

Thomas More Reader: Meditations on Death: Part One

100. "Our Last Stage-play"

[From *Remember the Last Things* ; Works, p. 84a]

If thou shouldest perceive that one were earnestly proud of the wearing of a gay golden gown while the losel¹ playeth the lord in a stage play, wouldest thou not laugh at his folly, considering that thou art very sure that when the play is done he shall go walk a knave² in his old coat? Now thou thinkest thyself wise enough while thou art proud in thy player's garment and forgettest that when thy play is done thou shalt go forth as poor as he. Nor thou rememberest not that thy pageant may happen to be done as soon as his.³

101. "Two Criminals Condemned to Death"

[From *Remember the Last Things* ; Works, p. 82a]

If there were two both condemned to death, both carried out at once toward execution, of which two the one were sure that the place of his execution were within one mile, the other twenty miles off, yea, an hundred an ye will, he that were in the cart to be carried an hundred miles would not take much more pleasure than his fellow in the length of his way, notwithstanding that it were hundred times as long as his fellow's, and that he had thereby hundred times as long to live, being sure and out of all question to die at the end.

Reckon me now yourself a young man in your best lusty⁴ twenty years of age, if ye will. Let there be another, ninety. Both must, ye [know] die; both be, ye [know], in the cart carrying forward. His gallows and death standeth within ten miles at the farthest and yours within eighty. I see not why ye should reckon much less of your death than he, though your way be longer, since ye be sure ye shall never cease riding till ye come at it.

102. "The Dance of Death in St. Paul's"

[From *Remember the Last Things* ; Works, pp. 77a-78b; 80b]

For nothing is there that may more effectually withdraw the soul from the wretched affections of the body than may the remembrance of death, if we do not remember it hourly as one heareth a word and let it pass by his ear without any receiving of the sentence into his heart.

But if we not only hear this word "Death" but also let sink into our hearts the very fantasy and deep imagination thereof, we shall perceive thereby that we were never so greatly moved by the beholding of the Dance of Death pictured in Paul's as we shall feel ourselves stirred⁵ and altered by the feeling of that imagination in our hearts. And no marvel. For those pictures express only

the loathly figure of our dead bony bodies, bitten away the flesh. Which, though it be ugly to behold, yet neither the sight thereof nor the sight of all the dead heads in the charnel house, nor the apparition of a very ghost, is half so grisly as the deep conceived fantasy of death in his nature by the lively imagination graven in thine own heart. For there seest thou not one plain grievous sight of the bare bones hanging by the sinews, but thou seest (if thou fantasy ' thine own death, for so art thou by this counsel advised), thou seest, I say, thyself, if thou die no worse death, yet at the leastwise lying in thy bed, thy head shooting, thy back aching, thy veins beating, thine heart panting, thy throat rattling, thy flesh trembling, thy mouth gaping, thy nose sharpening, thy legs rolling, thy fingers fumbling, thy breath shorting; all thy strength fainting, thy life vanishing, and thy death drawing on.

If thou couldst now call to thy remembrance some of those sicknesses that have most grieved thee and tormented thee in thy days, as ever man hath felt some, and then findest thou that some one disease in some one part of thy body as percuse the stone, or the strangury, * have put thee to thine own mind to no less torment than thou shouldst have felt if one had put up a knife into the same place, and wouldest as thee then seemed to have been content with such a change: Think what it will be then when thou shalt feel so many such pains in every part of thy body breaking thy veins and thy life: strings with like pain and grief, as though as many knives as thy body might receive should everywhere enter and meet in the midst!

A stroke of a staff, a cut of a knife, the flesh singed with fire, the pain of sundry sicknesses many men have assayed in themselves. And they that have not yet somewhat have heard by them that felt it. But what manner dolor and pain, what manner of grievous pangs, what intolerable torment the silly creature feeleth in the dissolution and severance of the soul from the body, never was there body that yet could tell the tale.

Think ye not now that it will be a gentle pleasure when we lie dying, all our body in pain, all our mind in trouble, our soul in sorrow, our heart all in dread, while our life walketh awayward ' while our death draweth toward; while the devil is busy about us, while we lack stomach and strength to bear any one of so manifold heinous troubles, will it not be, as I was about to say, a "pleasant" thing to see before thine eyes and hear at thine ears a rabble of fleshly friends, or rather of flesh-flies, " skipping about thy bed and thy sick body like ravens about thy corpse now almost carrion, crying to thee on every side, "What shall *I* have? What shall *I* have?" Then shall come thy children and cry for their parts. Then shall come thy "sweet" wife, and, where in thine health happily she spake thee not one sweet word in six weeks, now shall she call thee "sweet husband" and weep (with much work!) and ask thee what shall *she* have. Then shall thine executors ask for the keys and ask what money is owing thee, ask what substance thou hast, and ask where thy money lieth. And while thou liest in that case " their words shall be so tedious that thou wilt wish all that they ask for upon a red fire so thou mightest lie one half hour in rest....

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Consider also that [with] all our swaddling and tending with warm clothes and daily medicines yet can our bodies not bear themselves, but that almost half our time ever in twenty-four hours we be fain to fall in a swoon which we call sleep, and there lie like dead stocks " by a long space ere we come to ourselves again, in so much that

among all wise men of old, it is agreed that sleep is the very image of death.

NOTES

(1) John Stowe (*A Survey of London* , ed. W.J. Thoms, p. 122) explains the origin and disposition of the famous painting of **The Dance of Death** at St. Paul's: "There was also one great cloister, on the north side of this church, environing a plot of ground, of old time called Pardon churchyard; whereof Thomas More, dean of Paul's, was either the first builder, or a most especial benefactor, and was buried there. About this cloister was artificially and richly painted the Dance of Machabray [i.e., Macabre], or Dance of Death, commonly called the Dance of Paul's; the like whereof was painted about St. Innocent's cloister at Paris, in France. The meters, or poesy of this dance, were translated out of French into English by John Lydgate, monk of Bury, and with the picture of death leading all estates, painted about the cloister, at the special request and at the dispense of Jenken Carpenter, in the reign of Henry VI." Thomas More (of no apparent relationship to Sir Thomas More), dean of St. Paul's, Stowe adds, "reedified or built anew [a] chapel in the reign of Henry V." According to the *Calendar of Wills proved in the Court of Hustings Wills, 1258-1688* (ed. R.S. Sharpe, II, 467n), the chapel was built by a Sir Thomas More in honor of St. Anne and St. Thomas the Martyr, and the will dated July 8, 1424; hence it was not built in Henry V's reign, as Stowe says, but rather during the minority of his son, Henry VI. In 1539, according to Stowe, the Protestant reformer Duke of Somerset ordered the chapel pulled down.

(2) More's description of the agony of **death drawing on** reminds one of Dame Quickly's report of Falstaff's demise (*Henry V* , II, iii, 14-18): "I saw him fumble with the sheets, and play with flowers, and smile upon his fingers' ends, I knew there was but one way: for his nose was as sharp as a pen, and 'a babbled of green fields.'

103. "A Dead Man Looks Back"

[From *The Supplication of Souls* ; Works, pp. 336a-337a)]

What a sorrow hath it been to some of us when the devil hath in despiteful mockage cast in our teeth "our old love borne to our money, and then shewed us our executors as busily rifling and ransacking our houses as though they were men of war that had taken a town by force. How heavily hath it, think you, gone unto our hearts, when our evil angels have grinned and laughed, and shewed us our late wives so soon waxen wanton and (forgetting us, their old husbands, that have loved them so tenderly and left them so rich) sit and laugh and make merry (and more, too, sometimes, with their new wooers!) while our keepers in despite keep us there in pain to stand still and look on.

Many times would we then speak if we could be suffered, and sore we long to say to her: "Ah, wife, wife, ywis "this was not covenant, " wife, when ye wept and told me that if I left you to live by "ye would never wed again." We see there our children, too, whom we loved so well, pipe, sing and dance, and no more think on their father's soul than on their old shoes, saving that sometimes cometh out, "God have mercy on all Christian souls!" But it cometh out so coldly and

with so dull affection that it lieth but in the lips and never came near the heart. Yet hear we sometimes our wives pray for us more warmly. For in chiding with her second husband, to spite him withal, "God have mercy," saith she, "on my first husband's soul, for he was ywis an honest man, far unlike you." And then marvel we much when we heareth say so well by us. For they were ever wont to tell us far otherwise.

But when we find in this wise our wives or children and friends so soon and so clearly forgot us, and see our executors rap and rend ^u unto themselves, catch every man what he can and hold fast that he catcheth and care nothing for us: Lord, God, what it grieveth us that we left so much behind us and had not sent hither more of our substance before us by our own hands!

And among all your alms, somewhat remember us: Our wives there, remember here your husbands. Our children there, remember here your parents. Our parents there, remember here your children. Our husbands there, remember here your wives:—

Ah, sweet husbands, while we lived there in that wretched world with you; while ye were glad to please us, ye bestowed much upon us and put yourself to great cost and did us great harm therewith, with gay gowns and gay kirtles and much waste in apparel—rings and ouches, with partlets and pastes garnished with pearl, with which proud picking up both *ye* took hurt and *we* too, many more ways than one, though we told you not so, then. But two things were there special of which yourself felt then the one, and we feel now the other.

[*IN MARGIN* : *Note, ye Wives!*]

For ye had us the higher-hearted and the more stubborn to you: and God had us in less favor, and that, alack, we feel. For now that gay gear ^u burneth upon our backs and those proud pearled pastes hang hot about cheeks; those partlets and those ouches hang heavy about our necks and cleave fast fire-hot! That woe be we three, and wish that while we lived ye never had followed our fantasies nor never had so cockered ^u us nor made us so wanton nor had given us other ouches than onions or great garlic heads, nor other pearls for our partlets and our pastes than fair orient pease.

NOTES

(1) **Ouches** were brooches of precious stones; **partlets** were coverings, often embroidered with pearls, for covering the neck and upper chest; **pastes** were fancy headdresses made with pasteboard and extending down on either side of the face.

(2) **orient pease** : a double entendre, i.e., precious oriental, Indian pearls/excellent morning peas. When More wrote this passage in 1529 he may possibly have been thinking of Anne Boleyn, who was addicted to costly gowns and gaudy jewels, symbols of what More considered lewdness and arrogant pride. According to Wolsey's usher-biographer Cavendish, after winning Henry's heart, Anne began "to look very hault [high] and stout [mighty] having all manner of jewels or rich apparel that might be gotten with money" (R. Sylvester, and D.P. Harding, *Cavendish* , p. 37). Martin Hume also records that on May 31, 1533, for her coronation Anne "wore a robe of crimson brocade stiff with gems. Her hair, which was very fine, hung over her shoulders

surmounted by a coif and a coronet of diamonds, whilst around her neck was hung a necklace of great pearls, and upon her breast reposed a splendid jewel of precious stones". In earlier years Anne had attended Mass on occasions "loaded with diamonds and other precious stones, and dressed in a gorgeous suit of tissue" (M. Hume, p. 206; 202). Anne even coveted Queen Catherine's jewels and demanded them from her after the Queen's divorce. Lucas Cornelisz's portrait of Anne Boleyn (now in the National Portrait Gallery) shows her wearing a coif studded with a double row of pearls; her neck is emblazoned with a long string of enormous pearls and a bejeweled letter "B" attached; a second chain hangs about her neck, and a square midriff is studded with a double row of pearls. Her "gay gear" thus included bejeweled "*pastes*," embroidered "*partlets*," and elegant "*ouches*." (Poor Anne was beheaded without her finery one year after More's execution.)

¹ Rogue

² *go..knave* : i.e., begone, like a knave

³ See also No. 32

⁴ Healthy, vigorous

⁵ Moved, excited

⁶ Probably the famous charnel house located on the north side of St. Paul's churchyard (see also No. 29)

⁷ Fancy, imagine

⁸ Disease of the urinary tract

⁹ In the other direction

¹⁰ Flies which deposit eggs in carrion; figuratively of persons

¹¹ Plight, condition

¹² Logs

¹³ *Cast...teeth* : i.e., reproached us for

¹⁴ Certainly

¹⁵ I.e., covenanted, agreed upon

¹⁶ *To live by* : i.e., sufficient to live on

¹⁷ *Rap and rend* : seize and snatch

¹⁸ *Gay gear* : i.e., expensive clothes, etc.

¹⁹ Pampered