

“To lerne you to dye when ye wyll”: John Skelton and the *Ars Moriendi* tradition

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ABSTRACT

The transition to the Renaissance in the early years of the sixteenth century was marked by the appearance of the *Artes Moriendi*, manuals for spiritual – and sometimes practical – preparation for the last moment. The imminence of death abandoned its depressing aspect and a didactic, businesslike approach evolved with great success. Caxton and Wynkyn de Worde, among others, introduced this tradition in England, which became extremely popular in few years. John Skelton seemed to be attracted to this tradition and traces of its imprint can be found in some of his compositions. However, the authorship of an authentic *Ars Moriendi*, something he explicitly claimed for in *The Garlande of Laurell*, is at least dubious. This paper examines the analogies between Skelton and the *Ars Moriendi* tradition and explores the possibility of an existence of such a work.

1. Introduction

A writer's word about himself should be authoritative, almost sacred, especially when we deal with periods where the lack of documents or the loss of texts leave the scholar in a difficult position to face the literary problems that arise. Any datum, detail or scrap of personal information offered by a classic poet is easily accepted and often entails a series of hypotheses that try to solve principal, disproportionate issues. But that is not the case with John Skelton. The 'poet laureate' *par excellence* keeps arousing suspicions among the critics who are acquainted with his egocentric fantasies, his revengeful (though prolific) outbursts and, in short, his particular view of life. An implicit distrust seems to lie behind all his biographical revelations.

The present study is provoked by one of the entries included in the catalogue of works Skelton displayed in his long poem *The Garlande of Laurell*. This self-evaluative, or self-congratulatory work depicts a scene where the author is presented before the Queen of Fame and the goddess Pallas, to be judged for

his literary career, and to their presence a book is brought containing all the works written by the English poet. This famous 'recorde', which starts with the well-known quotation,

Of your oratour and poete laureate
Of Englande, his workis here they begynne:
In primis, the Boke of Honorous Astate;
Item the Boke how Men Shulde Fle Synne; (1170-3)¹

has always attracted the fascination of scholars since it offers a complete register of more than forty titles and, among them, some thirty works we have never recovered, thirty works lost in the five-century gap between Skelton and the present day. One of them, the fifth entry (in line 1176) has especially caught my attention for its force and theatricality: "Item [a Boke] to Lerne You to Dye When ye Wyll." This reference seems to point directly to the *Ars Moriendi*, a genre rather unknown today but enormously popular in the transition from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance.

2. The *Ars Moriendi*

The *Ars Moriendi* is one of the many devotional genres which developed from the fifteenth century obsession with death.² G. Gregory Smith (1900: 14) defined the *Timor mortis conturbat me* as "the refrain of the fifteenth century" since death in that period transcended from everyday reality (in plagues, wars or a high rate of mortality) to the words of writers and preachers, becoming one of the philosophical and religious foundations of the age. A disastrous cycle, joined to too many medieval death motifs such as *Ubi Sunt?* or *Memento mori* gave rise to a feeling of "Death conquers all!" from which different macabre genres emerged like the *Dance of Death*, the *Four Last Things* or *The Three Living and the Three Dead* (Beaty 1970:

¹ Quotations from Skelton's poetry will be taken from Scattergood (1992) unless explicitly said otherwise.

² Though many books and articles have been written on the question of death at the end of the Middle Ages, the essential ideas are best found, in my opinion, in chapter 5 of Huizinga's classic *Autumn of the Middle Ages* (1919: 156-71). Other useful accounts are Woolf (1968: 67-113), Tristram (1976: 152-83) or Braet and Verbeke (1983). For a recent and comprehensive survey of this attitude, see Aston (1994).

41-45; Morris 1985: 311-325). Among them, the most didactic-aimed and probably unemotional one was the *Ars Moriendi*.³

The *Ars Moriendi* disregarded popular motifs like the horrors of human decay, the inevitability of death or the imperative necessity to be prepared for it. This genre was, as Mary O'Connor accurately defined it, "a complete and unintelligible guide to the business of dying, a method to be learned while one is in good health and kept at one's fingers' ends for use in that all-important and inescapable hour" (1966: 5). In the *Ars Moriendi* death did not have to be dreaded, at least for those whose life was being rightfully led: it was not a doleful book, nor a treatise seeking for repentance as ultimate salvation. These works were solely manuals, how-to-do-it texts, with specific instructions to be followed on one's deathbed. Their main features were didacticism, materialized in allegorical profusion and homiletic statements, and propensity to ritual, superficial in most cases.

Though the preoccupation with the last days is an old question, the precedents of this genre must be looked for in scattered treatises written in the fourteenth century, such as Henry Suso's *Horologium Sapientiae* or Dirk van Delft's *De Tafel van den Kersten Ghelove*, and especially in the fifteenth-century reformer Jean Charlier de Gerson and his *De Arte Moriendi*, section three in his *Opusculum Tripartitum*.⁴ Gerson's instructive tract for Christians of any condition (from theologians to simple peasants) on the preparations for death would inspire an anonymous preacher, probably German, to write "a schorte maner of exortacion for techynge & confortynge of hem þat bene in poynt of deth"⁵ (what would become the *Ars Moriendi*) in the first quarter of the fifteenth century. From this moment on, an increasing quantity of copies, first manuscripted and later printed, led to an unexpected success. Nancy Lee Beaty wonders about the popularity of the work when "the tract has almost nothing to offer beyond a restatement of the

³ Despite its success in the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance, the *Ars Moriendi* genre has not received much critical consideration, especially in recent years. The basic studies are still O'Connor (1966) and Beaty (1970). The most complete compilation of *Artes Moriendi* is Atkinson (1992). Other essays that shed light on different aspect of this tradition are Chené-Williams (1979), Macksey (1983), Spinrad (1985), Matsuda (1997: 187-92) and Tokunaga (2001).

⁴ For details on the sources and forerunners of the *Ars Moriendi* tradition, see O'Connor (1966: 11-41).

⁵ Anon. *Crafte and Knowledge for to Dye Well*, MS Rawlinson C 894, Prologue; in Horstman (1896: 106).

clichés of the Christian gospel and a rather superficial application of them to man's deathbed experience" (1970: 35).

By the end of the century, the *Ars Moriendi* existed in two closely related versions of the original text, now lost: a longer and earlier *Tractatus artis bene moriendi* or *Speculum artis bene moriendi*, known in England as *Craft of Dying*, predominant in manuscript and xylographic editions; and the abridged version, simply called *Ars moriendi*, more frequent in block-books and typographic editions, with an accompanying stock of eleven illustrations⁶ which stressed the struggle between good and evil which every man engages during his last moments.⁷ Both treatises were rapidly translated and adapted so that, at the beginning of the sixteenth century, we find editions in most of the vernaculars in Europe.

In England, the impact of the *Ars Moriendi* was considerable. Pragmatic texts such as the fourth book in Richard Rolle's *The Pricke of Conscience*, the homiletic *Toure off All Toures*, or Hoccleve's poem titled "Lerne to Dye" (in fact, a dramatic complaint) give an idea of how badly needed this tradition was in the Isles.⁸ A manuscript edition, erroneously attributed for centuries to Richard Rolle (Horstman 1896: 406-20), and a printed translation by William Caxton, titled *The Arte and Crafte to Know Well to Dye*,⁹ introduced the tradition in England, both in 1490. Caxton himself entered also the short version in 1491 and afterwards, multiple editions appeared over the following fifty years.¹⁰ In the first half of the sixteenth century, subsequent

⁶ Five temptations (against Faith, to Despair, to Impatience, to Vainglory, to Avarice), five inspirations (to Faith, against Despair, against Impatience, against Vainglory, against Avarice) and a picture of Death (O'Connor 1966: 9).

⁷ For detailed information about the two versions and their editions, see O'Connor (1966: 11-17 and 41-48).

⁸ Though not always scrupulous about divisions and differences between genres, a general account of these medieval treatises on death can be found in Chené-Williams (1979).

⁹ Edited by Atkinson (1992: 21-35). Subsequent quotations from Caxton's *Craft of Dying* will be taken from this edition and include the page number in it.

¹⁰ Nine versions of the *Ars Moriendi* prior to 1550 have survived:

- c.1490 *Crafte and Knowledge for to Dye Well*, Anon.
- 1490 *The Art and Crafte to Knowe Well to Dye*, W. Caxton
- 1491 *Ars Moriendi*, W. Caxton
- 1495 *The Art and Crafte to Knowe Well to ye*, R. Pynson
- 1497 *Ars Moriendi* [1st edition], W. de Worde
- 1503 *The Book Intytuled the Art of Good Liwing & Good Deyng*, T. Lewington
- 1505 *The Arte of Crafte to Lyve Well and Deye Well*, A. Chertsey

developments of the original text helped to set up the tradition: the anonymous *The Dyeynge Creature*, the translation of the Erasmian *Preparation to Death*, or Thomas Lupset's *The Waye of Dyenge Well* perpetuated the genre and provided it with an important literary significance (Atkinson 1992). By the time of Skelton's death, in 1529, there were at least eight editions of the treatise and in 1550 this number would be double.

The six parts into which the *Ars Moriendi* was divided¹¹ reveal such a simplistic scheme and over-didactic tone that it is certain to be firmly rooted in the Middle Ages. Few doubts remain about the medieval character of the genre which under the influence of the incipient Renaissance, in Skelton's lifetime, acquired a diffused sense of pragmatism for that inevitable moment. That is why those texts underwent a constant transformation in the following 200 years, to suit even Puritan ideas.¹²

Is Skelton's "Boke to Lerne You to Dye When ye Wyll" an unequivocal reference to that genre? It is highly probable. Neither the specialists on this funerary genre (O'Connor 1966: 169; Beaty 1970: 44) nor Skelton's editors (Henderson 1931: 385; Scattergood 1983: 507) have doubted it and a comparison between Skelton's expression and different *incipits* of *Artes Moriendi* is relevant enough. Among the first English versions of the genre we find a *Crafte and knowledge for to dye well*,¹³ two *Arte & Crafte to Know well to Dye*,¹⁴ an *Arte or crafte to lyve well and deye well*,¹⁵ and also *A breffe instruccyon for to teache a person wyllingly to dye*.¹⁶ Skelton's

1506 *Ars Moriendi* [2nd edition], W. de Worde

1532 *Ars Moriendi*, R. Wyer

¹¹ "Commendacion of deth & of cunynge for to dye well," "The temptacions of men that dyene," "The interrogacions þat schulden be asked of hem þat were in her deth-bed while þei may speke and vnderstond," "Instruccion with certeyne obsecracions to hem þat schullen dye," "Instruccion vnto hem þat shullen dye" and "Praisers þat shullen be seid vpon hem þat bene a-dyinge of som man þat is abowt him."

¹² The best example of this transformation of the original *Ars Moriendi* is the puritan *Holy Dying* by Jeremy Taylor (1651), included in Atkinson (1992: 311-337). Nancy Beaty's book (1970) is, in fact, a study of the evolution of the genre towards this work.

¹³ The aforementioned anonymous MS Rawlinson C 894 (Horstman 1896: 406-20).

¹⁴ William Caxton (1490), in Atkinson (1992: 21-35); and Richard Pynson (1495) STC (2nd ed.) 790 (no modern edition).

¹⁵ Wynkyn de Worde (1505) STC 792 (no modern edition).

¹⁶ John Frith's *A Mirroure. To Knowe Thyselfe. A breffe instruccyon for to teache a person wyllingly to dye* (1536) STC 11390 (no modern edition).

description of his work's main purpose may be found almost exactly in the first chapter of different editions of the *Craft*. Therefore, Skelton's rhetoric leaves us quite confident that he was proclaiming the authorship of a genuine *Ars Moriendi*.

3. Treatment of death in Skelton's poetry

Once accepted that the work in question is lost, it may be interesting to locate it among Skelton's literary production or to trace the influence such treatise would exert in his poetry. Thus, a comparison of the main characteristics of the death subject in Skelton and the *Ars Moriendi* genre is necessary, a contrast which offers very suggestive results, from my point of view.

First of all, the recurring appearance of the subject of death in Skelton's work is noticeable. Practically any composition, with no exception among his major poems, provides a meditation on the subject or an illustration of the topic, in a wide variety from simple allusions (multiple examples in *Upon the Dolorous Dethe of the Erle of Northumberlande*, *Magnyfycence* or *The Garlande of Laurell*) to very elaborated frames (as in *Phyllyp Sparowe*). Despite his originality, his independence and his rejection of prevailing thought, Skelton was obviously an heir of the fifteenth century and the uppermost preoccupation of the period, *timor mortis*, affected him. He was far from the fanatic tone of some devotional writers, and almost untouched by that exaggerated religious temperament of the last years of the century, described by Johan Huizinga (1919: 23-6), but Skelton unavoidably succumbed to the most prolific literary issue at that time.

Leaving aside the poems that portray a ludic, ornamental dimension of death,¹⁷ and focusing the analysis on those concerned with the transcendence of that moment, one conclusion is clear: Skelton's concept of death is deeply anchored in the Middle Ages. The uselessness of late repentance, the paradox between the dolorous feeling and the joy for salvation, and other Renaissance dilemmas already presented in Girolamo Savonarola, Luther or Erasmus, are inconceivable in Skelton (Bietenholz 1978: 159-64). His style is still the clear, homely language which is characteristic in devotional writings; his didacticism and simplicity of design, those

¹⁷ As it was common at the beginning of the sixteenth century, Skelton uses death to express the pain of love (*Go pytyous heart*, 1-3), Goddess Fortune's power (*The Bowge of Courte*, 115-6), etc.

that were distinctive to the fifteenth century; his funerary lyrics depend exclusively on the *Ubi Sunt?* motif, with epideictic displays and a blending of private and public lament, typical in the first stages of the genre.¹⁸ And, especially, his poems still preserve the old medieval conventions, such as the “*Vanitas Vanitatum*,” in *Speke, Parrot* (ll. 214-5), the “*O, mors*,” in *Phyllyp Sparowe* (ll. 50-63), or the “*Signs of Death*,” in *Uppon a Deedman’s Hed* (ll. 25-37). Skelton seems to be unaware of the new attitudes towards death and the afterlife introduced in the Christian doctrine by continental reformers.

3.1. Skelton and the *Ars Moriendi* tradition: possible contacts

Skelton’s traditional view of death does not come into conflict with the *Ars Moriendi*, since this genre, we have explained, was essentially medieval in expression, structure and, ostensibly, ideology. Both avoid the controversy already present in most of contemporary literature on that subject and seem to rely excessively on the Scriptures, the Fathers of the Church and early exegetical commentaries. So far, nothing indicates that any impediment existed to believe in a probable influence of the *Ars Moriendi* on Skelton.

An example of this imprint might be found in the poem *Uppon a Deedman’s Hed*, one of his earliest compositions.¹⁹ This “*gostly medytacyon*” on death, provoked by a skull that Skelton supposedly received as a gift, has been considered a variant of the *Ars Moriendi* by certain scholars, like Harry Morris (1985: 313-5). Personally, I consider it erroneous to link this poem to the genre we are dealing with: a simple comparison with different medieval traditions indicates that it is a reflection on the ‘*Signs of Death*,’ derived from the Latin *Fasciculus Morum* (a fourteenth-century homiletic compilation frequently used by preachers throughout Europe). It renders the same image of death we find in many *Memento mori* lyrics from the thirteenth and fourteenth century and

¹⁸ Samples of this medievalism are numerous, especially in his elegies. See Gustavson (1998).

¹⁹ “Skelton Laureat, uppon a deedmans hed, that was sent to hym from an honorable Jentyllwoman for a token, Devysyd this gostly medytacyon in English: Covenable in sentence, Comendable, Lamentable, Lacrymable, Profytable for the soule,” included in the group of poems attached to *Agaynste a Comely Coystrowne*.

shows a lack of organic unity clearly originated in an artificial composition made up of previous doctrinal poems.²⁰

However, though not a proper *Ars Moriendi*, there is an aspect in this poem which points directly to that genre: the implicative connection between the act of contemplation of death and spiritual instruction. This element, expressed explicitly in the *incipit* and the colophon,²¹ was ascribable almost exclusively to the *Ars Moriendi*. The so-called 'Spectacle of Death,' the observation of people on their deathbed in order to learn how to die, was a common practice in the Tudor period and one of its main sources must be looked for the *Ars Moriendi* and its teachings.²² This poem seems to have drawn the essence of the method of the 'spectacle of death' and thereby, despite the lack of other parallels, its motivation is patently linked to the *Craft of Dying*, especially to the last part concerning the onlookers around the dying man.

More specific reminiscences from the *Ars Moriendi* in Skelton's poetry include his recurrent use of the principal temptations described in the second chapter of the *Craft of Dying*: According to this treatise, "in tharticle of deth [Moriens = the dying man] haue many greuous & strong temptacions verli suche that in their lyf they neuer had lyke" (Caxton, in Atkinson 1992: 22) and among them, the first and fundamental are the Loss of Faith,²³

²⁰ It can be easily associated to several poems dealing with the 'Signs of death' or the *Contemptu Mundi* topic included in Carleton Brown's anthology (1924) such as "A Song of Mortality" or "Esto Memor Mortis," and in Furnivall's compilation (1866), like "Signs of death," "All is lost on death," "Three certainties of the day of death," etc. See Kinsman (1953: 107-9).

²¹ Its exemplar intention though visual impact is evident in Skelton's words about the "Comendable & Profytable for the soule" character of the lyric in the introduction. The same is suggested in the coda "Myrres vous y," originally taken from Jean Castel's "Mirover des dames" (Kinsman 1969: 137).

²² A general survey on this practice in Europe appears in Gigliucci (1994; esp. chapter III: 147-69). For its relation to the *Ars Moriendi*, see O'Connor (1966: 19n).

²³ "for by cause the fayth is fundacion of alle helth, and that wythoute faythe, it is impossyble to please God. Therefore it is that thenne in thys poynt, the deuyll, wyth alle his myghte, enforceth hym to trouble the persone from hys faythe hooly, or at leste to make hym to goo oute of the waye from hys faythe" (Caxton, in Atkinson 1992: 22).

Despair,²⁴ and Impatience,²⁵ since these three constitute a act of revlry against death and, hence, against God's will. These weaknesses appear occasionally related to death in Skelton's poetry, as it can be appreciated in the Holy Ghost part of *Wofully Arraid*,²⁶ the dialogue with Occupacyon in *The Garlande of Laurell* (ll. 533-821) and, above all, the morality play *Magnyfycence*.

Magnyfycence, the main character of the homonymous play, is compelled to commit suicide (incarnate in Myschefe) by certain conspirators who progressively manipulate him. At that crucial moment, near the fatal end, Skelton designs a sort of *Psychomachia* with vices and virtues fighting on three different fronts: the Loss of Faith, "Faythe and good hope I make asyde to stonde. / In Goddys mercy, I tell them, is but foly to truste" (2288-9); Despair, "But, my good sonne, lerne from dyspaire to flee; / Wynde you from wanhope and aquaynte you with me" (2338-9); and Impatience, "Dysease and sekenesse his consyence to dyyscryve; / Afflyccyon and trouble to prove his pacyence" (2370-1).

To overcome these temptations, Magnyfycence follows the instructions described in the *Ars Moriendi*: complete and explicit reliance on Christ's sacrifice,²⁷ public acknowledgement of his mortality,²⁸ and the examination of the soul as the result of a series

²⁴ "for a persone oughte to haue alle hope and confydence in God. And it happeth thenne whan a persone leyng seke in his body is tormented wyth grete payne and sorowes that the deuylle enforceth to bryng to him sorowe vpon sorow in bryngyng tofore his remembraunce all hys synnes, by all the wayes that he maye, at leste thym that he neuer confessyd hym of, to thende that by the meane he drawe him into disperacion" (Caxton, in Atkinson 1992: 23).

²⁵ "The thryde temptacyon that the deuyl maketh to theym that deye is by impacyence, that is ayenste charyte, for by charyte we ben holden to loue God a boue alle thynges" (Caxton, in Atkinson 1992: 24).

²⁶ "O mirror of meekness, peace, and tranquillity,
My comfort, my counsel, my perfite charity!
O water of life, O well of consolation,
Against all stormes of hard adversity
Rescue me, good Lord, by thy preservation." (ll. 12-6; from Henderson 1931: 15. Emphasis mine).

²⁷ "Byleueste thou that thou mayste not be saued, but by the deth of our Lorde Jhesu Cryste and by his passyon" (Caxton, in Atkinson 1992: 26); "Syr, your fesycyan is the grace of God, / That you hath punysshed with his sharpe rod" (*Magnyfycence*, ll. 2349-50).

²⁸ "To the ende that yt is nedefull to hym to be the better warned, enfourmed, and taughte ..." (Caxton, in Atkinson 1992: 21); "And know yourself mortal, for all your dignity" (*Magnyfycence*, l. 2499).

of questions looking for repentance: scene 33 in *Magnyfycence* is structurally an imitation of the third chapter of the *Craft of Dying*,²⁹ where a set of interrogations between the dying man and his confessor is dramatized. It is quite likely that Skelton had in mind the emotiveness this chapter added to the treatise and tried to create a parallel in his own work:

<i>Redresse</i>	Syr, is your pacyent any thyng amendyd?
<i>Good Hope</i>	Ye, syr, he is sory for that he hath offendyd.
<i>Redresse</i>	How fele you your selfe, my frend? How is your mynde?
<i>Magnyfyc.</i>	A wrechyd man, syr, to my maker unkynde.
<i>Redresse</i>	Ye, but have ye repentyd you with harte contryte?
<i>Magnyfyc.</i>	Syr, the repentaunce I have no man can wryte.

(2387-93).

Visually, the *Ars Moriendi*, or rather the illuminations accompanying the block-books versions, might have inspired some images in Skelton's poetry as well. Just to mention one, it is worth noting the evident similarity between the final scene of the dream rendered in *The Bowge of Courte* and the picture represented in the woodcut that opened Wynkyn de Worde's versions of the *Craft of Dying*.³⁰ In Skelton's oneiric poem, *Drede*, the writer's counterpart, forbears his own death on board that *Navis Stultorum*, and his devilish companions, personifications of the most common vices in his time, gather round him in order to seize his life and his soul:

And as he rounded thus in myne ere
 Of false collusyon confetryd by assente,
 Me thoughte I see lewde felawes here and there
 Came for to slee me of mortal entente. (526-9)

²⁹ "Art thou joyfull that thou deyst in the fayth of our Lorde Jhesu Cryste? And he or she oughte to ansuer, ye repentest the of that or suche thyng wherto thou were enclyned. Ansuere ye, hasto thou wylle to amende the yf thou haddeste space to lyue? Ansuere ye ..." (Caxton, in Atkinson 1992: 26).

³⁰ This image is taken from Wynkyn de Worde's edition in 1506, but it probably came from Caxton's printing house since many of his woodcuts were taken from there. Besides de Worde's *Artes Moriendi*, it can be found in the anonymous tract *The Dyeinge Creature* (1507) STC 6035.5. For details of this and other illustrations, see Tokunaga (2001).



Engravings like the one Caxton included in his *Ars Moriendi*, and many others depicting frightful demons chasing the dying man (frequent in the widely circulated block-books), may have weighed on Skelton's mind because that was exactly their intention: to impress the reader and provoke the subsequent feeling of contrition these tracts looked for (O'Connor 1966: 45-7).

3.2. *Skelton and the Ars Moriendi tradition: divergences*

Skelton's contact and even familiarity with the *Ars Moriendi* genre, in my opinion, should not be questioned. In addition to the examples aforementioned, many other similarities in imagery, dogmatic material, or structural devices claim for a more than probable relationship between these treatises and the 'poet laureate'.³¹ However, are these borrowings proof enough to believe Skelton when he states that he wrote an *Ars Moriendi* of his own? I am inclined to doubt it and I would like to defend this opinion showing his divergence with four major aspects of the *Ars Moriendi* genre.

³¹ In my opinion, it would be interesting to consider the influence of the *Artes Moriendi* to explain certain elements in Skelton's poetry not completely justified by his scholars yet: anomalous parts in some compositions, like the closing prayers (ll. 190-217) in *Upon a Dolorous Dethie* or the "Commendacions" at the end of *Phyllyp Sparowe* might find their origin in the treatises we are dealing with.

All these structural, ideological and visual elements shared by these deathbed treatises and Skelton seem insufficient when contrasted to their discordances in some fundamental approaches to the concept of death in the *Craft of Dying*. Among these, maybe the most important, we find an unconditional acceptance of the 'dualistic theory'. Dualism, an after-effect of primitive eschatology, envisages the world from a manichaean perspective, blaming universal evil and suffering on Satan and his devils, so that it does not belong to the divine creation.³² This tenet, deeply established in the early Middle Ages but fading after the Cathar heresy (rarely found in the fifteenth century) is at the core of these *Ars Moriendi*, which may be regarded as a fight for the soul of the dying person, an analogy with the cosmic battle between God and Satan; each individual must be rescued from the demons gathered for their last assault and, therefore, the moment of death is desperate, a feeling which gives sense to these manuals.

Skelton's ontology, at least in what we apprehend from his treatment of death, rejects dualism, as most of the thinkers in the sixteenth century did. On one's deathbed, God will castigate and condemn *Moriens*, i.e., He will cause suffering to one of His creatures, if the dying man deserves it. In the Renaissance mind, and also in Skelton's, there was no controversy in presenting God as a punisher since their conception of Divine Love did not exclude punitive elements, such as the Divine Justice or the Wrath of God, and thence, they asked for just reward and not for automatic salvation. That is why in several poems God will dispense His merciless justice against some of Skelton's enemies as we can read in *Collyn Clout*, with Cardinal Wolsey,³³ or in *Against the Scottes*, with James of Scotland.³⁴

In Skelton's poetry, Satan is too feeble to fight against God for the souls of the dead. His performances paint a risible character, helpless before God's omnipotence, completely inadequate in a dualistic conception of the world. Besides the poet's proclamation that "The devyll is dede" (*Collyn Clout*, l. 37), the Evil One becomes

³² An overall view of the dualistic theory can be found in Stoyanov (2000). For its consequences in late Middle Ages, the standard study, though often criticized, is still Cohn (1957).

³³ "Thus for your Guerdon quit are you / Thanked be God in Trinity," ll. 139-40.

³⁴ "Christ cense you with a frying-pan!" l. 62.

an object of ridicule with shameful actions,³⁵ or is even overcome by Cardinal Wolsey who will torture him in hell (*Why Come Ye nat to Courte?*, ll. 976-86). Opposed to the metaphysical antagonism that Satan presents to God in the *Ars Moriendi*, Skelton constantly reminds us that “we nede never feere / of the fendys blake” (*Why Come Ye nat to Courte?*, ll. 974-5).

Another element of great importance at the end of the Middle Ages, which becomes indispensable in the *Ars Moriendi*, is the strict observance of ritualism in any religious act, including death (Huizinga 1919: 158-67). These treatises depended on fixed rituals, artificial ceremonies and superstitious acts, which were considered fundamental to achieve a dignified end: each obsecration, each prayer had a suitable moment and place; to disregard these practices would mean the loss of all significance and could be dangerous. This ritualistic tone constituted one of the most archaic aspects of the *Craft of Dying*, so it would be progressively removed in the sequels of the genre after 1550.

Skelton, on the contrary, is a notorious transgressor of any kind of ritual, especially if it is related to death. The poem *An Epitaphe for Adam Udersall and John Clarke* defies formal irony by asking for a Trental, a set of thirty Requiem masses, in ‘honor’ of two criminals, enemies of the writer (ll. 60-74). Furthermore, *Phyllyp Sparowe* is framed by a parody of the Service of the Dead, which was considered “almost obscene” by Stanley Fish (1965: 119) or “a supreme blasphemy” by H.L.R. Edwards (1949: 110).³⁶ It is hard to believe that Skelton would follow and exhort such intransigent and anachronistic rites as those performed in the fourth chapter of the *Ars Moriendi*.³⁷

The treatment of Christ’s passion and death is also antithetic in the English poet and the *Ars Moriendi* tradition. However trivial this subject may seem to the modern reader, Christ’s crucifixion synthesized the different reflections on death

³⁵ “The devyl kysse his cule! / For whyles he doth rule / All is warse and warse. / The deyll kysse his arse!” (*Why Come Ye nat to Courte?*, ll. 133-6). Another instance of the *Osculum infame* with the devil as protagonist appears in *An Epitaphe for Adam Udersall and John Clarke*, l. 79.

³⁶ For an excellent analysis of this parodic framework, see Brownlow (1979).

³⁷ “He oughte to saye thre tymes this verse that foloweth ...” (Caxton, in Atkinson 1992: 28); “oughte to be presented to the seke persone the image of the crucyfix whiche alway sholde be emonge the seke people, and also the image of our blessyd lady and of other sayntes” (Caxton, in Atkinson 1992: 30).

since it was considered the highest paradigm of sacrifice and the act through which human death had become a mere formality to achieve a better life (Beaty 1970: 29-30). Christ's end was a model for any man and, actually, chapter 4 in the *Craft of Dying* derives from an attempt of imitation of this act of self-renunciation and suffering.³⁸ Nevertheless, in this treatise the transcendence of Christ's death is exclusively doctrinal: anticipating the Reformation, the *Ars Moriendi* defends the idea that only through that sacrifice will the human soul escape from death. No matter how blameless a life the dying man has led, no matter his holiness, his absolute trust in Christ's salvation at the moment of death is the only way to avoid condemnation.³⁹

Skelton seems to disagree with this axiom and turns back to the uses of Christ's Passion that were frequent in the aesthetics of the fifteenth century. At times, he retakes the radical, almost neurotic style of Franciscan preachers, characterized by a tendency to decadent realism, and offers a non-reflective imagery of pain, stressing the crudity of the moment and searching merely for emotional ecstasis (Beaty 1970: 44-5). Examples of that harsh, visually disagreeable spirit could still be found in some of his poems:

Behold my body, how Jews it dong
With knots of whipcord and scourges strong:
As streams of a well the blood outsprong
On every side. (*Vexilla Regis*, 21-4. From Henderson 1931: 16)

Finally, and this may be an instinctive consideration but not unjustified, it is hard to associate the moderation and sobriety of the *Ars Moriendi* with Skelton and his spontaneity. We have the feeling that the meditative, over-schematic tone predominant in these treatises is completely opposed to the style of the English laureate. He wrote more than Skeltonics and histrionic satires: he

³⁸ "All accyon and werke of our Lorde Jhesu Cryste oughte to be our instrucion, and therefore euery goode Crysten persone disposed well to deye oughte to doo after his manere and possiblyte in his laste ende, lyke as dyd our Lord, whan he deyed on the crosse" (Caxton, in Atkinson 1992: 27).

³⁹ "And constytute and sette alle thy truste in this deth that thou abydeste now presently. And haue no truste in any other thyng. Giue thy selfe ouer, couer the alle, and wrappe the in this deth. And yf God wyll judge the, saye thus to hym, Lorde, I putte thy deth bytwene thy jugemente and me" (Caxton, in Atkinson 1992: 26).

could express himself in perfect earnestness (an instance is *Magnyfycence*) or concentrate in didactic purposes, like his *Diodorus Siculus*; but even in these cases, he turns easily to dramatization, either through allegory or exemplarity, in order to capture the reader's attention and exhibit his mastery of rhetoric. There is no point of comparison with the grave style, half religiously fervorous, half melancholic, sometimes oppressive, in the *Ars Moriendi*, and that ascetic condition was essential for those works. Provided that Skelton wrote one of these treatises, a complete transformation of attitude would be previously necessary.

4. Final remark

At this moment, having presented these arguments, I must stop and leave the question open with no intention of answering it once and for all. Can we believe Skelton when he reclaims the authorship of an *Ars Moriendi*? Should we take his word for granted and accept the existence (and later loss) of a doctrinal work of this kind in spite of the cues against? I'm not the first who mistrusts the famous list of works in *The Garlande of Laurell*: John Scattergood, in his edition of Skelton's poetry, admits that "its arbitrary incompleteness and the whimsical, playful tone of the list do not inspire confidence" and wonders whether the catalogue is just a parody of similar records by contemporary writers (1983: 7). His reluctance still remains in the air, and so I leave mine. Meanwhile, we will wait for the recovery of that work which would dispel any doubt.

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