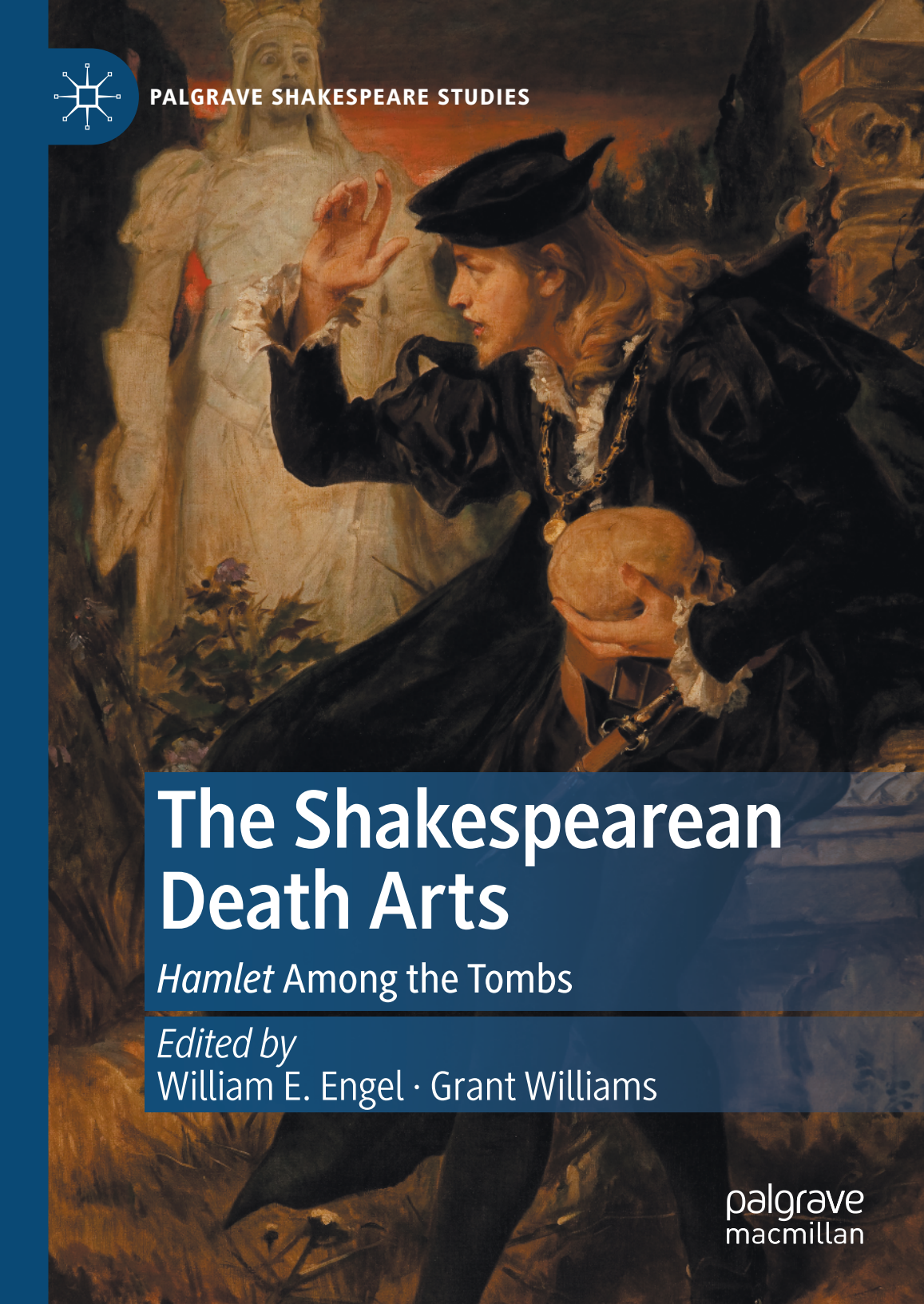

The Shakespearean Death Arts

Hamlet Among the Tombs

Edited by
William E. Engel · Grant Williams

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ISSN 2731-3204 ISSN 2731-3212 (electronic)
Palgrave Shakespeare Studies
ISBN 978-3-030-88489-5 ISBN 978-3-030-88490-1 (eBook)
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-88490-1

Cover illustration: Pedro Américo—Hamlet's Vision—Google Art Project

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by the registered company Springer Nature Switzerland AG
The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

This is the first book to view Shakespeare's plays from the prospect of the premodern death arts, not only the *ars moriendi* tradition but also the plurality of cultural expressions of *memento mori*, funeral rituals, commemorative activities, and rhetorical techniques and strategies fundamental to the performance of the work of dying, death, and the dead. The volume is divided into two parts: first, critically nuanced examinations of Shakespeare's corpus and then, second, of *Hamlet* exclusively as the ultimate proving ground of the death arts in practice. This book revitalizes discussion around key and enduring themes of mortality by reframing Shakespeare's plays within a newly conceptualized historical category that posits a cultural divide—at once epistemological and phenomenological—between premodernity and the Enlightenment.

Acknowledgments

Like Tennyson's "Flower in the crannied wall," this collection of essays has deep roots "all in all"—and a backstory. *The Shakespearean Death Arts* stems from a seminar (of the same name) that did not convene as originally planned at the Forty-Eighth Annual Shakespeare Association of America meeting in Denver, April 17, 2020, owing to the global pandemic. Our first thanks therefore need to go to the 2020 SAA Program Planning Committee for accepting our proposed seminar (Gina Bloom, Davis Dennis Britton, Laura A. Estill, Timothy Francisco, Susan Frye, Wendy Beth Hyman, and Rory Loughnane); and to SAA Executive Director, Karen Raber, and her staff, for their dedication and resourcefulness leading up to the decision to cancel the meeting but also to accommodate the ongoing work of those seminars, such as ours, still actively engaged with their specialized topic. Anyone familiar with the SAA seminar format knows that participants work throughout the year in advance of the conference to prepare, share, and team-edit essays which then are discussed at the annual meeting in the presence of auditors. Since the seminarians had worked so diligently for so long, we thought it worth everyone's while to continue the dialogue but now with an eye toward publishing the contributions in a coherently organized volume. We are extremely grateful that Eileen Srebernik at Palgrave-Macmillan contacted us and encouraged us to pursue this project in earnest. We also gratefully acknowledge the editors of the Palgrave Shakespeare series, Michael Dobson and Dympna Callaghan, who offered much-needed

critical insights early and late. While we regret a few of the original seminarians were unable to take part in the volume, we are indebted to several experts in the field who graciously came on board in May 2020 and whose contributions truly add luster to the project.

Engel would like to thank the Office of the Dean at The University of the South, for allowing a year of research leave, 2020–2021; the successive chairs of Sewanee's English Department, Jennifer Michael and Matthew Irvine, for their unflagging support; and long-time collaborator, Grant Williams, as patient as he is wise. Grant would like to acknowledge his supportive family during the challenge of working at home throughout multiple lockdowns and will miss the stimulating Zoom sessions with Bill Engel from and about whom, even after all these years, he still learns unexpected things.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

William E. Engel and Grant Williams

What ceremony else? (*Ham.* 5.1.185)[1]

This volume takes as its point of departure the assumption that "the death arts" designates a historical category vital for understanding early modern social interaction and cultural production. By the "death arts" we do not refer to necromancy or occult practices, although, technically speaking, what we mean by the term would not rule out altogether such strands as being among the many possible "arts" to investigate under this rubric in future studies along these lines. Rather, our engagement with the death arts seeks principally to acknowledge the enduring legacy of the medieval *ars moriendi*, which instructed the dying person (the *moriens*) and their

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W. E. Engel and G. Williams (eds.), *The Shakespearean Death Arts*, Palgrave Shakespeare Studies,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-88490-1_1

family in how to prepare for a religiously auspicious passing—that is, a "good death."[2]

As Amy Appleford's recent work demonstrates, however, the medieval *ars moriendi*'s influence was not confined to a private, ecclesiastically controlled death-bed scene but entered the civic sphere through the process of laicization, bearing an imprint upon the management of households and the administration of the city.[3] After the Reformation, the English *ars moriendi* did not die out with the prohibition of Catholic rituals,[4] for in the words of Robert Hill, the puritan-minded clergyman who devotes to it a quarter of his popular catechism, *The Pathway to Prayer and Piety* (1609), "it is the art of all arts, science of all sciences, to learn how to die."[5] Hill's claim, notwithstanding its zeal-fueled hyperbole, conveys a sense of the continuing relevance of the *ars moriendi* for seventeenth-century Protestant society.

While not diminishing this traditional art's contributions to cultural work, the phrase "the death arts" also widens the scope of scholarly inquiry by recognizing the pluralization of knowledge and practice around dying, death, and the dead in the period. They include varied and sundry activities: funeral and burial rituals; mourning the dead; constructing monuments, tombs, and epitaphs; Protestant and Catholic speculation on the apocalypse and the after-life; *memento mori* habits; meditative techniques; sermonizing and homiletics; the making of emblems and woodcuts; remembering martyrs, fallen military heroes, and the executed; writing wills and other legal documents around inheritance; the practice of anatomy and barber-surgery; and many more besides.

The difference between the single art and the multiple arts of mortality may be discerned most clearly in the early modern print industry. "The art" was primarily transmitted by translated versions and home-grown variants of the *Tractatus artis bene moriendi*, starting with William Caxton's *Arte and Crafte to Know Well to Dye* (1490),[6] while the death arts reveal themselves throughout assorted types of book production: elegiac and commemorative verse; collections of sermons; theological, meditational, and devotional works; psalters, primers, and prayer books; conduct books; moral philosophy treatises; commonplace and emblem books; anatomical, medical, and surgical treatises; narrative poetry, romance, histories, and popular literature, such as ballads and repentance pamphlets—and the list goes on.

The death arts reach beyond the traditional *ars moriendi* to encompass the secular implications of mortality stimulated by humanism's revival

of interest in ancient philosophy. William Baldwin's *A Treatise of Morall Philosophie Contayning the Sayings of the Wise*, a popular commonplace book that went through twenty-four editions between 1547 and 1651, not only circulated adages on why one should not fear death but also recounted the exemplary suicides of Socrates and Seneca. Clearly stoicism, epitomized by the Roman way of death, proposed alternative ways to think about how to die outside the Catholic and Protestant traditions. In *Antony and Cleopatra*, Eros chooses suicide as a means to avoid dispatching his master Antony, prompting the latter to exclaim: "But I will be / A bridegroom in my death, and run into't / As to a lover's bed. Come then, and Eros, / Thy master dies thy scholar. To do thus / I learned of thee" (*Ant.* 4.15.98–102). He thanks his brave lieutenant for giving him timely instruction in the noble art of death. Implicit in this declaration is the role of stoicism in teaching one how to die well.[7] Choosing honorable death over the abrogation of one's moral duty was a theme that resonated powerfully during the period, recapitulated in Horatio's proclamation to his dying friend, Hamlet, "I am more an antique Roman than a Dane" (*Ham.* 5.2.299).[8]

Tudor court culture provides another source for the worldly death arts. In the collection of lyric verse, commonly known as *Tottel's Miscellany*, whose multiple editions over the decades left a lasting impact on Elizabethan love poetry and drama, both Thomas Wyatt and Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey, serve as ambassadors to European Petrarchanism and in doing so import the conceit of the paramour's melancholic suffering darkened by death's long shadow. The choice "[t]hat death or mercy end my woeful smart," in the stark words of Wyatt's speaker, operates according to an uncompromising logic that escalates the *ars amatoria* to a secular kind of *ars moriendi*.[9] However much the poetic language of "ending it all" signifies an idle or figurative threat in the period's literature, Shakespeare intriguingly gravitates toward lovers whose circumstances and responses to those circumstances literalize this hysterical courtly discourse, in effect transforming Petrarchan rhetoric into spectacular scenes of dying. The sequential suicides of Romeo and Juliet enact the grave logic driving Petrarchanism and Ovidianism,[10] whereas the melodramatic deaths represented by *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*, two narrative poems written, perhaps not incidentally, during plague times, explore the emotional gulf separating the indifferent beloved from a manic if not psychotic suitor.

The various and sundry death arts prove significant for studying the period's artifacts in that they entrench further the deep cultural divide between premodernity and the Enlightenment. With respect to this divide, our thinking is indebted to the argument originally formulated by Phillipe Ariès[11], whose work traces the evolving Western attitudes toward dying: the Renaissance marks a liminal period when the acceptance of mortality as an integral part of communal life started to give way to Protestant and capitalist notions of dying and burial as a personal act; as individual relationships and the concomitant sentiments around those relationships gained increasing social value, modernity excluded the corpse along with its funeral rituals from public purview, fostering defensive emotional reactions to death: denial, horror, and aesthetic fascination. Where we differ from Ariès's argument is in our methodological focus. Not only do the death arts posit a historical firewall between premodernity and the Enlightenment rather than a long duration through the ages, but their scope also moves beyond the confines of *l'histoire des mentalités*. Death is not just an attitude; it is an art. More precisely, it recruits many premodern arts.

One might suppose that, given the extensive scholarship, death as a Shakespearean topic would have expired years ago. It is our contention that the death arts reinvigorate an old, tired theme. The broad hermeneutic framework of the death arts recasts the uniqueness of premodern cultural production, accentuating the distance between Shakespeare and contemporary readers and inviting new ways of assessing the significance of his individual plays and plots where dying, death, and the dead are regularly staged and verbally represented.[12] We propose three interrelated positions on how the death arts can shift our perspective on premodern death and thereby reframe our approach to Shakespeare's plays. These arts convey death's epistemological difference, its cultural difference, and its phenomenological difference—in other words, its relationships to knowledge, civilization, and the perceived world.

Generally speaking, the Renaissance arts operated according to Aristotelian epistemology, an inheritance from medieval and classical times. Unlike an empirical science, an art does not quantify and measure objects in an attempt to master the material world but shapes a human enterprise to the lessons and limits of nature. Whereas modern medicine develops therapies and technologies to steal from death's audit book as many precious moments as possible, premodern knowledge accepted death as something you could not cheat. Consider the *memento mori* messages in

Fig. 1.1 Skeleton contemplating skull (Andrea Vesalius, *De Humani Corporis Fabrica*)

Vesalius's anatomical plates (see Fig. 1.1), in which, for example, a skeletal figure poses over a tomb, resting its hand contemplatively on a skull.[13]

Here death is not a pathological state to be negated at all costs but, instead, represents a part of the natural order, which the anatomist must duly recognize even as he divulges the body's secrets. Such knowledge looks for the human not the object in the cadaver, for Aristotelian epistemology conceived of the art as the all-important means by which human subjects could actualize their potential.[14] An individual existing in a natural state could not obtain the virtue necessary for achieving the good life without exercising intellectual judgment to supplement the deficiencies one was born with. Thus for Cicero, the art of rhetoric raised humans from a savage and bestial condition by equipping them with the oratorical

technique and discipline through which they could establish civic order.[15] This epistemological reasoning behind the arts applied equally to death insofar as a natural death stripped of funeral and burial rites presupposed an uncivilized, even an animal state—it may, by the way, contextualize the long-held fear of death by drowning at sea.[16] Knowing about and preparing for death belonged to the goal of fulfilling one's humanity.

Premodern death's positive epistemological value fed into and was fed by its ubiquitous cultural presence—our second position on the critical difference of the death arts. The death arts do not take their cues from an individual's mournful sentiment, which, notwithstanding its overwhelming power and therapeutic significance, often fixates on loss, privation, and absence and fosters by extension denial, paralysis, and inactivity. The death arts shift our perspective from the claustrophobic sphere of inwardly experienced feeling to the materiality of public expression and production, where mourning, for example, may manifest itself in elegies, commemorations, and monuments. For the death arts, then, the deterioration and expiration of life do not spell civilization's decay; rather, dying, death, and the dead spark the energy that built up early modern London culture, injecting vigor and animation into everyday existence. With its affiliations to artifice and techne, the premodern conception of art also highlights the artisanal dimension of this robust cultural activity. For Shakespeare's age, death was not just a knowing, but a doing and a making. One could trade and traffic in it. Priests who prepared their parishioners for passing on—and also collected fees from the deceased—were by no means the only death-mongers.[17] Think of playwrights, especially those of revenge tragedies, whose craft exploited the theatricality of agonizing death throes and saintly sleep-like passing away, while strewing the stage with make-believe cadavers. Bosola, that death-mongering factotum in Webster's *Duchess of Malfi*, parodically arrogates to himself a number of such occupations.

The death arts reveal a thanatological plenitude in mainstream early modern culture—not sequestered to media and genre silos as it is today in goth and metal music, crime television, and horror film and literature. From ballads to sermons, one witnesses the presence of death in life. Death listens, it speaks, it dances, and it plays among the living. George Herbert and John Donne address conversational poems to death as though they were sitting in its company.[18] Indeed, thanatological plenitude and proliferation manifest themselves in a kind of generative, copious discourse. Capulet laments to Paris,

> O son, the night before thy wedding day
> Hath death lain with thy wife. See there she lies,
> Flower as she was, deflowerèd by him.
> Death is my son-in-law, death is my heir.
> My daughter he hath wedded. I will die.
> And leave him all. Life, living, all is death's. (*Rom.* 4.4.63–68)

Romeo speaks of death as an adulterous rival as well: "Shall I believe / That unsubstantial death is amorous, / And that the lean abhorrèd monster keeps / Thee here in dark to be his paramour?" (*Rom.* 5.3.102–105). Shakespeare depicts death as though it has the same urges and desire as the living[19], almost promoting it to a character in the play and most certainly marshaling the topos to copiously dilate Capulet's and Romeo's speeches with lively wit and irony mixed with pathos.

The thanatological plenitude found throughout premodern cultural activity suggests a phenomenological or existential ground alien from what we have in contemporary society. Death's prominence made the world appear quite differently to premodern individuals so much so that contemporaries may mistake its prominence for a fascination with the macabre.[20] In post-Enlightenment society, we regard death through the lens of a living world, the experiences of which induce us to deem it a threatening, unhealthy negation. Death, properly understood nowadays, holds a subordinate place as a culminating stage or boundary in an entire life cycle, a concept that, for example, informs the method of early modern social history conducted by David Cressy's thorough study *Birth, Marriage, and Death*. But early modern documents and artifacts do not restrict death to a final event terminating existence. When Robert Greene reflects upon his reprobate behavior of languishing in the sinful moment, he exclaims, "neither did I care for death, but held it only as the end of life."[21] For Protestants, a good life was considered the best preparation for a good death.[22] And so when we look at life through the prism of the death arts—as Hamlet does when he gazes at Yorick's skull—our world becomes bathed in shades, tints, and hues hitherto unseen. The prismatic light of mortality casts colorful shadows on persons, places, and things, as well as actions, habits, and thoughts. In other words, every activity, every gesture, and every expenditure of energy potentially direct themselves toward mortifying ends—"mortifying," etymologically speaking, as "making death." The initial conceit of "A Valediction Forbidding Mourning" may sound farfetched in comparing the lovers' temporary parting to

the gentle passing of a good death which makes "no noise" (l. 5),[23]until Donne's later homiletic observation illuminates the larger early modern perspective behind the comparison: "In all our periods and transitions in this life, are so many passages from death to death."[24] Enobarbus depicts Cleopatra's emotional fragility at Antony's departure in mortifying terms that could well be read as parodying Donne's valediction: "Cleopatra catching but the least noise of this dies instantly. I have seen her die twenty times upon far poorer moment. I do think there is mettle in death, which commits some loving act upon her, she hath such a celerity in dying" (*Ant*. 1.2.121–123). Enobarbus, ever the cynic, capitalizes on another death conceit that Donne employs in his love poetry[25]: dying as a synonym for experiencing orgasm exposes the motivation underlying Cleopatra's readiness to abandon herself to stereotypical feminine histrionics. Much like Donne, Shakespeare makes us see the many deaths punctuating life's intense experiences.

No phrase, mantra, or algorithm captures better this making of death in everyday existence than *memento mori*, the elegiac habit of thought in which the mortality of creatures revealed their ongoing decay and decrepitude. To contemplate one's death arises from taking to heart the doctrine of the fall and its legacy of dank pessimism. The meditative act of *memento mori* is a strange remembering because one does not look toward the past but toward what will come. When meditating, one imagines the finitude of the future in the present as though one's entire history were now already finished. Remembering one's death orients the self to the teleological concept of time promulgated by Christianity—one labors toward the inevitable end times. Through the prism of *memento mori*, not only every perception and sensation but also every feeling and thought come saturated in mortification. *Memento mori* is a watchword that trains the mind to understand death as an ever-present condition of existence. In its capacity to prepare the individual mentally for the end, this incantation exerts tremendous cognitive pressure: death becomes a continuous event that weighs heavily on the here and now.

One of the ways in which *memento mori* was put into practice was through ruminating upon any number of germane verses from holy scripture: for example, "Whatsoever thou takest in hand, remember the end, and thou shalt never do amiss" (Ecclesiasticus 7:36) and "O that they were wise, that they understood this, that they would consider their latter end" (Deuteronomy 32:29).[26] In his catechism, Robert Hill provides mental fodder for his catechumens by listing Old Testament quotations

that figure forth the fragility and misery of life: a pilgrimage, a flower, smoke, a clay house, a weaver's shuttle, a shepherd's tent, a wave-tossed ship, a mariner, a shadow, a thought, a dream, vanity, and nothing.[27] But *memento mori* could spiral off in secular directions too. Shakespeare's Sonnet 64 teaches the reader to ruminate on ruins as an elegiac experience of earthly love and, as such, exemplifies a death art woven throughout his sonneteering. The moribund is already present in plenitude. It is plenitude's hidden freight, its invisible potential.

Contemplating death during the sixteenth century, far from signaling a morbid fascination with mortality, was considered a sensible and mature response to the vagaries of everyday life and the moral choices that arise as a result. Erasmus sums up this commonplace Renaissance attitude well, at once typically and proverbially, in his popular treatment of the theme[28]:

> Nothing is so much before our eyes as death—then why is nothing further from our minds? Even our name—mortals—is taken from "mortality," so that we cannot hear our name pronounced even in a casual manner without our own ears reminding us of death. […] In our own times as well we observe that death spares no class of man. […]. If we kept in mind the uncertain promise of our treacherous age, if we kept death, which threatens us at all times, in mind at all times, we would pour into our ears the words spoken by the famous prophet to the ailing king: Set your house in order, for you will die [2 Kings 20:1].[29]

Accordingly, Roland Frye has said of Hamlet's holding Yorick's skull (*Ham.* 5.1.151ff.), perhaps the most iconic image now associated with confronting mortality in the West,[30] that "Shakespeare's audience in the Globe Theatre can be presumed to have seen Hamlet here as being at once most realistic and most rational [...] thinking through the ultimate realities of death to arrive at what becomes, for him as it had been for others, a new sanity and even serenity."[31] The same applies to Pericles, another of Shakespeare's young princes (though less often discussed) who, like Hamlet, seeks to navigate his way in a world beset by treachery and court intrigue.[32] When confronted by the heads of those who failed to answer the riddle to win the Princess—thereby, as with the graveyard scene in *Hamlet*, bringing center stage the quintessential *memento mori* symbol (see Fig. 1.2)—Pericles shows himself to be pragmatically schooled in the fundamentals of the death arts.

Fig. 1.2 Hamlet with Skull (David Tennent as Hamlet)

ANTIOCHUS Yon sometimes famous princes, like thyself,
Drawn by report, adventurous by desire,
Tell thee with speechless tongues and semblance pale
That without covering save yon field of stars
Here they stand, martyrs slain in Cupid's wars,
And with dead cheeks advise thee to desist
For going on death's net, whom none resist.

PERICLES Antiochus, I thank thee, who hath taught
My frail mortality to know itself,
And by those fearful objects to prepare
This body, like to them, to what I must;
For death remembered should be like a mirror
Who tells us life's but breath, to trust it error.
I'll make my will then, and, as sick men do,
Who know the world, see heaven, but feeling woe
Grip not at earthly joys as erst they did,
So I bequeath a happy peace to you
And all good men, as every prince should do;
My riches to the earth from whence they came;
[*To the Daughter*] But my unspotted fire of love to you.
[*To Antiochus*] Thus ready for the way of life or death,
I wait the sharpest blow, Antiochus. (*Per.* 1.1.35–56)

This long quotation from *Pericles* sums up well the range of commonplace understandings of the period about lessons the living stand to

learn from the dead, especially when confronted symbolically by the face of death in the form a skull, which came to be known simply as "a death's head." A dried human skull thus became a popular *memento mori* ornament in the Renaissance that adorned desks of the circumspect and pious—as well as those, of course, who might want to be perceived as being so: high-minded, contemplative, and stoic in the face of one's mortality. It was the gift of just such a "token" from the Queen Mother, Lady Margaret Beaufort (mother of the future king Henry VIII), to John Skelton, that ostensibly inspired him to write a "ghostly meditation [...] in sentence commendable, lamentable, lachrymable, profitable for the soul."[33] With such precedents in mind, Frye was at pains to argue in his survey of likely responses to *Hamlet* in 1600, and consonant with our position throughout this volume, that recovering and understanding Shakespeare's plays in their original terms gives them new depth of meaning and renewed affective power for our own time. Principal elements of the death arts therefore are developed more particularly with respect to *Hamlet* in the second half of this volume, while the first, through other plays, explores and discloses the cultural, intellectual, social, and religious contexts for understanding *in situ* the dynamics of their reception.[34]

Shakespeare draws on and significantly contributes to the Renaissance death arts in important and far-reaching ways. The fundamental question that first needs to be considered, though, is in what ways does Shakespeare put his stamp on the death arts through his ongoing and intense engagement with them, ranging from episodes like the scene just mentioned in *Pericles*, to the grisly literalization of the maxim that "death's a great disguiser" with the severed head of a notorious pirate to stand in for that of Claudio (*MM* 4.2.150)[35]; from Falstaff's comic description of Bardolph's red nose as "a death's head, or a memento mori" because it makes him "think upon hell-fire" (*1H4* 3.3.23–24), to his admonition to Doll Tearsheet not to "speak like a death's head, do not bid me remember mine end" (*2H4* 2.4.201–202).[36] And there are of course dozens of even more well-known passages such as the "contempt for the world" monologue spoken by deposed Richard II beginning "Let's talk of graves, of worms, and epitaphs" (*R2* 3.2.141ff.); the famous conflation of the tomb and marriage bed in *Romeo and Juliet* with "worms that are thy chambermaids" (*Rom.* 5.3.109); and the grandiose expression of Cleopatra's "immortal longings," with her monumental staging of her own death to fix and memorialize a lasting image of her grandeur—in hopes of

preempting in Rome "[s]ome squeaking Cleopatra boy my greatness / I'th' posture of a whore" (*Ant.* 5.2.216–217):

> Show me, my women, like a queen. Go fetch
> My best attires. I am again for Cydnus
> To meet Mark Antony. Sirrah Iras, go.
> Now, noble Charmian, we'll dispatch indeed,
> And when thou hast done this chore I'll give thee leave
> To play till doomsday—Bring our crown and all. (*Ant.* 5.2.223–228)

With scenes such as this one in mind (and many more besides), there are very good reasons why the death arts figure so significantly in Shakespeare's plays: paramount among them, the inherent theatricality of death and dying. There is something unmistakably spectacular—harkening to earlier religious rituals—about the on-stage revelation of recessed spaces covered by curtains for the presentation of corpses and solemn ceremonies involving (and sometimes denying) last rites.[37] And the obverse is true as well: there is something that smells of death in the mocking shadows of actors playing out the lives of characters for others to see and to marvel at the cunning counterfeit. This is taken into account—at once tongue-in-cheek and with evident metatheatrical resonance—with Falstaff's playing dead only to rise and mock one who is dead (within, of course, the fiction of the play) and then claim as booty the lifeless body of Hotspur:

> 'Sblood, 'twas time to counterfeit,
> or that hot termagant Scot had paid me, scot and lot too. Counterfeit? I lie. I am no counterfeit. To die is to be a counterfeit, for he is but the counterfeit of a man who hath not the life of a man. But to counterfeit dying when a man thereby liveth is to be no counterfeit, but the true and perfect image of life indeed. The better part of valour is discretion, in the which better part I have saved my life. 'Swounds, I am afraid of this gunpowder Percy, though he be dead. How if he should counterfeit too, and rise? By my faith, I am afraid he would prove the better counterfeit. Therefore I'll make him sure, yea, and I'll swear I killed him. Why may not he rise as well as I? Nothing confutes me but eyes, and nobody sees me. Therefore, sirrah, [stabbing Hotspur] with a new wound in your thigh, come you along with me. (*1H4* 5.4.111–123)

The self-conscious sporting with conventions relating to actors repeatedly impersonating characters throughout the run of play, even and especially

those who die on stage, is given its due in many Elizabethan plays, exemplarily Thomas Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy*. This play long has been seen as sharing "many elements" with Shakespeare's consummate revenge play, *Hamlet*.[38] Immediately prior to the on-stage breaking of the theatrical spectacle's fourth wall with the play within a play, the person responsible for the deadly court entertainment, Hieronimo, admonishes the audience (both on stage and off) as to the performative nature of theatrical impersonation involved with viewing fatal spectacles—comparable to Hamlet's asides to Ophelia as we watch them watching the command performance of "The Murder of Gonzago" (*Ham.* 3.2.117–240). Hieronimo's speech literally reframes the spectacle, calling attention to and putting into perspective the operative conventions of mimetic illusion—especially as regards deaths on stage:

> Haply you think—but bootless are your thoughts—
> That this is fabulously counterfeit,
> And that we do as all tragedians do:
> To die today, for fashioning our scene—
> The death of Ajax, or some Roman peer—
> And, in a minute starting up again,
> Revive to please tomorrow's audience. (*The Spanish Tragedy* 4.4.77–82)[39]

The same aesthetic affinity between theater (where the lives and deaths of characters are counterfeited by flesh and blood actors) and death (where people newly dead are ceremonially staged for one final scene by the living) shows up in comedy as well as tragedy, thereby attesting to the sometimes unexpected—and, at times, even mad-cap—ways that the death arts can be seen to inform and animate Renaissance dramas. In *Midsummer Night's Dream*, for example, the "mechanicals" strive to present the tragic deaths of Pyramus and Thisbe as their contribution to the Athenian court's nuptial celebration, about a "lover, that kills himself most gallant for love" (*MND* 1.2.18). Apart from "Pyramus and Thisbe" being an absurdly indecorous choice for the occasion, the mechanicals' earnestness reveals, indeed highlights, the cracks in the seams of mimetic illusionism.[40] The comedic miscalculation of the power of their performance to embody, portray, and bring to life the thing itself is hilariously presented in their rehearsals—and even is written into their play:

> [SNUG] [as Lion] You, ladies, you whose gentle hearts do fear
> The smallest monstrous mouse that creeps on floor,

> May now perchance both quake and tremble here
> When lion rough in wildest rage doth roar.
> Then know that I as Snug the joiner am
> A lion fell, nor else no lion's dam.
> For if I should as Lion come in strife
> Into this place, 'twere pity on my life. (*MND* 5.1.212–219)

Their raucous enactment of a play involving the death arts, in effect, turns tragedy into farce. They bungle their way through a story in which the lovers, owing to parental disapproval, arrange to meet at an out-of-the-way place, among the tombs—specifically "Ninny's tomb," by which Bottom means "Ninus' tomb" (*MND* 2.2.241, 5.1.198)—and end up both dying because of a mistake about whether the beloved actually is dead. This motif, characterizing the fatal end of Pyramus and Thisbe, and likewise set among the tombs, essentially describes the denouement of *The Most Excellent and Lamentable Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet* (to give the full title according to the 1599 quarto). The easily discerned parallel between the mechanicals' theatrical travesty of the demise of Pyramus and Thisbe and the abject pathos of *Romeo and Juliet* attests to the ubiquity of the death arts in the period, and also indicates something about how it can show up in seemingly unexpected places. For just as the tragic deaths of Pyramus and Thisbe can be played as farce in a comedy like *Midsummer Night's Dream*, so too the constitutive elements of the death arts can be parodied—creating a kind of affective comic frisson—for a moment of grim levity in this otherwise relentless tragedy of young love gone awry, as is the case with *Romeo and Juliet*. With the prospect of being united at last with her beloved, but only after a drug-induced death-like sleep that will cause her kinsmen to inter her in the family vault, Juliet's free-wheeling imagination spins out an associative checklist of youthful fears about being entombed alive.

> How if, when I am laid into the tomb,
> I wake before the time that Romeo
> Come to redeem me? There's a fearful point.
> Shall I not then be stifled in the vault,
> To whose foul mouth no healthsome air breathes in,
> And there die strangled ere my Romeo comes?
> Or, if I live, is it not very like
> The horrible conceit of death and night,
> Together with the terror of the place—

> As in a vault, an ancient rèceptacle,
> Where for this many hundred years the bones
> Of all my buried ancestors are packed;
> Where bloody Tybalt, yet but green in earth,
> Lies fest'ring in his shroud; where, as they say,
> At some hours in the night spirits resort—
> Alack, alack, is it not like that I,
> So early waking—what with loathsome smells,
> And shrieks like mandrakes torn out of the earth,
> That living mortals, hearing them, run mad—
> O, if I wake, shall I not be distraught,
> Environèd with all these hideous fears,
> And madly play with my forefathers' joints,
> And pluck the mangled Tybalt from his shroud,
> And, in this rage, with some great kinsman's bone
> As with a club, dash out my desp'rate brains? (*Rom.* 4.3.28–53)

In both instances, whether expressed farcically in the play within a play of "Pyramus and Thisbe" in *Midsummer Night's Dream*, or as lugubrious fancy reduced to manic humor in Juliet's bedroom soliloquy in *Romeo and Juliet*, the death arts flow unchecked. Moreover, the death arts tend to stand out more prominently, freighted as they are with a special kind of affective poignance, when self-reflective elements within the work hint at or explicitly reveal the imbrication of mortal transience in the construction and delivery of the representation. Hence Macbeth's hollow reflection on his wife's death reverberates with a deeper resonance owing to the metatheatrical allusion that guides his grief:

> Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow
> Creeps in this petty pace from day to day
> To the last syllable of recorded time;
> And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
> The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!
> Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
> That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
> And then is heard no more. It is a tale
> Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
> Signifying nothing. (*Mac.* 5.5.18–27)

This much having been observed, we are in a position now to circle back to the perennial case in point already mentioned. The situational context