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Death sentences in Shakespearean deathbed scenes: The cases of *2 Henry 6* and *Henry 8*

Nathalie Oziol

- 1 Early modern attitudes towards death, in both Catholic and Protestant beliefs, insisted that a dying person's state of mind on her or his deathbed in the "final moment before death"¹ would determine their salvation or damnation. This seemed to indicate that the dying ones had the power to control their death and their fate, and that salvation was accessible to everyone. With the traumatic ending of the doctrine of Purgatory in Protestant ideology, encouraging the idea that it was never too late to earn one's place in heaven gave everyone a chance to get prepared for the eventuality of death.² But at the same time, beliefs in the struggle between angels and demons for the soul of the deceased suggested that everything was still possible after the person's death.
- 2 For the dying person, or *moriens*, the stake resided in resisting last-minute temptations and in maintaining a virtuous and pious attitude until the end. This could not be done without a lifetime of preparation, though. An iconography around death had been developed by the early modern period: paintings, tomb sculptures, objects of everyday life, or even the woodcuts that illustrated John Foxe's *Acts and Monuments* or any thanatological book whose function was to constantly remind people of their mortality. Hans Holbein's *Dance of Death* represents a good example of *memento mori*. This series of pictures inspired by everyday life had a didactic function, as it showed the universality of death and encouraged every individual, rich or poor, king or peasant, to prepare for death by leading a good life. Good deaths served as visual and memorable examples to the viewers:

the innocence or good scholarship of a dead child, the pathos of a dead soldier, the heroism of a death met in a great cause, the sacrifice of a martyr, the tranquility of an old man dying, the virtue of a good wife dying.³
- 3 On the other hand, images of unwanted or violent deaths warned against the dangers of an unprepared end of life.

- 4 The art of dying as a good Christian person was taught by *ars moriendi* literature too. Whether it be Catholic Philip Caxton's *Ars moriendi* (1495) or Puritan Thomas Becon's *Sicke mans salve* (published for the first time in 1561), *ars moriendi* books provided answers to the fear that the last moment before dying represented.⁴ Some key elements in the dramatisation of this last moment are found generally. This last moment consists in a real ceremony during which relatives and friends accompany and support the *moriens*, so that everyone takes a particular part and says particular lines in a predetermined scene; death is shown as something that is certainly not to fear but rather to envisage like a liberation decided by God, while the stake for the dying person was to utter peaceful last words suggesting that he or she willingly accepted death.⁵ On the contrary, if the dying one was short of words when dying, her or his chances of obtaining access to heaven were diminished.
- 5 Therefore, the deathbed had a practical function in the house for the dying person who was unable to move, but also a social function as Nigel Llewellyn explains:
- The time of dying included an important preparatory phase. The process of dying was a rite of passage – a time for repairing any damage which death might cause to the social fabric and for establishing a suitable commemoration to replace the deceased.⁶
- 6 Gathering around the deathbed thus allowed a collective preparation. In drama, the deathbed represents a typical prop and an intimate spatial area in which the dying character remains in her or his final moment while the other characters move around it without being allowed to penetrate it. Becon's popular *Sicke mans salve* stages a long conversation between the "sick man" on his deathbed, Epaphroditus, and his friends. Epaphroditus's agony is shown as exemplary as he comes to terms with his own death and properly makes his last arrangements, which suggest his pious state of mind. Yet his acceptance of death takes time, and the brutality of the sickness decided by God is first an upsetting and incomprehensible subject:
- EPAPHRODITUS. There is no father that so handleth his sonne, as I am handled. Oh what a chaunge is this, yea & that within two Dayes? For from gladnes to sadnes, from pleasure to sorrow, from health to sicknes, from quietnes to trouble, from strength to feblenes, yea in a maner from life to Death am I sodenly falne. O miserable wretch that I am.
- PHILEMON. No manner chastising for the present time seemeth to be ioyous, but greuous, as the Apostle sayeth, neuertheles afterward it bringeth the quiet fruite of righteousnes vnto them which are exercised thereby. Blessed is the man, saith S. Iames, that suffereth temptation, for when he is tried, he shal receiue the crown of life, which the Lord hathe promised to them that loue him.⁷
- 7 It is worth noticing the character's list of nouns expressing his passing from good health ("gladness", "pleasure", "health", "quietness", "strength", "life") to bad health ("sadness", "sorrow", "sickness", "trouble", "feebleness", "death"). This suggests a loss of physical, psychological and emotional balance. The sick man is in the middle of a transformation, on the threshold between two states or, in other words, in transition from one state to another. This image of transition is also used by Philemon in temporal terms as he juxtaposes "the present time" and "afterward" and suggests that Epaphroditus experiences a spiritual as well as physical struggle that will determine his soul's fate.
- 8 In early modern England, as Nigel Llewellyn puts it, the deathbed episode therefore represented a rite of passage, which, according to ethnographer Arnold van Gennep is

invariably composed of three steps: the separation from the former state or place; the transition during which participants in the ritual stand at the threshold between their previous identity, time or community and the next ones; and the incorporation to a new state.⁸ With *ars moriendi*, the deathbed scene became a socially, culturally and dramatically symbolic episode, and the bedchamber became the stage of this highly dramatic ritual. Besides, the presence of relatives who witnessed the scene and accompanied the dying person in passing through the door of death added to the dramatisation of the end of existence. Shakespearean drama naturally adapted these deathbed scenes to the Elizabethan stage, emphasising how the private space of the bedchamber had become the place for a public spectacle. When considering deathbed scenes, one should study the visual but also the verbal dimension. In the same way that there are good deaths and bad deaths, there are good and bad last words, conventional and subversive dying speeches in drama.

- 9 In *All Is True* or *Henry VIII* (1613), Queen Katherine offers the example of a good Christian death, as she not only behaves and speaks in a pious and virtuous way but she also has a heavenly vision, leaving little doubt as to her celestial destiny. This scene also offers an alternative to the deathbed, as the stage directions indicate Katherine sits in a chair, although some productions choose to stick to the more traditional bed. In an earlier history play, *Henry VI Part 2* (1594), Cardinal Beaufort's infernal nightmare, caused by the guilt of having sinned in ordering innocent Gloucester's murder, leads him to a terrifying and unwanted death. Each time, the characters' deaths occupy a whole scene in their respective plays, which suggests their dramatic significance but also the fascination they aroused in early modern audiences as well as their potentially pedagogic nature.
- 10 I will argue that, in deathbed scenes, the bedchamber is a transitional or liminal space indeed. It is first a temporal transition between past life, present agony and coming death, as the recapitulatory and proleptic nature of last speeches suggests. It is then a spatial and spiritual transition between the world of men and the world of the dead, which dying speeches let us glimpse in their pre-visions or pre-dictions. Finally, I will show how dramatic deathbed scenes borrow aesthetic codes from both the theatre and funerary art.

The deathbed ritual: recapitulating and anticipating in the deathbed's last speech

- 11 Even though Katherine in *Henry VIII* is represented as a fallen queen whose only friends in her last living minutes are her servants, Griffith and Patience, she speaks as a virtuous Christian woman who has long been prepared for death and has taken time to arrange her earthly affairs. A good death was in fact a good synthesis of one's past deeds and one's expectation of one's mortality. The deathbed scene is then a critical, climactic timeless moment making past, present and future coincide. Throughout her deathbed scene, Katherine uses verbs in the past, present and future tenses, particularly in the final letter she writes to the king to remind him to be good to their daughter for the sake of their past love:

In which I have commended to his goodness
The model of our chaste loves, his young daughter—
The dews of heaven fall thick in blessings on her—

Beseeching him to give her virtuous breeding.
 She is young, and of a noble modest nature.
 I hope she will *deserve* well—and a little
 To love her for her mother's sake, that *loved* him,
 Heaven knows how dearly. (*H8*, IV.ii.132–39)⁹

12 With these words, Katherine hopes to reconcile the lovers' love and paternal love, so that the deathbed scene would bring coherence to a severed family. Katherine thus appears as a dying but loving mother, wife and queen indeed. In that regard, having Katherine speak from a death-chair rather than a deathbed makes sense, as it visually draws a parallel with the royal seat, while the bedchamber becomes a final throne room.¹⁰

13 Katherine's death makes even more sense if we put it in another chronological perspective. Her deathbed scene actually comes after another reported deathbed scene: that of her former enemy, Cardinal Wolsey, who pushed the King to divorce Katherine and to marry Anne Boleyn. Griffith is the one who informs Katherine of Wolsey's repentance at death, reporting his last words to her:

'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
 Pursued 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 honours to the world again,
 His blessed part to heaven, and slept in peace. (*H8*, IV.ii.20–30)

14 There is another chronology than that of Katherine's life which is suggested. Wolsey's death as a redeemed Christian who gave up on earthly temptations and on earthly life sets a precedent for Katherine. It makes the deathbed scene and the sacralisation of the space of the bedchamber a cultural and dramatic motif of course, but it also emphasises Katherine's last scene in the play by making it a double deathbed scene.

15 However, Shakespeare also offers examples of bad deaths, in which the dying characters are overwhelmed by the confrontation with their past sins and the imminence of their deaths. Cardinal Beaufort's last ritual is not only hopeless since his final words clearly mean he is doomed to hell, but it shows his failure to control his fate:

KING HENRY. How fares my lord? Speak, Beaufort, to thy sovereign.
 CARDINAL BEAUFORT. If thou beest death, I'll give thee England's treasure
 Enough to purchase such another island,
 So thou wilt let me live and feel no pain.
 KING HENRY. Ah, what a sign it is of evil life
 Where death's approach is seen so terrible.
 WARWICK. Beaufort, it is thy sovereign speaks to thee.
 CARDINAL BEAUFORT. Bring me unto my trial when you will.
 Died he not in his bed? Where should he die?
 Can I make men live whe'er they will or no? (*2H6*, III.iii.1–10)

16 As King Henry, Warwick and Salisbury come and see the dying Cardinal in his bed, they find him tormented by a vision, presumably that of the Duke of Gloucester who was murdered because of him. His death reflects his past sins, which the King doesn't fail to

underline. Beaufort's last mental efforts are then those of a negotiation for survival. He is ready literally to sell his soul to the devil, putting "England's treasure" in the balance. By yielding to fear and despair rather than resisting them, he is doomed to hell. Besides, Beaufort answers the King as if he were Gloucester. This confusion in identity actually suggests a temporal confusion with his memories resurfacing. The ghost of Gloucester is in between a metaphysical phenomenon and a production of Beaufort's mind in a pang of conscience. The bedchamber is therefore the place where demons of the past and demons of hell meet.

Pre-visions and pre-dictions of the world(s) of the dead

- 17 The deathbed scene is also a liminal *space* in which the *moriens* is on the threshold between the world of the living and the world(s) of the dead. Deathbed scenes thus open windows to supernatural, transcendental spaces by representing them either verbally or visually. In Beaufort's deathbed scene, hell is only suggested, but in the minds of early modern spectators, it would echo infernal images in churches, in books such as Holbein's *Dance of Death*, or even in cadaver tombs. When hearing Beaufort's description of his torment, it clearly sounds like an anticipation of hellish pains. Here, the devil takes the shape of Gloucester, his innocent victim, who looks as if he just came out from the grave to take his assassin to hell:¹¹

He hath no eyes! The dust hath blinded them.
Comb down his hair—look, look: it stands upright,
Like lime twigs set to catch my wingèd soul. (2H6, III.iii.14–16)

- 18 One could also argue that Beaufort expresses human fear of becoming a body in decomposition after dying and that the infernal figure he sees approaching is actually himself. Early modern funerary art was inspired by such anxieties. Cadaver tombs, or *transi*, would feature such decomposing corpses lying on their last and eternal bed.
- 19 With Katherine's last scene, the bedchamber becomes the place of a supernatural experience, as she obtains a heavenly sight that is thoroughly described in a long stage direction introduced as "The Vision":

THE VISION

Enter, solemnly tripping one after another, six personages clad in white robes, wearing on their heads garlands of bays, and golden visors on their faces. [They carry] branches of bays or palm in their hands. They first congé unto [KATHERINE], then dance; and, at certain changes, the first two hold a spare garland over her head at which the other four make reverent curtsies. Then the two that held the garland deliver the same to the other next two, who observe the same order in their changes and holding the garland over her head. Which done, they deliver the same garland to the last two who likewise observe the same order. At which, as it were by inspiration, she makes in her sleep signs of rejoicing, and holdeth up her hands to heaven. And so in their dancing vanish, carrying the garland with them. The music continues. (H8, IV.ii.82 sd)

- 20 The Queen understands the prophetic nature of the foresight and adds pre-diction to pre-vision:

They promised me eternal happiness,
And brought me garlands, Griffith, which I feel
I am not worthy yet to wear. I shall,
Assuredly. (H8, IV.ii.90–4)

- 21 Katherine is about to close the doors of her life on earth and to open widely those of a celestial world. In fact, this vision brings her close to the image of another, highly religious, crowned woman: that of the Virgin Mary. In spite of the English monarchy's renewed interest in Anglicanism under Elizabeth's reign, the figure of the Virgin was familiar to an English society that had experienced, only a generation before, a return to Catholicism under Mary Tudor's reign. The Coronation of Mary had thus inspired many artists like Renaissance painter Raphael. The 1979 BBC production emphasised the parallel with this image of the Coronation of Mary. Katherine's white dress and her pious attitude with her joined hands make her a heavenly Mary-like figure.¹² The film technique superimposing the image of Katherine with Christian symbols such as the Cross and painted angels also gives a visual representation of the transitional, liminal dimension of her death bedchamber. Katherine's death scene thus shows us the election by God and the emancipation of a woman embracing her celestial destiny in words and in acts. Bedchambers can be described as places of superior experiences, whether divine or infernal, shared by the dying characters and the audience.

Epitaphic last words, monumental bedchambers

- 22 Finally, these deathbed scenes borrow aesthetic codes from funerary art. On tombs, epitaphs are meant to both call the identity of the deceased to remembrance and commemorate their deeds. Epitaphs thus perpetuate the voice of the deceased and establish a form of communication with the passerby. In Shakespeare's plays, sick and dying characters may precisely express concern with how they will be remembered and talked about after their deaths. Katherine, for instance, is careful to designate a trustful, reliable person as a living spokesperson, as she sees in him the capacity to praise the merits and virtues of the deceased. Indeed, Griffith's eulogistic narration of Cardinal Wolsey who, in her opinion, could not be described in positive terms, seduces her as she sees a chance of being herself described and remembered in a flattering manner. She thus trusts Griffith's talent in making good use of the artifice of posthumous narration:

After my death I wish no other herald,
No other speaker of my living actions
To keep mine honour from corruption
But such an honest chronicler as Griffith.
Whom I most hated living, thou hast made me,
With thy religious truth and modesty,
Now in his ashes honour. Peace be with him. (*H8*, IV.ii.69–75)

- 23 Katherine does not just choose the sort of posthumous discourse she would like people to hear; she also builds a real monument for herself in words:

When I am dead, good wench,
Let me be used with honour. Strew me over
With maiden flowers, that all the world may know
I was a chaste wife to my grave. Embalm me,
Then lay me forth. Although unqueened, yet like
A queen and daughter to a king inter me. (*H8*, IV.ii.168–73)

- 24 Even though she has been deprived of her royal title, what she orders is a queenly commemoration. She imagines a representation of herself that reminds one of the royal effigies for all to see during royal funerals. The bed can thus be seen as a

monument for her to lie in while the bedchamber is the place where she takes control of her life after death, but also of her image in collective memory.

- 25 If tomb inscriptions give a life account, monuments remind the passerby that death is universal. King Henry's reaction after Beaufort's death gives the precise impression that the monumental body,¹³ especially that of a man who died badly as is Beaufort's case, leaves on the spectators:

Forbear to judge, for we are sinners all.
Close up his eyes and draw the curtain close,
And let us all to meditation. (2H6, III.3.31–33)

- 26 In fact, in deathbed scenes, the bedchamber is a universal place and symbol: more than just a dramatic setting or the bedroom of a historical figure, it is an aesthetic construction, the place for rest. Death sentences are not only the words said by an actor who embodies the dying character, or those of the real, historical persons (the real Beaufort, the real Wolsey or the real Katherine) that are re-presented dramatically: they are our common, human and mortal destiny. Death sentences in deathbed scenes are thus an invitation to meditation for spectators, indeed a reflection on death and mortality.

What is dead may never die¹⁴

- 27 Nigel Llewellyn writes that no fewer than thirty-four scenes of Sir Philip Sydney's funeral procession, which took place on 16 February 1587, were engraved with Latin captions as well as their English translations. About this spectacular visual and written commemoration of both a war hero and a poet, he adds: "Sidney's funeral helped resist the inevitable but always abrupt and painful demise of the natural body by re-presenting the social body in an unfolding tableau of chivalry."¹⁵ In the early modern period, the death ceremony thus made it possible to substitute the image of a morbid, decomposing body with a social and aesthetic image, while the funerary inscriptions perpetuated not only the identity of the deceased, but also her or his voice. In fact, the epitaph re-established a form of posthumous communication from the tomb to the living.
- 28 In dramatic deathbed scenes, the bedchamber becomes a place of transition, a place of passage, from life to death, from past to future, from terrestrial to celestial world, from bed to tomb. Shakespearean drama thus associated verbal and visual aesthetic codes to make these deathbed scenes dramatically, as well as historically and culturally, memorable. As they are confronted by their mortality, by the projection of their decaying body and by the importance to speak and to communicate to the living, Katherine, Wolsey and Beaufort express what they think, or hope, will remain of them after their deaths. They reflect a universal desire to be visible and remembered in exemplary terms, even if it is by reminding the spectators that they too will become decaying bodies as in Beaufort's case. They thus "assert their identities beyond demise"¹⁶ and pretend to transcend death by making their death sentences survive.

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NOTES

1. Richard Wunderli, and Gerald Broce, "The Final Moment before Death in Early Modern England", *Sixteenth Century Journal*, 20.2 (1989), pp. 259–75.
2. Nigel Llewellyn, *The Art of Death: Visual Culture in the English Death Ritual c. 1500–c. 1800*, London, Reaktion, 1991, pp. 26–7: "The Reformation in fact produced a crucial adjustment in the attitude of the living towards the dead. Under the old theoretical orthodoxy Christians lived in constant expectation of the Second Advent, the *Dies illa* trumpeted at the Requiem Mass, that day upon which 'Time and History' would end. The delay in the Second Coming had encouraged speculation about the fate of the Christian soul at death, and the result was the doctrine of Purgatory rejected by the Reformers along with the trappings of Papal authority.... The ending of Purgatory thus caused grievous psychological damage: from that point forward the living were, in effect, distanced from the dead."
3. Llewellyn, *The Art of Death*, p. 28.
4. Wunderli and Broce, "The Final Moment before Death", p. 263: "They focused attention on the final moment of life in order to help moriens resist the temptations of the devil to despair, which would leave his soul at death in an eternally damned state. They reveal the anxiety felt about that crucial last instant when all will be gained or lost."
5. Peter Carlson, "The Art and Craft of Dying", *The Oxford Handbook of Early Modern English Literature and Religion*, ed. Andrew Hiscock and Helen Wilcox, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2017, pp. 634–49, 648: "Sudden death in reformation England was complicated in new ways because the Church's authority, which in the past could determine if a person had received

extreme unction, or was a regular communicant, or at the least had been baptised, would determine the appropriate rites and disposal of the body. Reformation theology also proclaimed that death ended the opportunity for redemption.”

6. Llewellyn, *The Art of Death*, p. 18.

7. Thomas Becon, *The Sicke mans salve ...*, London, John Day, 1568, sigs. B7v–B8r.

8. Arnold van Gennep, *Les Rites de passage*, Paris, A. and J. Picard, 1981 [1909].

9. William Shakespeare, *All Is True (Henry VIII)*, *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt, et al. (New York, Norton, second edition, 2008), pp. 3119–3202 (italics mine).

10. Alan C. Dessen draws a parallel between the sick chair and the throne in *Henry VI Part 3*, which links kingship to sickness and is a sign of disorder in the kingdom and in the power itself, in “Stagecraft and Imagery in Shakespeare’s *Henry VI*”, *Yearbook of English Studies*, 23 (1993), pp. 65–79, 77.

11. Anne Owens-Brilleaud writes that Gloucester’s vision looks like those scrawny corpses that used to be represented in fifteenth century funerary iconography: “Gloucester, sorti de son tombeau pour venir emporter son assassin en enfer, a l’aspect traditionnellement décharné de ces cadavres quasiment réduits à l’état de squelette et dont la vogue remonte à l’iconographie funéraire du XV^e siècle.” (Anne Owens-Brilleaud, “Une saison en Enfer : la première tétralogie de Shakespeare : 1, 2, 3 *Henry VI* et *Richard III*”, *Nouvelle Revue du XVI^e siècle*, 11 [1993], pp. 71–100, 83).

12. *Henry VIII*, dir. Kevin Billington, BBC, 1979.

13. One of Llewellyn’s chapters in *The Art of Death* is entitled “The Monumental Body” (pp. 101–8), which describes how the effigy represented on the funerary monument was meant to replace the physical body and to commemorate the deceased by offering an image of him or her to the collective and the private memories.

14. This motto comes from the *Game of Thrones* books and television series, and is specifically a reference to a rite of passage during which priests are drowned and brought back to life, symbolising rebirth to a new life.

15. Llewellyn, *The Art of Death*, p. 68.

16. Philippe Ariès, *L’Homme devant la mort*, vol. 1, Paris, Seuil, 1977, p. 215.

ABSTRACTS

Early modern attitudes towards death, in both Catholic and Protestant beliefs, insisted that a dying person’s state of mind on their deathbed in the final moment before death would determine their salvation or damnation. With *ars moriendi*, the deathbed scene became a socially, culturally and dramatically symbolic episode and the bedchamber became the stage of a highly dramatic rite of passage. Shakespearean drama naturally adapted these deathbed scenes to the Elizabethan stage, emphasising how the private space of the bedchamber had become the place for a public spectacle. When considering deathbed scenes, one should study not only the visual but also the verbal dimension. In the same way that there are good deaths and bad deaths, there are good and bad last words, conventional and subversive dying speeches in drama.

Aux XVI^e et XVII^e siècles, le dernier instant avant la mort était considéré comme peut-être le plus critique et le plus crucial de toute l’existence puisqu’il était décisif pour l’âme du mourant. Avec l’*ars moriendi*, la scène du lit de mort devint donc un épisode socialement, culturellement, mais aussi dramatiquement symbolique et la chambre devint la scène d’un rite de passage

éminemment théâtral. Le théâtre shakespearien s'est naturellement approprié ces scènes de lit, renforçant la transformation de l'espace privé de la chambre en un lieu de spectacle public. Lorsqu'on considère ces scènes de mort, on est alors tenu d'étudier non seulement l'aspect visuel mais aussi la dimension verbale : de la même manière qu'il existe de bonnes et de mauvaises morts, il y a de bonnes et de mauvaises dernières paroles, des discours conventionnels ou subversifs.

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