting the crown aside for the moment, and looking only at the struggle going on between the King and the Prince, we must be reminded that since Freud death has been regarded as the definitive Other, the formless form against which we struggle to identify our selves, and whose existence is totally predicated (that the word is a grammatical one is no accident) on our own; as Lacan puts it, "there is no Other of the Other" (qtd Lee, 115). In that sense, Richard's and Henry's struggles against nothingness are struggles to maintain their own collapsing identity against the approach of the ultimate ad-nihilation-and their struggle is only a version of the one that all people face, refracted through and around the hollowness of the crown but not dependent on it. [Can we begin to historicize this by wondering about the effect on early modern English writers and viewers of the disappearance of death as a physical figure in contemporary representation?]

Since Freud, it has been understood that the same struggle goes on in other terms. It has a sexual mode—the phallic I or 1 (one) against the vaginal 0 (zero). It also, in ways most relevant to the present context, has a generational mode, father against son. Each becomes the other's Other—the son as the projection of the father's self who is not that self, the father as the generator of the son's self who is not that self. It is not my purpose here to explore all of the many ways in which the relationships between Richard and Bolingbroke in *Richard II* and between Henry and Hal in the two parts of *Henry IV* explore and exploit those interactions. They do help to account for the presence and the power of a striking feature of the deathbed scenes however—most prominent in *2 Henry IV*, but a fact of several others: the coming and going, presence and absence, of the characters. This is especially the case with Harry Monmouth. Throughout the two plays, his relationship with his father (and even with his surrogate father Falstaff, in some important ways) is defined in terms of absence, not-being. [15. In this as in other things Bolingbroke anticipates his son; from the time of his banishment at the beginning of *Richard II*, in the immediate aftermath of the duel with Norfolk that does not take

place, he tends to be, like Eliot's Macavity, not there; even when he is on the stage he and Richard never directly confront one another; their interactions are always mediated through some other person—Northumberland, the caterpillars, Carlisle, Exton—or through objects—the crown, the mirror—whose reflexivity or hollowness beautifully catches up the themes of otherness and nothingness.] When looked for at court, he is always away; when confronted, taxed with his wild ways, he becomes another self, with that slipperiness that has so infuriated some of his recent critics. Otherness being an absence of the self, it is appropriate that he absent himself—as he so conspicuously does during the deathbed scene of 2 Henry IV. Paradoxically, however, in his absence his otherness cannot function as it should to allow his father to define his self, a fact exacerbated by his carrying off of that other Other, the hollow crown, the token of death. In his turn, the Prince, needing his father to define his self, becomes no thing away from him, off the stage, and onstage requires a surrogate father—Other, Falstaff, to make him most himself. And in the absence of his father brought about by death, he needs a different Other, the crown, against and through which to define himself, in ways that we see enacted in the final scene of this play and many scenes of Henry V. These paradoxes invoke another one, which also involves the crown. In going beyond Freud, Jacques Lacan intimately and intricately connects up death, desire, and language. Life, he says, “has only one meaning, that in which desire is borne by death” (qtd Lee 92). But desire is inflected through language:

When biological need is articulated as demand, what is left  
Over constitutes desire, and . . . desire is [thus] made  
dependent upon language for its existence, even though it is  
precisely that which cannot adequately be expressed in  
language. (Lee 93)

Desire, and hence the reality in life, is constructed by language; Hal makes the crown real to him by debating with it: “I spake unto this crown as having sense,” of a linguistic as well as a neural kind (4.5.157). But the crown is the prime symbol of desire; achieving it, as Hal crowned king does, marks the achievement of desire and thus the end of life, as Lacan sees it. Hal's self, deprived of life, falls silent; the voice that speaks thereafter is the voice of some Other, of king as a concept, not a person (the notion of the King's two bodies can thus be given a postmodern inflection, too): what it utters is the death of desire, in the confrontation with Falstaff—“leave gormandizing”—, in the meeting with the Chief Justice (whom, I must note, he immediately begins to construct into another father):

My father is gone wild into my grave  
For in his tomb lie my affections,  
And with his spirit sadly I survive. . . . (5.2.123-24).

The Prince is dead; long live the King. The living Prince/King will revitalize himself, of course, by recovering desire, for France, for Katherine, although we may feel that he always lives most fully when he puts the deadly crown aside, as he does when he walks disguised through the camp at Agincourt, and learns how “Kingly desire” means “death” to the Bateses and Williamses of the world. But that is another paper. For now I will only end with the observation that it is on the deathbed of Henry IV that the life of this play is to be found.

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