

Sarah CARPENTER, « Dramatising Death in *Everyman* »,
coll. « Théâtre Anglais : traductions introuvables », 2008, p.1-12,
mis en ligne le 12 décembre 2008,
URL stable <<https://sceneeuropeenne.univ-tours.fr/theta/theta8A>>.

Théâtre anglais

est publié par le Centre d'Études Supérieures de la Renaissance
Université François-Rabelais de Tours, CNRS/UMR 6576

Responsable de la publication

Philippe VENDRIX

Responsables scientifiques

Richard HILLMAN & André LASCOMBES

Mentions légales

Copyright © 2008 - CESR. Tous droits réservés.
Les utilisateurs peuvent télécharger et imprimer,
pour un usage strictement privé, cette unité documentaire.

Reproduction soumise à autorisation.

ISSN 1760-4745

Date de création

décembre 2008

Dramatising Death in Everyman

Sarah CARPENTER
University of Edinburgh

The title of this paper might seem excessively literal. Of course *Everyman* dramatises death, since the coming of death is what the play famously and centrally concerns. But the aim of this paper is to explore both those terms a little more fully. What is “death”, or rather what is the conception of death, that the play presents? And how does it “dramatise” that – how does it embody the idea of death in performance? In order to explore this, I aim to look a little beyond the play itself. *Everyman* does not stand alone: it is part of a rich and wide tradition of representing or exploring death in the late middle ages – through literature, through visual images, and through drama. As one part of that tradition, the play is both very conventional, drawing on writing and images that have been widely established; but also to some extent independent and unusual, playing off and sometimes almost playing against the dominant traditions of representation.

So what does the action of the play present? In one way it is very simple: we have an allegorical enactment of the death of “Everyman”, a representative and ordinary late-medieval Christian. In constructing this dramatic action, *Everyman* is drawing on, but imaginatively re-embodiment, one strand of the

popular writings about death of the later fifteenth century. The *Ars Moriendi*, the “art of dying”, or as it is called in English the book of “the art and craft of dying” or “the crafte for to deye for the helthe of mannes soule”, was a hugely popular text throughout Europe in the fifteenth century.¹ [Fig. 1] It was a book of advice for those on their deathbeds, or contemplating their deathbeds, or helping others who were dying, explaining to them or reminding them how to prepare for death and judgement in order to avoid damnation. The *Ars Moriendi* focuses primarily on the last days of the dying Christian. It offers encouragement and warning, ways for the sick person to understand death, prayers and meditations to prepare the soul. Parts of its advice on how to prepare for death come very close to the issues raised in *Everyman*. So, for example, William Caxton’s 1490 English version explains that the

temptacyon that most troubleth the seculers and worldly men, is the overgrete ocupacyon of outwarde thinges and temporall. as towarde his wyf his children & his frendes carnall / towarde his rychesses or towarde other thynges / which he hath most loved in his lyf.²

Everyman clearly closely follows this sequence in the first part of the play, dramatising the protagonist’s encounters with Kindred, Fellowship and Goods, and the movement of the action to turn away from such worldly concerns. The *Ars Moriendi* goes on to urge the dying man to “set symply and all from hym alle outwarde thynges & temporell”. It explains that by turning from temporal concerns to God the dying Christian:

satsfyeth for alle his venyalle synnes / And that more is he bryngeth some thyng for to satsfye for the dedely synnes / But it happeth not ofte that ony be founde be he seculer or regular / that hopeth not but to escape fro deth.

Here, too, we find echoes of *Everyman*, who at first tries frantically to escape from death, yet learns to clear his book of reckoning by making satisfaction for his sins.

So *Everyman* is in many ways working very closely with the tradition of the *Ars Moriendi*. Yet by re-casting the advice of the prose treatise into allegorical and dramatic action, the play both expands and enriches its exhortation. In one way, the

1. See John Raymond Shinner, ed., *Medieval Popular Religion, 1000-1500: A Reader* (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 1997), pp. 525-36, and Nancy Lee Beaty, *The Craft of Dying: A Study in the Literary Tradition of the Ars Moriendi in England* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1970).

2. William Caxton, *Here begynneth a lityll treatise shorte and abredged spekyng of the arte [and] crafte to knowe well to dye* ([Westminster]: W. Caxton, 1490), sig. A4^v. Accessible on EEBO, <http://eebo.chadwyck.com/home>.

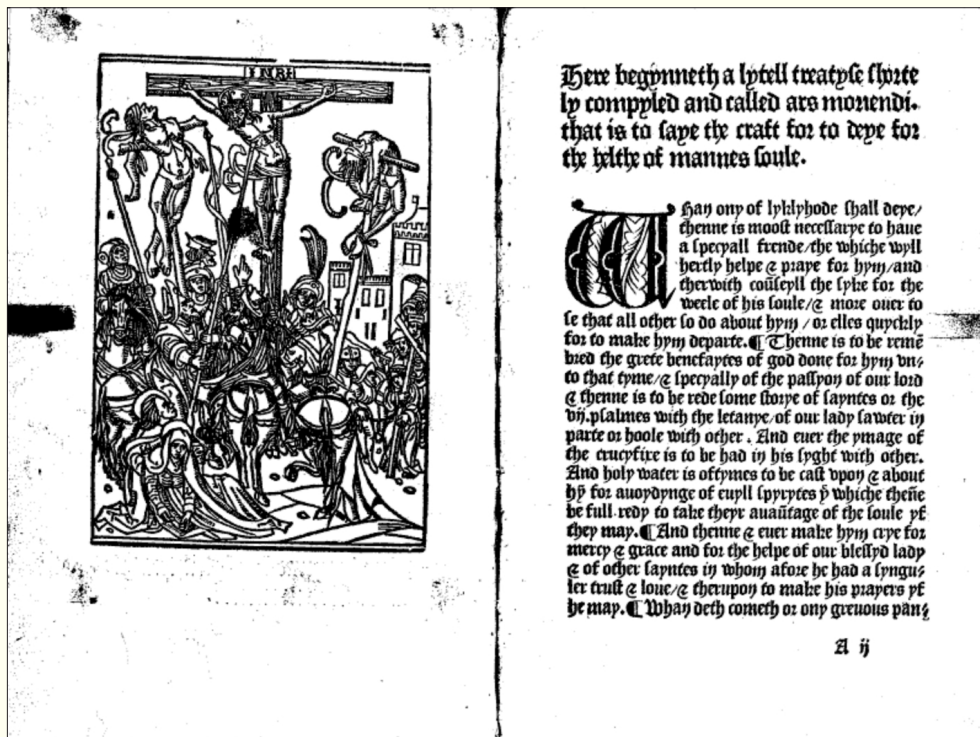


Fig. 1 – *Ars Moriendi* printed by Wynkyn de Worde, 1497.

play makes the encounters of the dying man more material, and so more vivid and immediate than the *Ars Moriendi*, by personification. Everyman does not just think about his family, friends or possessions; he meets, discusses and argues with them. They acquire a life of their own alongside his. But this use of allegory also works to open up and challenge the straightforward and literal deathbed scene of the *Ars Moriendi*. The use of allegory raises questions about the scope of the action, of what is represented.

We might look at this through the handling of time in the play. The stage action unfolds comfortably in the linear “real time” of the duration of the performance: we have a steady progression from the message brought by Death, through Everyman’s preparations, to the moment when his body and soul part. But what is the “imagined time” of the play? Is the action thought of as happening within the intimate moment of death, the final minutes of Everyman’s life and consciousness, expanded into a play by the possibilities of theatrical representation? Or does it, more naturalistically and more closely to the *Ars Moriendi*, cover a few days or weeks of illness and decline?

Or might we, in another way, see the play expanding even further as a refracted dramatisation of the whole of Everyman's life? The coming of Death in the play forces him, and us, to look back over his life, to reassess, re-evaluate what he has been, who he has become. Death provokes a crisis of self-awareness, a rethinking of his own self. In this way the play presents death in part as a means of exploring life. As Everyman faces his own mortality, that causes him, and us, to re-think what life is and how it is to be lived. Everyman finds his values questioned: his faith in his friends, family and possessions is challenged. His actions are re-assessed, as he learns how to release and strengthen his Good Deeds; and his faith is reinforced, through understanding the processes of confession and penitence. So (and this is of course a truism) the play is not, or not only a play about death; it becomes a play about the whole of life and how it should be lived. It takes up, but then moves beyond the spiritual advice of the *Ars Moriendi*. It takes the audience beyond the moments of dying, to reflect on how to live.

So *Everyman* draws on but also transforms the teaching of the *Ars Moriendi*. But written literature was not the only means of meditating on death in the fifteenth century—not even the most influential. The significances of death were also powerfully explored in the many traditions of visual representation. The *Ars Moriendi* itself acknowledged the importance of these images. Many versions of the treatise were illustrated, and at least one points out that

in order for this material to be fruitful to everyone, and so that no-one will be barred from contemplating it but may learn from it how to die well, it is offered to them both in writing, to serve the literate, and in pictures, to serve the literate and illiterate alike.³

Pictures are also a way to teach about death. One image commonly illustrating the *Ars Moriendi* was a picture of a deathbed.⁴ [Fig. 2] In this the dying man is helped to fix his eyes on the crucifix, while devils try to distract him. His soul, represented as a small naked child, is taken up to God. This pictorial story of death was famously developed by Hieronymus Bosch in the picture now commonly called *Death and the Miser*. [Fig. 3] Bosch's more elaborate visual representation echoes the dramatic action of *Everyman* at least as closely as the prose of the *Ars Moriendi*, although in very different ways: In his painting the worldly man lies in bed gazing at Death who comes through

3. Shinnars, ed., p. 526.

4. For example, *Here begynneth a lytell treatyse called ars moryendi* (London: Wynkyn de Worde, 1506). Accessible on EEBO.



Fig. 2 – Deathbed, from *Ars Moriendi* printed Wynkyn de Worde, 1506.

the door with his lance. A representation of the worldly man's younger self loads riches into a chest, while devils try to distract him to think on the gold and treasure. An angel meanwhile urges the dying man to ignore these worldly things and turn his eyes to the crucified Christ, appearing at the window above. Apart from the devils, who were traditionally seen as always attending a deathbed but rather unusually do not appear in *Everyman*, this picture sums up a good deal of the overall action of the play in one vivid image. It is both a literal image of a deathbed, yet also a sharply personified summary of a process—of worldly preoccupation, the approach of death, recognition of mortality, and the need to turn to God.

It should not be surprising if *Everyman*, as a drama, draws at least as heavily on the contemporary visual traditions of representing death as on literary works like the *Ars Moriendi*. When we explore this connection further, we can see how the play both interacts with and yet plays partly against contemporary traditions. In the Bosch picture we see not just a dying man, but Death itself, personified as a “character”. So



Fig. 3 – Hieronymus Bosch, *Death and the Miser*, c. 1490-1500.

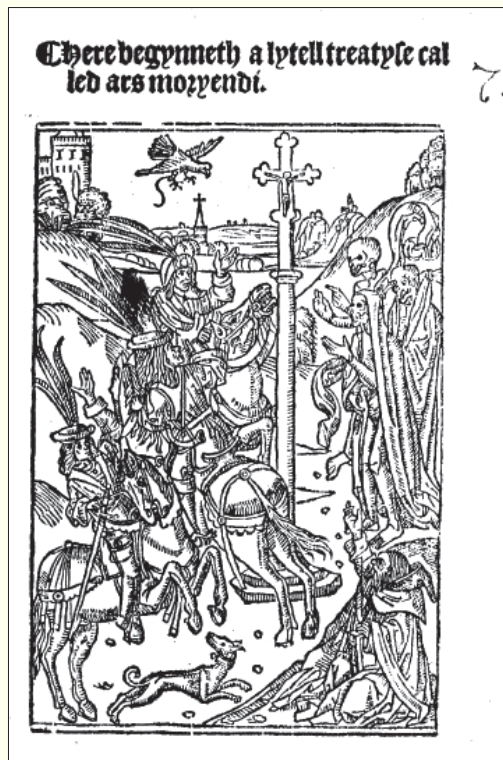


Fig. 4 – The Three Living and the Three Dead from *Ars Moriendi*, printed by Wynkyn de Worde, 1506.

“Danse Macabre”.⁶ The Dance of Death often involved a mix of image and text. It presented skeletal figures inviting members of each social class to join them in a dance. [Fig. 5] Most famous was the Dance of Death in the cemetery of the Holy Innocents in Paris, but the motif was very widely represented. The levelling effect of death – the fact that it strikes all without respect for class, gender or age—is perhaps analogous to the name and characterisation of the protagonist of the play as “every man”. In England, a version by John Lydgate, said to be translated from the Holy Innocents, was made for St Paul’s Cathedral. The encounter between Death and the Burgess in Lydgate’s version shows how closely *Everyman* relates to the dance of

the moment of death, or, as it may be, the moment of awareness of death, is represented as a personal encounter between individuals. Most of the visual traditions of death imagery at the time do focus on this moment of encounter, where the human subject “meets” Death. So, for example, the *Ars Moriendi* often has as its frontispiece an illustration of the story of the Three Living and Three Dead. [Fig. 4] The picture represents three wealthy young men meeting with three skeletons or corpses. The pictures themselves rarely include words, but traditionally the corpses address the young men with this challenge: “As you are now, so once were we; as we are now, so you shall be.”⁵

The most famous of these visual traditions of meeting Death is probably the “Dance of Death” or

5. See, for example, the De Lisle Psalter in the British Library: <http://www.bl.uk/catalogues/illuminatedmanuscripts/ILLUMIN.ASP?Size=mid&IllID=472>.

6. James Midgley Clark, *The Dance of Death in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance* (Glasgow: Jackson, 1950).



Fig. 5 – The *Danse Macabre*, from La Chaise Dieu, Haute Loire.
Personnage effacé/le bénédictin/le jeune bourgeois/la chanoinesse/
le marchand/la moniale bénédictine/le sergent à verge/le chartreux.

death.⁷ [Fig. 6] The figure of Death summons the Burgess, pointing out how foolish he is to gather all his wealth only for it to pass to others:

For yowre tresoure / plente & largesse
From other hit came / & shal vn-to straungeres
He is a fole / that yn soche besynesse
Wote not for hom / he stuffeth his garneres.



Fig. 6 – Woodcut from the *Danse Macabre* of Guyot Marchand, Paris 1485 (Right, Death and the Burgess).

7. Lydgate, *Dance of Death*, <http://www.dodedans.com/Epaul.htm>.

[For your treasure, plenty and largesse
It came from others, and it will pass to strangers.
He is a fool that in such business
Does not know for whom he is filling his storehouse.]

The Burgess laments his loss, realising how wealth is only lent, not given:

There-fore / wise is no creature
That sette [h]is herte / on gode that mote disseuere
The worlde hit lente / & he wille hit recure
And w[h]o moste hathe / [l]othest dieth euer.

[Therefore no creature is wise
That sets his heart on goods that he must part from.
The world lent it, and the world will take it back,
And he who has most is always most loath to die.]

This is very close to Death's admonition to Everyman. Everyman is foolish to trust in his wealth, says Death,

For as soone as thou arte go,
Another a whyle shall have it, and than go ther-fro,
Even as thou hast done.
Everyman, thou arte made! (165-68)⁸

The play is not directly dramatising the dance, but is clearly very familiar with its ideas and images.

Most of the visual traditions of representing death present the encounter of Death and the human individual as a moment of shock and fear. These are horrifying encounters, when individuals are suddenly faced by the fact of their own mortality. They respond with fear, reluctance and distress. The images seem designed to shock the viewer out of complacency, along with the unfortunate recipient of Death's message. What especially reinforces this sense of shock and horror is the way that Death is visually represented. It is noticeable that in all these images death is figured as either a skeleton, or a near-skeletal corpse. His skull-like face and gaunt or decaying body are terrifying in themselves, and also a startling reminder of the physicality of mortality. Death also often carries a spear, reinforcing the sense of violence, suddenness and fear surrounding the encounter. The poster for this conference sums up exactly this mood of sudden, violent, horror.

Even in static pictures, this encounter already seems 'dramatic': an intense moment of frightening conflict between two individuals. It is not surprising that the coming of death was presented not only in pictures but on the stage – in processions,

8. References, given within the text, are to *Everyman*, ed. A. C. Cawley (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1961).

shows and plays of various kinds.⁹ When it came to these dramatic performances, that dominant medieval icon of Death as the skeleton, often shrouded, perhaps carrying a spear, was clearly carried over into theatrical costume. In various sixteenth-century inventories of players' clothes in England we find "Deathes cote", "deathes face", and "dethes cootes / hoose dobled & hedd all in one".¹⁰ Some stage costumes which reflect this tradition actually survive. A particularly famous version of the *Dance of Death*, painted at Bern in the early sixteenth century, was dramatised in 1637, and the canvas costumes and masks are displayed in the City Museum.¹¹ The costumes have skull-masks and body-suits of canvas with feet and hoods attached, painted to appear like skeletons or decaying corpses.

The appearance of Death on stage in this particular costume seems designed to reinforce the sense of terror and horror that the pictures suggest. An early Spanish spectacle, played at the coronation of Ferdinand of Aragon in 1414, included a spectacle of Death as

[a] man dressed in tight-fitting yellow leather so that his body and head looked like those of a skeleton, quite cadaverous, without substance, without eyes – he looked so ugly and terrifying – and with his hands he gestured in every direction, beckoning now to some, now to others to come.¹²

Closer in time to *Everyman* we hear about a carnival show of *The Triumph of Death* in Florence in 1511, which involved

masks painted behind and before like skulls, including the throat, most realistic but a horrid and terrifying sight.¹³

When Death appears as a character in medieval English drama, he continues both the horrifying appearance and the aggressive attitude to the dying man he comes

9. Phoebe S. Spinrad, *The Summons of Death on the Medieval and Renaissance English Stage* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1987); Meg Twycross and Sarah Carpenter, *Masks and Masking in Medieval and Early Tudor England* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), pp. 247–50.

10. *Records of Early English Drama: Cambridge*, ed. Alan H. Nelson, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989), pp. 146–47, 161, 197, 220.

11. Bern, Historisches Museum, no 743. Reproduced in Twycross and Carpenter, *Masks and Masking*, 249.

12. Peter Meredith and John E. Tailby, *The Staging of Religious Drama in Europe in the Later Middle Ages* (Kalamazoo, MI: Western Michigan University, 1983), pp. 138–39, quoting N. D. Shergold, *A History of the Spanish Stage: From Medieval Times until the End of the Seventeenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), p. 119.

13. Giorgio Vasari, *The Lives of the Painters, Sculptors and Architects*, ed. and trans. A. B. Hinds (London: Dent, 1927), p. 178.

to summon. In one mystery cycle where Death appears to summon Herod, he is clearly dressed as a corpse: “I be nakyd and pore of array / and wurmys knawe me al a-bowte”. He threatens: “Wher I smyte ther is no grace, / For aftere my strook man hath no space / To make amendes for his trespase”.¹⁴ In *The Castle of Perseverance* (c.1425), Death threatens the audience as well as the hero of the play, Humanum Genus, that is, Mankind: “Ye schul me drede everychone; / Whanne I come ye schul grone”.¹⁵ Like Death in the Herod play, he strikes Mankind without warning; yet Mankind instantly recognises his horrifying assailant. The terrifying skeleton is a familiar figure, who strikes fear where he comes, and allows no escape and no delay. These dramatic corpse-like Deaths offer the protagonists and the audience a vision of their future selves, worm-eaten and decayed. They provoke, we assume, a pleasurable theatrical terror; but they also ideally shock the spectators into a reflection on their own mortality.

So the author of *Everyman* is creating his play in the context of a very well-established tradition. Death, in performance, is hideous and frightening, sudden, violent and inescapable. Audiences, and later readers, of the play knew what Death looked like as a character, and how he behaved. But it looks as though the playwright did not passively adopt this tradition, but played off it in quite powerful and subtle ways. The text of *Everyman* gives no specific guidance about Death’s appearance, although there is an allusion to his spear or “dart” (76). But the woodcut which prefaces the printed versions of the play shows a very traditional skeletal Death, suggesting that this was certainly how he was envisaged by readers, and almost certainly also by audiences of the play. [Fig. 7]

If this is the case, then the animated corpse of Death is used in *Everyman* with a kind of chilling subtlety which matches the sensitivity of the play as a whole. *Everyman* does not greet Death with the horrified recognition of, for example, Mankind in *The Castle of Perseverance*, which we might expect as the obvious response to the familiar walking skeleton. Initially he does not seem to recognise Death at all, or even to notice his inhuman appearance: when Death challenges him, he says simply, “I knowe the not. What messenger arte thou?” (114). *Everyman*’s apparent unconsciousness of whom he is talking to at this point seems likely to intensify the

¹⁴ *The N-Town Play*, ed Stephen Spector, *Early English Text Society* SS 11-12 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), Play 20, ll. 190, 272

¹⁵ *The Castle of Perseverance, The Macro Plays*, ed. Mark Eccles, EETS 262 (London: Oxford University for the EETS, 1969), l. 2787.

response of the audience, who are all too aware of the horrifying identity of Death as they watch Everyman's innocent uncertainty. There are other differences too, especially those of tone. Unlike other dramatic figures of Death this one is, verbally, surprisingly non-aggressive in his encounter with Everyman. Although he does point out to Everyman the dangers of his position and the impossibility of escape, his language suggests a gentle, almost compassionate tone, which contrasts with the grim inexorability of his message and appearance:

<i>Everyman.</i>	Dethe, yf I sholde this pylgrymage take...
	Sholde I not come agayne shortly?
<i>Dethe.</i>	No, Eueryman, and thou be ones there,
	Thou mayst neuer more come here,
	Trust me veryly ...
	What, wenest thou thy lyfe is gyuen the,
	And thy worldely gooddes also?
<i>Everyman.</i>	I had wende so veryle.
<i>Dethe.</i>	Nay, nay, it was but lende the. (146-52, 161-64)

This spectacle of the confused and human Everyman being addressed with such stern but oddly gentle intimacy by a horrifically costumed Death's head adds an extra poignancy to an already powerful encounter. It is as if Death's terrifying appearance gains in power from Everyman's oblivion, as the audience read the sign he cannot see.

So altogether, in Everyman's initial encounter with Death the playwright is drawing on the traditions, and yet also adapting their tone and the scope of their reference. We might ask why the playwright makes these adaptations. It may be partly just to exploit the power of the stage. The tension of the encounter, in which the audience know and see more than the protagonist, is very theatrically compelling. But it also



Fig. 7 – *Everyman*, printed by John Skot, 1528.

seems to help the play to open up. It moves beyond the intense but limited moment of encounter with mortality (which we find in the pictures), and even beyond the advice to those on their deathbeds (which we find in the written traditions). Because, unusually, in this play the coming of Death is not the end of the story. Even though Death, in a traditional manner, refuses Everyman's pleas for more time to prepare, and tells him there can be no respite or delay, he in fact then withdraws, simply telling Everyman to 'make the redy shortely' (181). The play then moves on to explore the more existential questions Everyman faces now that he has been confronted with the fact of his own mortality. What does he invest value in (family, friends or possessions)? What has he done himself, which might define his spiritual identity, and how can he liberate his good actions? Can he take responsibility for his own sins through the sacrament of penance? Then, in the second half of the play, he learns first to draw on his own qualities of mind and of body (Beauty, Strength, Discretion); but then to let these go, too, and find that his final identity lies even beyond them. Death himself does not return, even when Everyman's soul finally leaves his body.

So this play is, as it says, about the summons of Death. But in the end it is not so much about the summons itself as about how that summons might be understood. It is about Everyman's experience once he has recognised the summons, and how that might help him to shape his own life, and us to shape our own. The dramatic figure of Death is a very important part of that process, and provides a highly intense theatrical encounter. But in many ways it is the pretext for the play, not its central or only subject.