

**REWRITING THE *ARS MORIENDI*:
SOCIETY AND THE DYING SELF IN WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE'S
MEASURE FOR MEASURE AND *OTHELLO***

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Abstract

The manuals on *ars moriendi* (“art of dying”) were a literary and religious legacy inherited from the late European Middle Ages; a legacy that underwent numerous transformations in reformed England. The liminality of the situation described in these handbooks allowed for vivid verbal interactions between the dying person and his/her attendants: in these imagined last moments, the sick-room was far from being a space of intimacy, but appeared crowded by the presence of demons and angels, as well as by the family and friends of the dying person. A social community was thus established around the death-bed, in which the roles of priest, friends and family were always well defined; in the context of the English Reformation, these roles were essentially preserved, even as they were being visibly simplified. The forms of preparation for death that are represented, envisioned or enforced in Shakespeare’s *Measure for Measure* and *Othello* are related in various ways to this cultural tradition and to its English assimilation, insofar as they register a pointed emphasis on the state of the self in its final moments. Both plays show a deep concern with the way in which selfhood is defined on the threshold of death, but also with the functions of those who stand as witnesses to it.

Keywords

Ars moriendi, Reformation, Shakespeare.

Resumen

Los manuales sobre *ars moriendi* (‘arte de morir’) fueron un legado literario y religioso heredados de finales de la Edad Media Europa; un legado que sufrió numerosas transformaciones en la Inglaterra reformada. La liminaridad de la situación descrita en estos manuales permitió vívidas interacciones verbales entre

la persona moribunda y su / sus asistentes: en estos últimos momentos imaginados, la habitación del enfermo estaba lejos de ser un espacio de intimidad, pues aparecía repleta por la presencia de demonios y ángeles, así como por la familia y amigos del moribundo. Una comunidad social se establece, de ese modo, en torno al lecho de muerte, en la que el papel de los sacerdotes, amigos y familia están siempre bien definidos. En el contexto de la Reforma Inglesa, estos papeles fueron en esencia conservados, incluso a medida que se fueron simplificando visiblemente. Las formas de preparación para la muerte representadas, imaginadas o ejecutadas en *Measure for Measure* y en *Othello* de Shakespeare se relacionan de diversas maneras con esta tradición cultural y con su asimilación inglesa, en la medida en que se registra un destacado énfasis del estado del yo en sus momentos finales. Ambas obras muestran una profunda preocupación por la forma en que la individualidad se define en el umbral de la muerte, así como por las funciones de sus testigos.

Palabras clave

Ars moriendi, Reforma, Shakespeare.

Towards the beginning of the *Hymn to God my God in my Sickness*, John Donne imagines a group of physicians congregated round his bed, surrounding his dying body “by their love”; by the end of the poem, he reimagines the whole of that text as a sermon for himself, validated by the fact that he has so often preached the word of God “to others’ souls” (“... As to others’ souls I preach’d thy Word,/ Be this my text”, John Donne, 1974, ll. 7, pp. 28-29). Both at the beginning and at the end of the poem/sermon, the dying self is imagined not as an isolated and independent entity, but as a social being, attended and provided for by others, just as he himself has attended others before. While the core of the experience of death is unavoidably individual, and the speaker primarily seeks an intimate, direct contact with his Saviour, a social environment surrounds the self at the moment of trespass, and a sense of community still frames it. These allusions in Donne’s poem are part of a more general reframing of the English *ars moriendi*, which corresponds to a moment of strengthening and stabilisation of the rites of death within the Church of England.¹ The aim of this brief paper is to sug-

¹ For a brief but accurate description of the iconography of the *ars moriendi* and its evolution in the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance, see Poole (2011, pp. 64-80).

gest that two of Shakespeare's very early Jacobean plays (*Othello* and *Measure for Measure*) engage strongly, at one of their multiple levels of meaning, with this socialisation of the self at the moment of dying, addressing both the need and the difficulty of such a socialisation. Whether we see Shakespeare's theater as being oriented towards reformed positions, as inheriting Catholic traditions or as a wholly secular enterprise, this specific aspect nevertheless must be seen as a recurring preoccupation at this point in his work.² The fact these plays dramatise the failure or the difficulty of establishing a sense of community in the threshold of death does not detract from the desirability of such a project; on the contrary, the anxieties that are represented at these moments constitute a sign of the major cultural value that is placed upon it.

The desire of guaranteeing a sense of social integration to the dying self had been in a central defining feature of the consolidation of English protestantism, and had even become a kind of common ground between the positions of puritans and moderate protestants towards the end of the sixteenth century. It is very significant that, beyond the profound doctrinal differences between them, two major late Elizabethan guidebooks on the preparation for death, such as William Perkins's *A Salve for A Sick Man* (1595) and Christopher Sutton's *Disce Mori, or Learn to Die* (1600) —the former written from a Calvinist perspective, the second from a moderate reformed viewpoint— should place, as they do, a similar emphasis on this aspect. These texts insist repeatedly on the importance of not leaving the dying self alone, for fear that physical and emotional isolation might come to imply, or might bring about, something far worse than solitude: a sense of moral or spiritual despair. Correspondingly, the ideal form of self that is imagined and promoted in the late Tudor and early Stuart *ars moriendi* is one which does not hide away or retreat from its fellows, one which sees in the guidance and help of the ministry a moral reference; it is, finally (and most importantly) one which can recognise in the environment around it a prefiguration of its insertion, beyond the experience of death, in the community of the saved.

Such a situational pattern attributes a major role to the mutual recognition between the self and its immediate context, one which goes far beyond the Continental tradition of the *ars* (where the emphasis is put, for good doctrinal reasons, on the vital role of the sacrament). It is true that, in a strict theological sense, emotional insertion within the community cannot guarantee the salvation

² For a representative instance of each of these three approaches, see Honningman (1998), Knapp (2002) and Dawson (2008, pp. 238-260).

of the soul; but then, in a Protestant context, neither can the minister representing the church. Despite this essential limitation, or perhaps because of it, both the community and the minister are expected to generate a feeling in the dying person that is, in itself, indicative of spiritual health: a feeling of trust and of confidence. The role of the attendants to the sick is thus significantly enhanced, not lessened: William Perkins particularly insists upon the paramount importance of the “fellow members” of the dying, who must “partly of their counsel be put to help them, and partly by their prayers to present them to God, and to bring them to the presence of Christ” (Perkins, 1595, pp. 58–59).³ Christopher Sutton likewise comments in detail the importance of the conversations that the attendants may give to the dying, “that they may be *persuaded* to endure the pains of sickness”, always ensuring that a good sense of proportion is maintained, since “tediousness of discourse may soon weary the weak party” (Sutton, 1600, p. 241).⁴ “Persuasion” is indeed a major term both for Sutton and for Perkins, pointing as it does to the vital function of the attendants in quietening the dying self; in this way the sick party will achieve the confidence to let him/herself be commended to God by the community, and to do so him/herself by repeating personally the words of Christ on the cross (“Into thy hands I *commend* my spirit”, Perkins, 1595, p. 99 —emphasis mine—, but see also Sutton, 1600, pp. 261–263).⁵ The gesture of *commendation* is fundamental: both Sutton and Perkins insist as much on the word itself as on the fact that it should be performed both by the attendants and by the *moriens*, thus becoming a central token of the mutual trust between the latter and the former, and of their common reliance on redemptive grace.

The renewed function of confession in the deathbed can also be taken as exemplifying the protocols surrounding the scenery of dying in the protestant *ars moriendi*, and the sense of community that is built around it. Once again, from a strictly protestant viewpoint, a specification of one’s own sins and an attribution of a salvific function to the priest were entirely at odds with the core of reformed doctrine. Auricular confession had been abolished in the practice of the reformed church; however, its use had been preserved in the “Order for the Visitation of the Sick” within the *Book of Common Prayer*, establishing the patterns that would be followed in the English *ars*; as William Perkins states, “the sick party, troubled

³ I quote directly, in this paragraph and the next, from William Perkins (1595). All extracts from early English prints and books are quoted directly from the originals; I have consistently modernised spellings in the quotations taken from them throughout this essay.

⁴ I quote directly, in this paragraph and the next, from Christopher Sutton (1600).

⁵ The biblical reference is to Matthew 27: 50, Mark 15: 37 and Luke 23: 40.

in mind with the memory and consideration of any of his sins past... shall *freely* and *of his own accord* open his case to such as are both able and willing to help him, that he may receive comfort, and die in peace of conscience" (Perkins, 1595: pp. 62-63, emphases mine). Confession was still a possibility, and remained a valid tool to ease the conscience of the *moriens*; it was its function as a system of interrogation and its assumption of a sacramental power over the soul that were radically questioned. In his *Disce Mori*, Christopher Sutton carefully stakes out the role of the priest at the deathbed; rites such as the extreme unction are not necessary any more, they are practices whose time has passed, but the company of the priest remains indispensable for the production of penitent selves: "Though there be not in use *unguentes cum oleo*, which we find rather appropriate to the former times of the church, and nearest unto the Apostles themselves, yet we say with St. James, *Infirmatur quid inducans presbyteros!*" (Sutton, 1600, pp. A8-A9). The priest is the main person to whom the care of the dying "especially appertains" (Sutton, 1600, p. 245), but not, by any measure, the only one; conversely, on his/her side, the *moriens* is not meant to assume an entirely passive role, but to remain morally responsive to his/her immediate environment, being also expected to preserve in death a full sense of "the duty which he oweth to his neighbour" (Perkins, 1595, p. 63). In the English *ars moriendi*, then, the superfluity of the ancient rites did not make the priest himself superfluous; he remained as the central guiding figure offering assistance at the moment of death, heading the group of the family and friends that should sustain the *moriens*.

Measure for Measure puts the thematic and doctrinal repertoire of the *ars moriendi* at the service of its dramatic machinery in challenging ways, but what is important for our present discussion is the emphasis it places on the socialisation of the dying self. The manipulative tendencies of duke Vincentio have been extensively analysed in the existing bibliography; the play has often been seen as evoking the spectre of ancient Catholic practice, especially in the duke's use of auricular confession. But, as we have just seen, the use of confession *in articulo mortis* was still a possibility within the framework of the Church of England. I would therefore argue that the play casts doubt on the mechanism of confession and on the role of the priest at the deathbed, not as situations that are inherently perverse or inadequate, but only to the extent that they fail to generate the insertion of the self in the emotional community to which it belongs. The first situation that directly evokes the situational patterns of the *ars* takes place in Act III, scene I of the play, as Claudio is coming to terms with the proximity of his execution, that is slated to take place on the following morning; it is at this point that he receives the advice of the duke who, disguised as a friar, has already been

acting as spiritual advisor to several characters. The duke recommends Claudio to renounce life, and to prefer death or “be absolute for death”: “Thou art not noble; / For all th’accomodations that thou bear’st / Are nurs’d by baseness. Thou’rt by no means valiant (...): Thou art not thyself; / For thou exists on many a thousand grains / That issue out of dust...” (3.1.13-21).⁶ All of these arguments can certainly be read in terms of the classical tradition of scepticism, but all of them were also commonplaces of the *ars moriendi*, recurrent images in its figural repertoire. And yet Claudio, as we know, falls into despair as soon as the duke leaves him in the company of Isabella: he falls back into panic later in this same scene, as soon as he sees the opportunity of saving his life if Isabella should accede to Angelo’s sexual bribery. The scenery and the dramatic pattern of the *ars moriendi* has been evoked here, but the figure of the priest has failed in the function that its English versions had assigned to it; that failure cannot be explained only by the classical elements (ciceronian, epicurean, etc) in Vincentio’s discourse, which were indeed present in the *ars*, but rather by the complete absence of a spiritual comfort that should counterbalance the necessary meditation on the physical fact of death. It is because of this that the figure of the priest has not been not able to insert the individual self in a living, existing community, nor in the transcendent community towards which that insertion should signal.

This is not the only scene in which the duke fails in this respect: in act IV, scene 3, he meets a far greater difficulty in the case of the recluse Barnardine, who entirely refuses to accept any kind of spiritual assistance, and even the fact of death itself, as his execution approaches (*Bar*: “I will not consent to die this day, that’s certain” *Duke*: “Sir, you must, and therefore I beseech you...” *Bar*: “I swear I will not die today for any man’s persuasion”, 4.3.56-59). In this particular case, the recluse’s indifference is read by Vincentio as the sign of a “gravel heart” (*Duke*: “Unfit to live or die. O gravel heart!”, 4.3.63): such a metaphor would immediately evoke in the early seventeenth-century audience the concept of the “hardened heart”, a favourite *topos* of protestant predication.⁷ Barnardine’s very vocabulary seems oriented towards a negation of the attitudes that the *ars moriendi* recommended, and of the means that it proposed for the exchange between the dying and his immediate environment: as he states it, he “will not

⁶ The best analysis of the rhetorical structure of this speech remains the one carried out by Baldwin (1944, pp. 84-86).

⁷ The image comes from Exodus 9,12: “And the Lord hardened the heart of Pharaoh, and he hearkened not unto them”. It was usually used in protestant literature to refer to the reprobate soul, unable to receive grace.

consent to die", and he will not do so "for any man's *persuasion*" (emphases mine). As we have seen, it was precisely on the matter of personal consent that much of the English tradition of the *ars* had insisted, and it was on the strategies for persuading the dying person that writers like Sutton and Perkins had proved most resourceful. But both terms involve some form of communication between the dying self and the institutional or social space around him; if there is no willingness for that exchange on the part of the individual, no strategy can place him/her in any interaction with his/her community, whether civil or religious. These two episodes of *Measure for Measure* showcase different degrees in which the dying self can become alienated from its environment; whether the causes for this alienation are external or internal, it is the solitude of the dying self, its isolation from any form of emotional community, that is perceived as most deeply troubling. Whether the figure of Duke Vincentio is interpreted as a Machiavellian figure or as an idealised priest-king,⁸ the central point remains: a basic emotional or social context is perceived as indispensable for the preservation (or even the simple assertion) of selfhood in the face of physical extinction.

The theatrical re-enactment of the *ars* thus brings to the stage (beyond the theological aspects of grace, salvation and the value of good works) both the difficulty and the desirability of establishing an adequate socio-emotional context for the dying self. The final scene of *Othello* can also be seen as dramatising aspects of this problem, in ways that enrich the whole connotative dynamics of play; here I have only room for pointing towards some forms in which this thematic network is projected over that scene, first in Othello's interrogation of Desdemona, and then in Emilia's and Desdemona's final words. Several critics have seen Othello's inquisition over Desdemona, his desire to obtain a full confession from her, as evoking ancient forms of Catholic intervention;⁹ I would argue that an important aspect of the problem here is not only the evocation of the Catholic past, but rather the kind of spiritual power that Othello attributes to himself. His act of murder is imagined, before it occurs, as the killing of a soul (*Oth*: "I would not kill thy unprepared spirit, / No; heaven forend! I would not kill thy soul", 5.2.33-34). Othello claims a capacity to determine the spiritual status of Desdemona, and even to bring about her damnation. The problem is partly caused by Othello's misguided tendency to believe that one can determine or establish beyond a

⁸ For an interpretation of the character along the former lines, see Greenblatt (1988: pp. 129-142); for a reading closer to the later option, see Shuger (2001).

⁹ For an influential reading of the whole play (rather than this specific scene) in this direction, see Watson (1997).

doubt the destiny and the nature of souls. No human person, no minister of the church, could do such a thing; even if the priestly quality Othello attributes to himself had any value beyond the metaphorical, the original audience might see it as completely invalidated by his attempt to achieve a control over consciousness that is entirely at odds with the reformed perspective on the *ars moriendi*, and on the role that the Church of England gave to the priest at the deathbed. Conversely, the meaning of Desdemona's and Emilia's deathbed words (not those that Othello would force out of them, but those that they willingly utter) can be seen as modulated in the exact opposite direction by this thematic repertoire. If the sacramental function is understood to be secondary at the deathbed while conformity of conscience and trust are seen as fundamental, then it can be argued that both characters manage to fulfill this pattern in different ways. In her final moment, and irrespective of what her previous attitude may have been, Emilia phrases a sense of absolute truthfulness before her surrounding environment, testifying to a complete absence of secrecy towards others: "So come my soul to bliss, as I speak true. / So speaking as I think, alas, I die" (5.2. 259-60). Taken in themselves, these words might well be read as exemplifying the ideal transparency (and even, I would suggest, the possible absence of inwardness) that the protestant *ars* established as a desirable outcome for the *moriens*. As for Desdemona, her own last words involve, at first sight, a withdrawal from any form of external inquisition: her final gesture is to hide Othello's guilt and to retreat into silence: (*Emilia*:) "Oh, who hath done this deed?" / (*Des*:) "Nobody. I Myself. Farewell. / Commend me to my kind lord. O, farewell!" (5.2.128-29). Whether the "kind lord" she refers to is Othello or a merciful God, we will never know; indeed we never hear a direct and transparent prayer coming from her lips.¹⁰ Seen in the context of the English *ars moriendi*, her phrasing nevertheless appears as deeply significant: as indicated above, the very act of commending the soul to the Lord was established in the *ars* as a gesture indicative of assurance and confidence. But even if we attribute a purely secular meaning to her words, they still may appear as double-sided, ensuring her secrecy while simultaneously achieving emotional communication with her environment, an environment which goes beyond the fictional world of the character. For in fact the community who has witnessed the whole truth, and whose testimony the character depends on for her final words to achieve full meaning, is none other than the theater-going audience. In this

¹⁰ For a possible reading of Desdemona's earlier addresses to God (in her answers to Othello) as prayer, see Hunt (2005: pp. 110-111).

way the notion of a community of emotion between the dying self and its environment achieves yet another possible meaning, one which is theatrical through and through, and which gestures more generally towards the theatrical aspects of the *ars moriendi* itself.

The aspects I have mentioned constitute only one element within the vast thematic framework of the scenes in which they appear, and yet this element seems to me significant, and deserving of greater scholarly attention than it has hitherto received: these scenes invoke the situational patterns of the *ars moriendi* in ways that are strongly influenced by the English approach to this tradition. A major point at stake in these moments is the continuity and communication that are established between the dying self and its environment, both in emotional and social terms. A number of factors made this subject particularly urgent in 1604-5; among them were the doctrinal unification that the Jacobean Church sought to achieve, and very especially its strong institutional tendency to integrate or unify all forms of religious practice, including the protocols for death, within the main body of the Church of England. The fact remains that the idea of asserting a strong sense of community on the threshold of death was a major cultural and ecclesiastical theme at this point, and one which would only increase as the Church advanced on its way towards Anglicanism. The plays point beyond the sacramental, and even beyond the religious, towards the possibility (and sometimes the fear) that the dying self might not be able to achieve the emotional integration with its environment that the reformed *ars moriendi* had invested so much upon.

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