

1975

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Recommended Citation

Pecheux, M. C. "Another Note on 'This Fell Sergeant, Death.'" *Shakespeare Quarterly* XXVI.1 (1975) : 74-75. Print.

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ANOTHER NOTE ON "THIS FELL SERGEANT, DEATH"

MOTHER M. CHRISTOPHER PECHEUX, O.S.U.

I read with interest Rebecca E. Pitts's discussion (*SQ*, 20 [1969], 486-91) of the lines from *Hamlet*, "as this fell sergeant, death, / Is strict in his arrest" (V. ii. 347-48). I am particularly interested in the common tradition to which she refers, and in Shakespeare's evident familiarity with it. To the examples she cites I would like to add another which seems closely related.

Miss Pitts suggests—quite rightly, I think—that "one very plausible way to read the 'fell sergeant' and his 'arrest' is to understand Death as the bailiff of the Almighty—an officer who makes his arrest in order to bring man into the Chambers of Eternity and Judgment" (p. 488). This same motif is very strong in the tradition of the Dance of Death, which Shakespeare is more than likely to have known in one form or another. In every form of the Dance (really a procession) personages from all walks of life, high and low, are accosted by Death, who is represented as an authoritative figure whose word of command cannot be resisted. Usually the pictures (or corresponding verses) are arranged in a descending scale, beginning with Pope and Emperor, thus emphasizing the idea that Death spares no one. Whatever the activities in which the characters are engaged when Death approaches them, they have no choice but to drop everything and follow him.

The most famous pictorial representation in England, that on the cloister walls of St. Paul's, was destroyed in 1549, but it was not forgotten: Stow's 1598 *Survey of London* describes it as "artificially and richly painted . . . Death, leading all estates. . . ." ¹ Moreover, there are records of other such mural paintings, one of them at Stratford upon Avon, which existed at some time in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. ²

¹ Florence Warren, ed., *The Dance of Death*, by John Lydgate, *EETS*, Original Series 181 (London: Humphrey Milford, Oxford Univ. Press, 1931), xxii-xxiv.

² *Ibid.*, p. 97.

SHAKESPEARE QUARTERLY Vol. xxvi No. 1
Winter 1975

The chief literary work inspired by the theme, Lydgate's *Dance of Death*, seems to have been composed to accompany the murals at St. Paul's. Actually, the poem is a free translation from a French original. It remained popular for some time, as is attested by the many manuscripts of the fifteenth century and by several editions of the sixteenth, including one issued by Tottel in 1554. A "Roll of Daunce of Death, with pictures and verses upon the same" was entered for publication in 1597.³ The tradition was evidently still very much alive in Shakespeare's day.

Many passages from Lydgate's lengthy poem might be cited; the pattern is repeated monotonously. Death is not referred to as a sergeant, but his actions and attitude are those of such an officer. One of the most interesting verses in the present context is that in which Death approaches another official figure, a Constable, telling him that he has a right to arrest and constrain him; that stronger and more honorable men than he have been forced to yield when cruel death assailed them.⁴ In the light of Miss Pitts's elucidation of the meaning of "fell" as "cruel," it is worth noting that the epithet "cruel" is applied to Death consistently throughout the poem.

Lydgate's verses include the notion of Death as the messenger of God, for he is seen as a deputy acting under God's orders. There is an intriguing twist to this concept in another poem attributed to Lydgate, *The Assembly of Gods*.⁵ In the first part Atropos, the officer of the gods, is charged with bringing an end to every creature. Displeased with the conditions of his service, and especially with his inability to kill Virtue, he seeks to turn from their service to that of the Lord of Light. To his surprise, he is told by Righteousness that he has actually been serving this Lord from the beginning of time. His name is changed to Death, and with great gusto he takes possession of the microcosm, happy now to know that he is serving the true God. As in the *Dance of Death*, he attacks every kind of person and boasts of his inexorable power.

All the ideas and nuances which Miss Pitts so well shows to be implicit in Hamlet's words—"this fell sergeant, death"—are present also in the pictorial and literary examples of the *Dance of Death*. I suggest that this tradition played an important part in the conscious or unconscious memories which Shakespeare, with almost infinitely greater subtlety, could synthesize into one pregnant phrase.

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³ *Ibid.*, pp. xxiv, 107-8.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 16 (st. xviii).

⁵ Ed. Oscar L. Triggs, *EETS*, Extra Series, LXIX (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1896).