

In Defiance of Death: Shakespeare and Tomb Sculpture

Catherine Belsey

1. Images of death

Maximilian Colt, sculptor of the marble monument to Elizabeth I in Westminster Abbey, was also responsible for the memorial to Robert Cecil, Lord Salisbury, right-hand man of Elizabeth and her successor, James I. Cecil's magnificent tomb at Hatfield, constructed after his death in 1612, shows two distinct effigies of its subject. One, the main commemorative sculpture, depicts a statesman lying at rest after a life of devotion to both monarchs, borne on his bier by personifications of Temperance, Fortitude, Prudence and Justice, the virtues supposed to have characterized his service. In this capacity, the Earl of Salisbury wears the robes and collar of the Garter, the highest order of knighthood, and holds the staff of the Lord Treasurer of the realm. He is seen resting his head on embroidered cushions, in repose but not inert. His eyes are open, ready to see the Second Coming.

Immediately below this confident figure, shown as its subject would want to be remembered¹, a skeleton lies on a bare rush mat. With the bones picked clean, this is the same Robert Cecil, we are to understand, after death. The two figures are aligned and similarly proportioned, each in white marble supported on black limestone. The moral of the monument is clear: death, the great leveller, confiscates worldly office, reducing the powerful to the fate common to all mortals. This is a three-dimensional *vanitas* on the grandest of scales.

But does the moral tell the whole story? However recognizable the skeleton as *memento mori* – and in the early seventeenth century it was very familiar indeed – this juxtaposition still has the power to surprise, not least because the bones remain perfectly articulated. The framework of the body has not collapsed with the decomposition of the connective tissue. Instead, the skeleton preserves its own integrity. Its jaw has not fallen away like Yorick's: on the contrary, the chin juts firmly into the air, while the eye sockets stare upwards intently, creating a figure that remains oddly alert, in spite of death and regardless of the moral point. The image invests the bones, paradoxically, with power – to hold their shape against ruin. Cecil has not crumbled to dust. On the contrary, if devouring time has consumed the flesh, it has left the outline of the man intact. Even without the signifiers of worldly glory, confined to the properties shared with other human beings, the skeleton has not lost all dignity in death. Colt's glowing Carrara marble, never painted, invests this *vanitas* with its own strange energy. The monument preserves the paradox of authority subject to and yet not quite extinguished by mortality.

It is tempting to see the Cecil monument as a late extension of the fashion for *transi* tombs that prevailed in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. These equally double-decker constructions show the deceased, fully and formally dressed, recumbent on a tomb chest, while below the commemorative effigy lies a corpse in a state of decay. Stripped to their shrouds, often contorted, sometimes verminous, the gaunt cadavers throw into relief the transitory nature of the grandeur shown above them. This

¹ The monument gives no indication of the curvature of the spine that elicited nicknames from both the monarchs he served.

shrunken state, they proclaim, is what human beings are brought to. Such mummified bodies are shameful, their lean hands pulling at their winding sheets to cover their genitals.

Pillars or arcading commonly support the upper effigy, partly screening the corpse and so creating the impression that the walls of the usual tomb chest have been pierced to show what ought to be hidden there. In this sense, it is as if they promise access to a forbidden knowledge. "We are teased by what ordinarily we should not be seeing"². One of the best-preserved examples gives an indication of the project. Henry Chichele, Archbishop of Canterbury and founder of All Souls College, Oxford, died in 1443. But his *transi* tomb was constructed to his own specification in the 1420s, with his robed and mitred effigy above a cadaver. He must have contemplated this *vanitas* in his cathedral for fifteen years or more. The inscription round the cadaver reads:

Pauper eram natus, post hic primas relevatus
 Iam sum prostratus et vermibus esca paratus
 Ecce meum tumulum, ecce tuum speculum
 Quisquis eris qui transieris rogo nunc memoreris
 Tu quod eris mihi consimilis qui post morieris
 Omnibus horribilis pulvis vermibus caro vilis.³

The internal rhymes of the epitaph degrade their subject almost as effectively as the visual image, while Chichele asks passers-by to look at his monument, dwelling on his corpse as their own mirror-image. The sculpted dead invite a morbid curiosity as they testify to the viewer's destiny too. Double effigies encourage self-reflection and self-contempt, Paul Binski argues. In contemplating the fate of the body, "[w]e mourn ourselves", as he succinctly puts it⁴. Supplanting earthly glory, death humiliates all.

² Paul Binski, *Medieval Death: Ritual and Representation*, London, British Museum Press, 1996, p. 149.

³ "I was born a pauper, then raised to primate here; now I am laid out and prepared as worms' meat. Behold my tomb; behold your mirror. Whoever you may be who will pass by, I ask for your remembrance, you who will be like me after you die, in all things horrible, dust, worms, vile flesh". Unless otherwise stated, all translations are mine.

⁴ Binski, p. 150.

Officially, perhaps, the Cecil tomb encourages a similar response. But in this instance, the skeleton conceals nothing. Instead, it is exposed to full view, unashamed and resigned, its palms at rest on its rush mat. In this instance death puts on display the ingenious architecture of the human body, defying its own annihilation. The difference is brought home by the adjacent memorial to Sir William Curle, d. 1617. This bas-relief by Nicholas Stone shows a contorted body in its shroud. No one would be likely to mistake it for a medieval sculpture but it clearly alludes to the older tradition. Where the Stone monument looks back, Colt's salutes the Renaissance. Would it be too much to suggest that his work invites us to celebrate ourselves? Perhaps, but if "a bare-bon'd death", as Shakespeare's Lucretius calls it (*Lucrece*, l. 1761)⁵, necessarily constitutes a reminder of mortality, the manner of its depiction may introduce a range of distinct nuances into the customary theme.

I suggest that such differential attitudes can be traced in Shakespeare and that the defiance we may read in the marble monument Cecil commissioned before his death⁶ finds a dramatic parallel when the "marble-constant" Cleopatra takes control of her own final image (*Antony and Cleopatra*, V.ii.239). Commentators have rightly stressed the transfiguration of the Egyptian queen in the artful performance of her death. She becomes her own masterpiece⁷, her own memorial⁸, truly authentic in her self-dramatization – with whatever irony that entails⁹. The scholarly emphasis has been on Cleopatra's assumption into the artifice of eternity. But what is easily overlooked or taken for granted is the sheer effrontery of her choice, "To rush into the secret house of death / Ere death dare come to us" (IV.xv.85-86). In her case, all-humbling death is to lose his usual advantage. Instead, the queen

⁵ All Shakespeare references are to *The Arden Shakespeare Complete Works*, eds Richard Proudfoot, Ann Thompson and David Scott Kastan, London, Bloomsbury, 2011.

⁶ Adam White, "Maximilian Colt: Master Sculptor to King James I", *Proceedings of the Huguenot Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, 27:1 (1998), pp. 36-49: p. 44.

⁷ Anne Barton, *Nature's Piece 'gainst Fancy: The Divided Catastrophe of Antony and Cleopatra; An Inaugural Lecture*, London, Bedford College, 1973.

⁸ Michael Neill, *Issues of Death: Mortality and Identity in English Renaissance Tragedy*, Oxford, Clarendon, 1997, pp. 305-27.

⁹ Rosy Colombo, "Cleopatra's 'Roman' Death", *Memoria di Shakespeare. A Journal of Shakespearean Studies*, 4 (2017), pp. 73-86: p. 80.

with her women will voluntarily “make death proud to take us” (IV.xv.92). As Charmian speaks Cleopatra’s epitaph, while Death personified takes ownership, it is as if the queen confers an honour on an inferior. At last his pride is justified: “Now boast thee, Death, in thy possession lies / A lass unparalleled” (V.iii.313-14).

2. Changing attitudes

The Cecil tomb and the play both respond in their different ways to an evolution in the meaning of mortality. Broadly speaking, in its medieval representation death appears as an unqualified victor. The figure of death, unseen but everywhere visualized, holds sway over all life on earth. His dart strikes unaccountably and brooks no resistance. Lydgate’s poem, *Death’s Warning to the World*, characterizes an indomitable antagonist:

My dredefull spere [that ys] full sharpe ygrounde
Doth yow now, lo, here thys manace,
Armour ys noon that may withstande hys wounde.¹⁰

“Against me may no man stand”, declares Death in *The Castle of Perseverance* (c. 1400); “Against me there is no defense” (ll. 2806, 2828)¹¹. There is no pleading with Death, either, as Everyman discovers towards the end of the fifteenth century. If he goes on the journey Death requires, can he come back, asks the protagonist. “No”, replies God’s messenger. Can he, then, have until tomorrow to repent? “Nay” is the inevitable answer. Reasoning is vain, “[f]or it is God’s commandment / That all to me should be obedient” (*Everyman*, ll. 150, 176, 117-18)¹².

In this climate defiance is synonymous with folly. Rex Vivus in the fourteenth-century play *The Pride of Life* boasts that he is immortal, ignoring the wise counsel of his queen and dismissing the bishop who urges him to remember his ending. The King of Life sends out his herald with an invitation to all comers to meet him in

¹⁰ John Lydgate, *The Minor Poems of John Lydgate*, Part II, ed. Henry Noble MacCracken, London, Oxford University Press, 1934, p. 655.

¹¹ Edgar T. Schell and J. D. Shuchter, eds, *English Morality Plays and Moral Interludes*, New York, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969, pp. 1-110.

¹² Schell and Shuchter, pp. 111-65.

single combat. His special target is Death who, he insists, has neither might nor ability to frighten him. And there the fragment ends but the prologue indicates what was to follow. Death wins the fight and fiends take the king's soul; its final destiny will depend on the intercession of the Virgin Mary.

The project of the play, as of the *transi* tombs, is to show pride brought low by the recognition that the values of this world are inconstant, its pleasures fleeting. Meanwhile, a capering death, sovereign over popes and emperors, as well as fools and beggars, drags all estates into the *Danse macabre*, originally depicted in graveyards in Paris, Basel and London. Hans Holbein's popular woodcut images of the *Dance of Death* were first published in France in 1538, before they were reprinted, translated and copied all over Europe. Holbein's King is feasting when he looks up to see Death's mummified carcass advancing towards him. Soon he will be in the grave, not where he eats, but where he is eaten. The quatrain below reads:

Ainsi qu'auiourd'hui il est Roy,
 Demain sera en tombe close.
 Car Roy aulcun de son arroy
 N'a sceu emporter aultre chose.¹³

The emphasis on death's irresistible dominance is not fully explained, in my view, by an irrational outbreak of the macabre, or a sudden preoccupation with mortality prompted by the Black Death. On the contrary, it makes theological sense. The *transi* cadavers are bare on scriptural authority. "Naked came I out of my mother's womb, and naked shall I return thither" (Job 1.21). When the Bad Angel leads the naked Mankind to the World in *The Castle of Perseverance*, the World's first action is to dress him (ll. 627-30). Infans asks to be clothed by Mundus in *The World and the Child*, a moral play of the early sixteenth century. "These garments gay I give to thee", Mundus replies (l. 67)¹⁴. In each case, the clothes are rich beyond the needs of their wearers, but there is no suggestion

¹³ "Just as today he is king, tomorrow he will be shut in the tomb. For the king cannot take anything with him". Hans Holbein the Younger, *The Dance of Death*, ed. Werner L. Gundersheimer, New York, Dover Publications, 1971, p. 23.

¹⁴ Schell and Shuchter, pp. 167-98.

that the human protagonists should remain in a state of nature. "Having food and raiment let us be therewith content" (1 Timothy 6.8).

In other words, human beings have no choice but to inhabit the world they are born into. At the same time, a proper contempt of the world entails a contempt of the self, or at least that part of the self that belongs in and to the world. The correct – and difficult – course is to remain in the world but not of it, wearing its clothes, eating its food, but refusing to overvalue its proffered delights. Remembrance of death keeps the world in perspective. "Man, think on thine ending day / When thou shall be closed under clay" (ll. 408-9), urges the Good Angel in *The Castle of Perseverance*, and, in case of doubt, God reiterates the imperative at the end of the play:

To save you from sinning,
Ever at the beginning
Think on your last ending! (ll. 3681-83)

In Holbein's *Dance of Death*, a cloaked female Death grins at the Empress in her regalia.

Qui marchez en pompe superbe,
La Mort ung iour uous pliera.
Comme soubz uoz piedz ployez l'herbe,
Ainsi uous humiliera.¹⁵

The orthodoxy of the period takes for granted that death is and ought to be an object of terror. "In what state that ever I be, *Timor mortis conturbat me*". The Latin phrase, originally from the Office of the Dead, recurs as the refrain of a number of medieval English lyrics¹⁶, as well as William Dunbar's late-fifteenth-century *Lament for the Makaris*, itself a verbal re-enactment of the *Danse macabre*, but with special reference to poets. "O wretched caitiff, whither shall I

¹⁵ "You who walk in proud pomp, Death will one day make you bow. As you bend the grass beneath your feet, so it will humiliate you". Holbein, p. 25.

¹⁶ See, for example, E. K. Chambers and Frank Sidgwick, eds, *Early English Lyrics: Amorous, Divine, Moral and Trivial*, London, Sidgwick and Jackson, 1966, p. 150 (and p. 149); MacCracken, pp. 828-32.

flee?" (l. 171) exclaims Everyman, once he grasps the meaning of his own mortality.

Unsurprisingly, similar anxieties make themselves felt in Shakespeare. "Death is a fearful thing", confesses Claudio, for instance (*Measure for Measure*, III.i.115), and, since Isabella remains obdurate,

The weariest and most loathed worldly life
That age, ache, penury and imprisonment
Can lay on nature, is a paradise
To what we fear of death. (III.i.128-31)

Better present miseries than unknown pains to come. But there is in Shakespeare an alternative view. The elegy spoken by Guiderius and Arviragus over Fidele exactly reverses the terms; here death puts an end to fear, worries about food and clothing, the anxieties that attend life in this world and the humiliations that flesh is heir to:

Fear no more the heat o'th' sun,
Nor the furious winter's rages [...]
Fear no more the frown o'th' great,
Thou art past the tyrant's stroke,
Care no more to clothe and eat,
To thee the reed is as the oak [...]
Fear not slander, censure rash.
Thou hast finished joy and moan. (*Cymbeline*, IV.ii.258-73)

This is not, it appears, merely a historicist concession to a play set in a pagan Britain. Although the form of the song is characteristically lyrical, the sentiments seem to have had a conventional purchase by this time (probably 1608-9). Within a decade either way of 1600, an engaging epitaph inscribed on the tomb of an unknown woman in Herefordshire endorses the view that death is not to be dreaded:

Death! She did not fear
The tenor of thy dart,
And that did well appear

When thou didst pierce her heart.¹⁷

Instead, the deceased is now at rest.

The fear of death was not extinguished. (How could it be?) But, alongside that habitual and rational apprehension, another option was making itself felt. When the Prince of Denmark lists the reasons why death is “a consummation / Devoutly to be wish’d” (*Hamlet*, III.i.63-64), he paraphrases Erasmus in *The Praise of Folly*, a work familiar in Latin from the grammar-school curriculum¹⁸ and repeatedly issued in English in the course of the sixteenth century¹⁹. The goddess Folly claims that she rules the world. After all, she asks, since life is one long history of disease, oppression, misrepresentation and shame, who in their right mind would not end it? But as most people don’t, she goes on, it is perfectly evident that the majority are fools and subject to her jurisdiction²⁰.

Folly is wrong, as Hamlet recognizes: she ignores the next life (III.i.78-85). Even so, the logic of her case appealed to Christian stoicism. *The Comedy of Errors*, for example, opens with a condensed version of the same sentiment: “Proceed, Solinus, to procure my fall, / And by the doom of death end woes and all” (I.i.1-2). Moreover, in case the groundlings were not yet giving the play their full attention, once the sentence has been pronounced, Egeon reaffirms his resignation: “Yet this my comfort; when your words are done, / My woes end likewise with the evening sun” (I.i.26-27). The Duke puts Folly’s case to Claudio: “Reason thus with life: / If I do lose thee, I do lose a thing / That none but fools would keep” (*Measure for Measure*, III.i.6-8).

The sources of the argument that follows are widespread and classical. But the new humanist learning, however influential, could not alone shift the emphasis from death as a source of fear to death as release from fear. The Reformation and, in particular, the abrogation of purgatory must also have played a part. It has

¹⁷ Quoted in Peter Sherlock, *Monuments and Memory in Early Modern England*, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2008, p. 74. For further examples, see pp. 111, 201.

¹⁸ T. W. Baldwin, *William Shakspeare’s Small Latine and Lesse Greeke*, Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1944, 2 vols, vol. I, p. 436.

¹⁹ It was translated by Sir Thomas Chaloner in 1549 and reissued in 1560 and 1577.

²⁰ Desiderius Erasmus, *The Praise of Folie*, ed. Clarence H. Miller, London, Oxford University Press, 1965, p. 41.

become the fashion to see the loss of purgatory as cause for regret²¹. Prayers, chantry chapels and masses for the dead, it is proposed, played their part in binding the living and the dead in a single community. Without the imperative to pray for the release of the dead from purgatory, who would remember them? The fear of death was compounded by anxiety about being forgotten²².

This may be so but it neglects the contrary and corresponding possibility that the abolition of purgatory brought relief²³. In theological theory, purgatory, designed for the elect, offered to comfort the dying: their venial sins would not lead them to damnation. Instead, their souls would be purified ready for the Last Judgement, refined by fire to fit them for heaven. In practice, on the other hand, this happy prospect included terrors of its own. Before the Reformation, anyone who was not a saint faced the immediate threat of a suffering unimaginable in this life. The fear of death can only have been intensified by the dread of facing “manyfold great and greuous paynys” beyond the reach of human comprehension²⁴. Appealing directly to the faithful for their prayers and alms, Thomas More’s souls in purgatory evoke a fire that

as farre passeth in hete all the fyris that euer burned uppon erth / as the
hoteſt of all thoſe paſſeth a feynyd fyre payntyd on a wall. If euer ye
lay syk and thought the nyght long & longed ſore for day whyle euery
howre ſemed longer than fyue: bethynk you then what a long nyght
we ſely ſoulys endure that ly ſleepleſſe / reſtleſſe / burnyng / and

²¹ For influential examples, see Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England c. 1400-c. 1580*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1992, updated edition 2005, pp. 348-54; Neill; Stephen Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory: Expanded Edition*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2013.

²² Conversely, “[a]s Jonathan Finch points out, in late medieval culture ‘the living were not encouraged to *remember* the dead, but to *remember to pray* for the dead’” (Sherlock, p. 125). In Thomas More’s *Supplication of Souls*, the dead who appeal to the living to remember them in their prayers and alms remain anonymous (Thomas More, *Supplication of Souls*, eds Frank Manley, Clarence H. Miller and Richard C. Marius, in *The Yale Edition of the Complete Works of St Thomas More*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1963-97, 15 vols, vol. VII, p. 228).

²³ But see Peter Marshall, *Beliefs and the Dead in Reformation England*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2002, p. 25.

²⁴ More, p. 219.

broylyng in the dark fyre one long nyght of many days / of many wekys
/ and sum of many yeres to gether.²⁵

Old Hamlet, more circumspect, withholds the tale of his own
prison house of purgation that would, he tells his son,

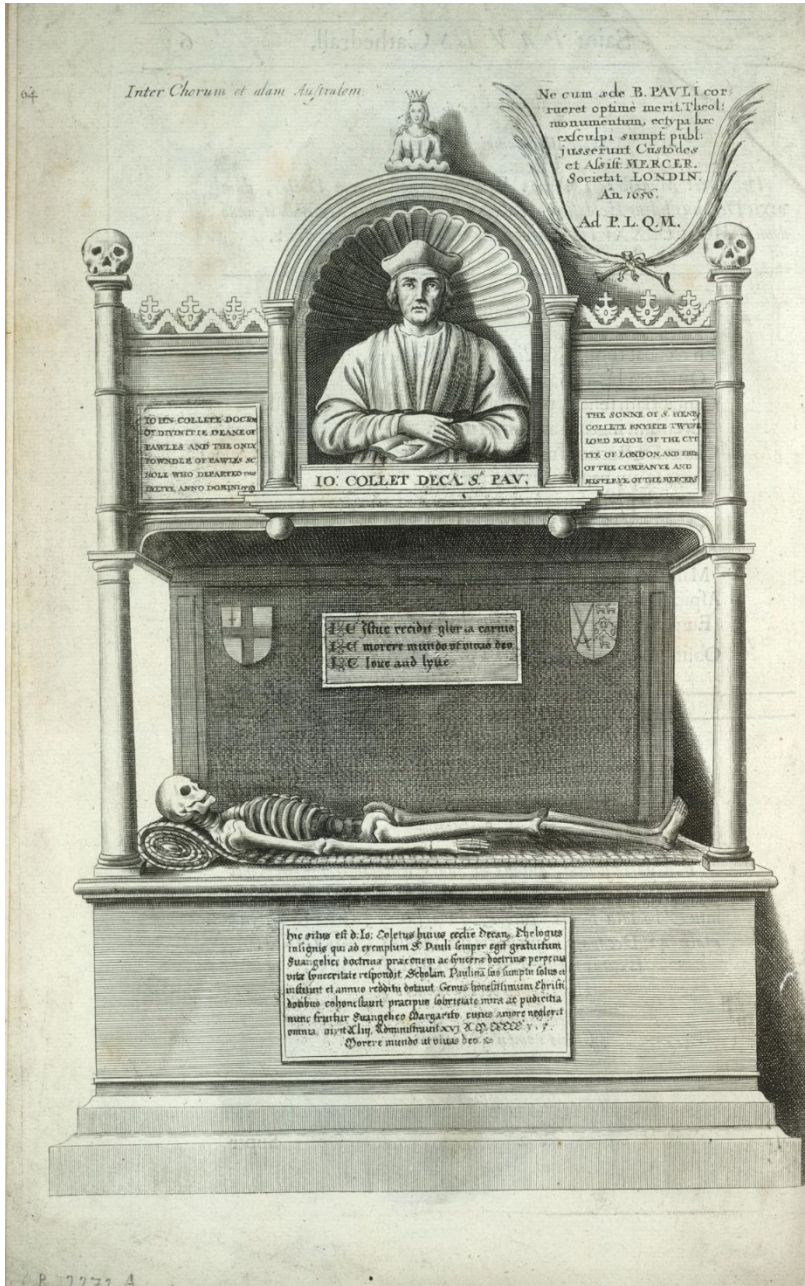
freeze thy young blood,
Make thy two eyes like stars start from their spheres,
Thy knotted and combined locks to part,
And each particular hair to stand an end
Like quills upon the fretful porpentine. (*Hamlet*, I.v.16-20)

The ordeal of death itself was only the gateway to a more
frightening state.

3. A new confidence

A wall monument to John Colet, friend of Erasmus, humanist, scholar and divine, already constituted a variation on the double effigy – and a new kind of *vanitas*. The skeleton lies on its rush mat in the same pose as Cecil's, but in this case on the tomb chest, not inside it. The structure above is supported only by a back wall and a pillar at each front corner. Nothing is concealed from the viewer. On the wall is inscribed in black letter, "Istuc recidit gloria carnis / Morere mundo ut vivas deo / Loue and lyue" ("The glory of the flesh is cut down to this. To die to the world in order to live to God. Love and live"). A black-letter inscription on the tomb chest below gives an account of Dean Colet's exemplary allegiance to the Gospel, his foundation of St Paul's School, his virtuous life and his death in 1519. The epitaph concludes by repeating the moral exhortation, "Morere mundo ut vivas deo". Above, in front of a scalloped niche, Colet faces the viewer confidently in a scholar's gown and holding a book. Skulls top the pillars, and the Virgin is shown in heaven above the portrait bust. Inscriptions in English and in Roman lettering declare Colet's foundation of the school, his father's status as freeman of the Mercers' Company and his death in 1519.

²⁵ More, p. 225. For further examples, see Duffy, pp. 338-39.



Wenclaus Hollar's Image of John Colet's Monument in St Paul's Cathedral.
Historic Images / Alamy Stock Photo.

While this date is twice confirmed, the moment of the memorial is much more difficult to assess. We know of its existence in the old St Paul's Cathedral from an etching by Wenceslaus Hollar, reproduced in William Dugdale's *History of St Paul's Cathedral* (1658)²⁶. Colet had endowed the school he founded with money inherited from his father, and it was the Mercers' Company who administered his trust. They also erected and maintained his tomb and are known to have restored it in 1580 and again in 1618²⁷. It is therefore unclear when it took the form Hollar depicted. Was it conceived as a unit? Are the black-letter inscriptions and the skeleton earlier than the Renaissance scalloped niche and the Roman lettering? Portrait-busts of divines, lawyers and scholars, familiar to us from Shakespeare's, are widespread in England only from the late sixteenth century on²⁸; most other known skeleton tombs are Elizabethan or later. On the other hand, the image of the Virgin implies a pre-Reformation construction.

Whatever the date, the monument constitutes an intermediary between the *transi* tombs and Cecil's. There is no invitation to pray for Colet's soul, nor is the image predominantly grim or shameful. There are no worms here, no dust, no vile flesh. While the skeleton is a residue of earthly existence, it does not humiliate the deceased. Death gives access to the next world; to die to this one is to gain eternity; the memorial embraces the gateway to life²⁹.

It is not, after all, so clear that purgatory was sorely missed. "On the surface the abolition of intercessory services was accepted with

²⁶ While John Weever describes the same image ("Under his liuely pourtraiture", a skeleton), he records a different inscription, though one that still extols Colet's virtues (*Ancient Funerall Monuments*, London, 1631, pp. 368-69).

²⁷ Sherlock, p. 52.

²⁸ Nigel Llewellyn finds medieval antecedents and ascribes the monument to the Florentine artist, Pietro Torrigiano (*Funeral Monuments in Post-Reformation England*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001, pp. 110-14). If the attribution is right, it might be no coincidence that the structure resembles Masaccio's *trompe-l'œil* fresco in Santa Maria, Florence, of *The Trinity* (c. 1425). There the tomb chest below the image of the Atonement bears a skeleton in exactly Colet's pose. The inscription translates as, "I was once what you are and what I am you will also be", but the predominant impression is of Christ's triumph over death.

²⁹ Kathleen Cohen, *Metamorphosis of a Death Symbol: The Transi Tomb in the Late Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1973, pp. 125-28.

remarkable alacrity"³⁰. Conversely, it would be absurd to suppose that the fear of death disappeared overnight, since purgatory would never be its only cause. But now the event was ideally to be faced with assurance³¹. The tombs gradually register a new focus on death as access to life³², in accordance with Cranmer's "Exhortation Against the Fear of Death" in the *First Book of Homilies*, appointed to be read in the churches and frequently reprinted between 1547 and 1640. Anyone who dies in the faith, the homily argues, has nothing to fear,

[f]or death shall be to hym no death at al, but a very deliuerance from death, from all paines, cares, and sorowes, myseries, and wretchednesse of thys worlde, and the very entry into reste, and a begynnyng of euerlasting ioye, a tastyng of heauenlye pleasures, so greate, that neither toungue is able to expresse, neither eye to see, nor eare to heare them: no nor for any earthly mans hearte to conceiue them. So exceding greate benefites they be, whiche God oure heauenly father by hys mere mercy, and for the loue of hys sonne Iesus Chryste, hath layed up in store, and prepared for them, that humbly submytte them selues to Gods wyll and euermore unfaynedly loue hym, from the botome of theyr heartes.³³

We know that Shakespeare expected his audience to recognize this widely repeated passage, since Bottom makes havoc of it in recounting his dream (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, IV.i.209-12)³⁴.

The arrogant tyrant familiar in the fifteenth century is here reduced to no death at all, a diminution that John Donne's *Holy Sonnet 6* develops as a direct challenge: "Death be not proud" (l.

³⁰ Ralph Houlbrooke, "Death, Church, and Family in England between the Late Fifteenth and the Early Eighteenth Centuries", in *Death, Ritual and Bereavement*, ed. Ralph Houlbrooke, London, Routledge, 1989, pp. 25-42: p. 36.

³¹ Ralph Houlbrooke, *Death, Religion, and the Family in England, 1480-1750*, Oxford, Clarendon, 1998, p. 353.

³² Sherlock, pp. 71-127.

³³ Thomas Cranmer, *Certaine Sermons appoynted by the Quenes Maiesty, to be declared and read, by al Parsons, Vicars & Curates, eueri Sunday and holi day, in their Churches: And by her Graces aduise perused & ouersene, for the better vnderstanding of the simple people*, London, 1563, sig. Piii^v.

³⁴ The biblical text is much barer: "eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man" (1 Corinthians 2.9). Bottom's "taste", "tongue" and "conceive" are all from the homily.

1)³⁵. “Some”, Donne concedes, “have called thee / Mighty and dreadful” (ll. 1-2), but the burden of the sonnet is that they are mistaken: “For those whom thou think’st thou dost overthrow / Die not, poor Death, nor yet canst thou kill me” (ll. 3-4). The poem does not deny the distress that the means may cause: “Thou’art slave to fate, chance, kings, and desperate men, / And doth with poison, war and sickness dwell” (ll. 9-10). But, however horrible the experience may be, mortality as “[r]est of their bones and soul’s delivery” is here partially transferred from supernatural to human agency and its implications divinely cancelled by the Atonement. “Why swell’st thou then? [...] Death, thou shalt die” (ll. 12-14).

Just as Donne defies Death by belittling it, the *vanitas* is reduced to portable property in the form of mourning and signet rings inscribed with skulls and hourglasses. These devices are luxury items, at once reminders of mortality and personal adornments. Death is owned and miniaturized. The so-called Torre Abbey jewel has nothing to connect it with monastic asceticism. A product of the 1540s or 50s, this 8cm coffin, made of enameled gold and enclosing a skeleton, was worn as a pendant. The image is a *memento mori* but the inscription is positive: “THROUGH. [sic] THE. RESVRRECTION. OF CHRISTE. WE. BE. ALL. SANCTIFIED”³⁶.

4. Ambiguities

This was the official view. But popular culture must move more slowly than orthodoxy, or lay people would hardly need constant exhortation. A variety of meanings for death is thus available to Shakespeare. “Rotten death” still conquers in *Lucrece* (l. 1767); “the lean abhorred monster” seems to have taken possession of Juliet (*Romeo and Juliet*, V.iii.104). Just as Death “arrests” Everyman and spares no one (l. 116), the “fell sergeant” “[i]s strict in his arrest” of Hamlet (V.ii.343-44), and the dead Polonius is compounded with dust and food for worms (IV.ii.5; IV.iii.19-20). The tyrant’s power to humiliate remains. “O proud Death”, exclaims Fortinbras at the

³⁵ John Donne, *Holy Sonnet 6 (X)*, in *Collected Poetry*, ed. Ilona Bell, London, Penguin, 2012.

³⁶ <http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O33863/torre-abbey-jewel-pendant-unknown>

sight of the bodies prostrate in Elsinore castle. "What feast is toward in thine eternal cell?" (V.ii.371-72).

In *1 Henry VI* Talbot reacts to the fall of his son in battle with a common accusation: "Thou antic death, which laugh'st us here to scorn" (IV.iv.130). This more ambiguous metaphor of death as a grotesque or a clown is echoed by Richard II, bewailing his losses. Within the circle of a king's crown, "[k]eeps Death his court; and there the antic sits, / Scoffing his state and grinning at his pomp" (*King Richard II*, III.ii.162-63). As John M. Bowers points out, while the figure of death wears many guises in Holbein's *Dance of Death*, these include a fool's cap in one instance and a full jester costume in another³⁷. Death had already appeared as the Fool's similitude when he took him by the hand in the mid-fifteenth-century *Totentanz* in Basel, where Holbein worked before he arrived in England. And, since an antic is also a dance (*The Two Noble Kinsmen*, IV.i.75), as well as a show or a pageant (*Love's Labour's Lost*, V.i.104, 138), we can legitimately see as antics all the prancing grotesques who deride and demean their living partners in the *Danse macabre*.

At the same time, the antic-as-Fool occupies an equivocal place in the power structure, entitled to tease and humble the prince, but at the aristocrat's command, even so, and subject to dismissal. Feste seems to be peripatetic (*Twelfth Night*, III.i.32-42), at once dependent and a free agent. Partly released by his own "antic disposition" (*Hamlet*, I.v.180), the Prince of Denmark jests with the skulls of representative social types, the politician, the courtier, the lawyer and the Fool (V.i.77-212) and ends with the dust of the emperor. But in this macabre pageant, played out in a graveyard, the power relations between life and death are partly reversed: here the living Hamlet initiates the dance³⁸. When the antic hero faces his own mirror image in the skull of the Fool, it is the prince who scoffs at Yorick: "Where be your gibes now, your gambols, your songs [...]? Not one now to mock your own grinning? Quite chop-fallen?" (V.i.187-90).

³⁷ The Abbot and the Queen; John M. Bowers, "'I Am Marble-Constant': Cleopatra's Monumental End", *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 46:4 (1983), pp. 283-97: p. 287.

³⁸ For the graveyard scene as Hamlet's Dance of Death, see Catherine Belsey, *Shakespeare and the Loss of Eden: The Construction of Family Values in Early Modern Culture*, Basingstoke, Palgrave, 1999, pp. 140-56.

In the same scene, the prince questions the gravedigger on the decomposition of the body. The episode in the graveyard gives visual form to Hamlet's recognition that "it will come" and his acquisition of the "readiness" that defies the fear of death (V.ii.221). Defiance is neither victory nor denial. Instead, the term itself carries two contrary implications: on the one hand, facing up to the enemy, on the other, acknowledging the power of an opponent that calls forth such bravado. Defiance concedes how much there is to be feared but confronts it with courage.

Michael Neill points out that the Clown who brings Cleopatra the asp in a basket of figs is an antic impersonation of Death³⁹ but, as Bowers notes, this antic "is not an assailant but rather a servant"⁴⁰. Cleopatra summons and does her best to dismiss him. Three times she bids him farewell but the irrepressible rustic resists her instructions in what amounts to a small-scale power struggle, absurd though it is. This Clown-as-Death, not entirely at the queen's beck and call, retains a vestigial intransigence. On the other hand, when she finally takes control, there is no suggestion that the antic asp-bearer does anything to degrade Cleopatra. On the contrary, the unimposing figure, who mangles the meanings of immortality and salvation (*Antony and Cleopatra*, V.ii.246, 255), has the effect of guaranteeing the queen's release from humiliation in a Roman comedy (V.ii.235-36).

5. Classical models

In Westminster Abbey a free-standing alabaster statue commemorates Elizabeth Russell, who died in 1601. As a very early instance of the upright effigy, Elizabeth sits on a wicker chair with her head on her hand in a melancholy pose. Unusually, her eyes are closed. The inscription declares, "Dormit non mortua est" ("She is not dead but sleeps"). Her foot rests on a skull. The monument is a *vanitas* but with the terms reversed: present but beneath her feet, mortality is at once acknowledged and subjugated.

³⁹ Neill, p. 324.

⁴⁰ Bowers, p. 286.

Cleopatra, seated on her throne⁴¹, has also in her own way both acknowledged and subjugated death; she too “looks like sleep” (V.ii.344). But there the similarity ends. Shakespeare’s contradictory protagonist, queen, gypsy, lover, strumpet, hero, captive bears very little other resemblance to Elizabeth Russell or, at least, to the patient and pious young woman depicted on her monument. And Reformed Christianity, ready to embrace death, was not yet willing to accommodate suicide, the ultimate affirmation of human sovereignty. Self-slaughter, as Hamlet knew, was outlawed by the Everlasting (*Hamlet*, I.ii.131–2) as showing despair of God’s mercy.

In pagan antiquity, however, Cleopatra has more to fear from Octavius Caesar than from the Everlasting and her role models belong to the powerful cultural current of classical learning brought into conjunction – and potential conflict – with religion by the grammar school curriculum. There Brutus, Seneca and Cato were heroes who followed the logic of their Stoic convictions when they resolutely took their own lives⁴². Shakespeare had already dramatized the deaths of Brutus and Cassius. Dishonourably, Macbeth refuses to take his own life in defeat: “Why should I play the Roman fool, and die / On mine own sword?” (*Macbeth*, V.viii.1–2). By contrast, Horatio chooses a heroic cultural allegiance before Hamlet deters him: “I am more an antique Roman than a Dane” (*Hamlet*, V.ii.348). When Cleopatra opts for death in “the high Roman fashion” (*Antony and Cleopatra*, IV.xv.91), if she adopts the mode of her conqueror, she nonetheless chooses self-determination over conquest by an oppressor. In controlling her own death, tactically outwitting the “ass” Caesar (V.ii.305), she will be true and “noble” to herself (V.ii.191).

⁴¹ Modern productions show her seated, but there is no stage direction. Oddly, Caesar gives instructions to “take up her bed” (V.ii.354). Alan Dessen, who knows more about early modern staging than anyone, replied to my question by conceding the problem, and adding, “However, the delivery of her final lines from a recumbent position seems unlikely – and there are sight-lines issues, then or now. At what point would she take to her bed?” He regards Caesar’s words as among several unresolved puzzles in the play.

⁴² Coppélia Kahn, *Roman Shakespeare: Warriors, Wounds and Women*, London, Routledge, 1997, pp. 121–27.

Rome allotted sovereignty to the individual subject. And in a rare instance of gender equality, women were not excluded from Roman *virtus*. Portia's Stoic suicide takes place offstage in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, but Lucrece, universally praised in the Renaissance as chaste wife and founder of the Roman republic, has her own long, sympathetic narrative poem. And when Antony names Dido and Aeneas as their predecessors (*Antony and Cleopatra*, IV.xiv.54-55), even if he gets the story wrong⁴³, he offers a classical frame for Cleopatra's death. In the tragic love story that Shakespeare would have found in Virgil's *Aeneid*, Ovid's *Heroides*, Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women* and Marlowe's *Dido, Queen of Carthage*, Dido anticipates Cleopatra as arguably the first North African casualty of the Roman will to empire⁴⁴. The Carthaginian queen elaborately stages her own death on the funeral pyre she builds to burn all that reminds her of her Roman betrayer, declaring "sic, sic, iuvat ire sub umbras" ("thus, thus I go gladly into the dark", *Aeneid*, IV.660). This line from Virgil, quoted as her final words by Marlowe's protagonist (*Dido, Queen of Carthage*, V.i.313)⁴⁵, is echoed by Shakespeare's Charmian (*Antony and Cleopatra*, V.ii.193).

Cleopatra takes on death as antagonist on her terms, not death's. If in the end she enters into his possession, she does so in defiance, not fear. Robert Cecil's tomb, I have suggested, also defies death in its refusal to humiliate his mortal remains. But is there a closer connection between the two? John Bowers proposes that in subjecting her body to the "worm", as the play repeatedly calls the asp, Cleopatra alludes to and transcends the tradition of the *transi* monument⁴⁶. Tombs already represented a tourist attraction, as prompts to moral and social reflection⁴⁷. Shakespeare's audience,

⁴³ The image of their ghosts drawing all attention away from the famous lovers evokes Cleopatra's first appearance and Antony's own consequent isolation in the marketplace (II.ii.223-28), and prepares for her characterization of her death as reenacting that meeting, "I am again for Cydnus" (V.ii.227).

⁴⁴ Colombo, p. 84.

⁴⁵ Christopher Marlowe, *The Complete Plays*, ed. Mark Thornton Burnett, London, Dent, 1999, pp. 242-93.

⁴⁶ Bowers, pp. 288-89.

⁴⁷ Llewellyn, pp. 337-62.

recognizing an allusion to them in the queen's self-declared marble-constancy, might well understand the last scene in this way.

Alternatively, however, instead of transcending the convention, does she not rather incorporate it? Her final effigy, if that is what we are invited to perceive, is not the conventional *vanitas* of the late Middle Ages. There is no decay involved, no decomposing flesh, no physical degradation. On the contrary, the seductive beauty that invests her with power remains intact (V.ii.342-46) as, in its own way, does the dignity of Robert Cecil. At the same time, both kinds of double effigy, whether they show cadavers or skeletons, bring earthly standing into conjunction and contrast with the condition that, whatever their status in life, all mortals have in common. *Antony and Cleopatra* shows a queen who has in her death, as in her life, at least two distinct identities. On the one hand, she takes her own life in the capacity of "Royal Egypt", an "Empress" (IV.xv.75) who, in her resolution, has nothing of woman in her (V.ii.237-38). On the other, she does so in the light of what she shares with all her sex, "[n]o more but e'en a woman, and commanded / By such poor passion as the maid that milks / And does the meanest chares" (IV.xv.77-79). This is the "lass" who dies with her crown awry (V.ii.314-16).

In the death she stages, these two modes of being coincide but, as throughout the play, they do not quite coalesce. Cleopatra's image in death preserves at least one of the paradoxes that, since Plutarch, have fascinated poets, playwrights and film directors, ensuring her immortality through nearly twenty centuries of fiction.

As a postscript, I add the observation that the power struggle between the tyrant death and human sovereignty remains unresolved in many modern regimes, where people now face mortality on the state's terms, not theirs. In the UK, suicide was against the law until 1961 and assisted dying remains unlawful. As Antony's undignified ending demonstrates, sometimes people need help to exercise self-determination. How far can we be said to be sovereign subjects if we cannot legitimately ask others to hold our swords, bring us figs, or provide barbiturates when, in extremis, we ask for them?