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OF DEATH AND DUKES: *KING HENRY VI PART 2* AND THE *DANSE MACABRE*

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ABSTRACT. *William de la Pole, 1st Duke of Suffolk, was captured and murdered by English sailors on 2 May 1450. The event is dramatically re-enacted in Shakespeare's early history play* King Henry VI Part 2. *Shakespeare's version differs markedly from known sources. In particular, the dramatist frames the death of Suffolk as a danse macabre experience in which the victim is taunted, diminished and ultimately dragged off to the grave. The Protestant Reformation had liberated a swathe of Roman Catholic iconographies, the* danse macabre *amongst them, breaking them free from their traditional semantic moorings and allowing them to find novel significances on the Elizabethan stage.* King Henry VI Part 2 *represents a preliminary engagement with the danse macabre, a search for new possibilities and new meanings. The danse macabre form is used more coherently and cohesively in later Shakespeare plays but* King Henry VI Part 2 *appears to be an early, deliberate attempt to explore its potential.*

Keywords: Danse macabre, iconography, history plays, Shakespeare, Reformation, Holbein.

DE MUERTES Y DUQUES: *ENRIQUE VI PARTE 2* Y *LA DANZA MACABRA*

RESUMEN. *William de la Pole, Primer Duque de Suffolk, fue capturado y asesinado por marineros ingleses el 2 de mayo de 1450. Este hecho es retratado dramáticamente en la obra de William Shakespeare E*nrique VI Parte 2*. La versión de Shakespeare difiere notablemente de lo relatado por otras fuentes conocidas. En particular, el dramaturgo describe la muerte de Suffolk como una experiencia de danza macabra, en la que la victima es vejada, ridiculizada y finalmente arrastrada hasta su tumba. La reforma protestante había liberado diversas iconografías Católicas romanas, entre las que se cuenta la danza macabra, de sus ataduras semánticas tradicionales y permitiéndoles desarrollar un nuevo significado en el teatro isabelino.* Enrique VI Parte 2 *representa un primer acercamiento a la danza macabra, una búsqueda de nuevas posibilidades y significados. La danza macabra se usa de manera más coherente y cohesionada en posteriores obras de Shakespeare, pero* Enrique VI Parte 2 *parece ser un primer intento deliberado de explorar su potencial.*

Palabras clave: Danza macabra, iconografía, obras históricas, Shakespeare, Reforma, Holbein.

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At the start of Act 4 of *King Henry VI Part 2*, a sea fight leads to the capture of William de la Pole, Duke of Suffolk. The captive is mocked and then brutally murdered off stage by a sailor called Walter Whitmore. Historically, the 1st Duke of Suffolk was indeed captured and murdered on 2 May 1450 by ordinary sailors as he attempted to flee across the English Channel to France (Hicks 2010: 68). Not only had he been impeached by Parliament but he was also regarded as a traitor by ordinary people who held him responsible for fomenting civil discord in England and for causing the disastrous loss of territories in France. The first and most likely account of Suffolk's murder comes in a letter from William Lomner to John Paston on 5 May 1450, the day after the news of his death reached London (Gairdner 2010: 147). Lomner describes how Suffolk was intercepted in the Straits of Dover, accused of treachery, detained for a few days, and then executed by an English sailor:

> oon of the lewdeste of the shippe badde hym ley down his hedde, and he should be fair ferd wyth, and dye on a swerd; and toke a rusty swerd, and smotte of his hedde withyn halfe a doseyn strokes, and toke away his gown of russet, and dobelette of velvet mayled, and leyde his body on the sonds of Dover. (Gairdner 2010: 147)

Shakespeare's account of the Duke of Suffolk's death in Act 4 of *King Henry VI Part 2* differs in a number of respects. Firstly, while Suffolk's historical execution occurred after a period of captivity, Shakespeare's Duke is killed within minutes of his capture. Secondly, in neither Lomner's account nor any subsequent accounts of the incident is the executioner ("oon of the lewdest of the shippe") given a name.[1] Shakespeare apparently invents "Walter Whitmore," along with a Lieutenant from whom Whitmore takes orders, and there is some play in *King Henry VI Part 2* on the name Walter—or the French "Gualtier" (as Suffolk suggests it should be more accurately rendered) which means "Great Warrior." And thirdly, Lomner offers only one piece of direct speech: "Welcom, Traitor" (Gairdner 2010: 146) spoken by a ship's master at the moment of Suffolk's capture; and one piece of reported speech uttered by Suffolk in which he reflects wryly on the irony that, in attempting to escape the fate of imprisonment in the Tower of London, he had been captured on a ship called "Nicolas of the Towre" (Gairdner 2010: 146).

Shakespeare's account of the Duke of Suffolk's capture and killing at the hands of Walter Whitmore and others in Act 4 of *King Henry VI Part 2* is a dramatic garment almost entirely woven by the playwright and hung very loosely from a few historical pegs. The Duke's verbal discomfiture and his march to the grave begin with the following exchanges:

> SUFFOLK: Look on my George, I am a gentleman:
> Rate me at what thou wilt, thou shalt be paid.
> WHITMORE: And so am I; my name is Walter Whitmore.
> How now? What starts thou? What, doth death affright?
> SUFFOLK: Thy name affrights me, in whose sound is death.
> A cunning man did calculate my birth
> And told me that by water I should die:
> Yet let not this make thee be bloody-minded;
> Thy name is Gualtier, being rightly sounded.
> WHITMORE: Gualtier or Walter, which it is, I care not...
> (IV.i.29-38)

> SUFFOLK: Stay, Whitmore, for thy prisoner is a prince,
> The Duke of Suffolk, William de la Pole.
> WHITMORE: The Duke of Suffolk muffled up in rags?
> SUFFOLK: Ay, but these rags are no part of the duke:
> Jove sometimes went disguis'd, and why not I?
> LIEUTENANT: But Jove was never slain, as thou shalt be.
> (IV.i.44-49)

[1] Roger Virgoe, "The Death of William de la Pole, Duke of Suffolk," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, 47 (1965), argues that Lomner's letter is the first and most important source for the story (490). He identifies six subsequent English and French sources (490).

The posturing of Suffolk and his soon-to-be killer is intriguing. Suffolk sees his nobility as protection from death, assuring his captors that any ransom demand will be met; and then, sensing his grave danger, he pleads "Stay, Whitmore, for thy prisoner is a prince." His case for special treatment is predicated on the assumption that his rank and station entitle him to be treated differently to other men—not on his good works as a human being and not on a denial of the charges his captives have raised against him. Whitmore is coolly unimpressed by Suffolk's rank and revels in his own role as death-dealer. He torments his captive, honing in on Suffolk's obvious terror: "How now? What starts thou? What, doth death affright?" This diminishing of Suffolk continues with Whitmore's mocking commentary on his "muffled" rag disguise. The nobleman takes as an affront any signification of his ordinariness, and quickly attempts to rebut the idea with an ill-judged classical allusion. In the symbolic iconography of the stage, Suffolk's disguise reaffirms that he is no different to or better than anyone else, and that he can and will die as readily as the next man. His killing is, in some senses, an unremarkable affair. The nobleman is full of threat and bluster, and offers what Pendleton calls "the obligatory speeches of aristocratic defiance" (Smith 2001: 198) but, when the moment of execution arrives, he exits the stage meekly and Whitmore returns seconds later with his head and lifeless body.

These characteristics of victims at the cusp of mortality resonate with medieval and sixteenth century renditions of the dance of death, as may be illustrated by two ducal examples of the art form. In figure 1, the inscription for the Duke in the twenty-two metre dance of death series in the porch of the Church of St. Mary, Berlin, which dates back at least to 1484, resonates with Death's contempt for his victim:

Her hertoch mechtich duchtich tho velde	*Mr. Duke, mighty and skilful on the battle field,*
(den ar)men ye vordruckede gy med gewelde	*The poor suffer the burden of your power,*
(unde d)en riken liethe gy bethemen	*And the rich flourish under your favours.*
ik wil iw ock by deme liue nemen	*I will snatch your life from you.*
ik laden jw snel an den dodendantz	*Quickly, join the dance of death with me,*
des gy iw noch schalen gewanen gantz	*Surrender to your inescapable fate.*[2]

Death, with an antic flick of his leg, judges his aristocratic victim as corrupt and elitist, and promises the certain fate of the grave. His words resonate with the familiar sentiments of the *danse macabre*. There is the rejection of earthly values and a discernible tenor of deprecation—Death toys with the Duke's title (he is reduced to the demeaning "Mr." rather than a more elevated appellation). The encounter oozes with menace and hopelessness. Death announces that he is about

[2] All translations by the author, unless otherwise indicated.

to snatch life away from the Duke, and that this outcome is an unavoidable and non-negotiable certainty. There is no possibility of respite or mercy; a process is in motion, a dance of death, and its unswerving destination is the grave. A similar diminishing of status and title is evident in the tormenting of Suffolk, with his family name (de la Pole) becoming a source of ridicule:

> LIEUTENANT: Yes, Poole.
> SUFFOLK: Poole?
> LIEUTENANT: Poole! Sir Poole! lord!
> Ay, kennel, puddle, sink; whose filth and dirt
> Troubles the silver spring where England drinks.
> (IV.i.70-72)

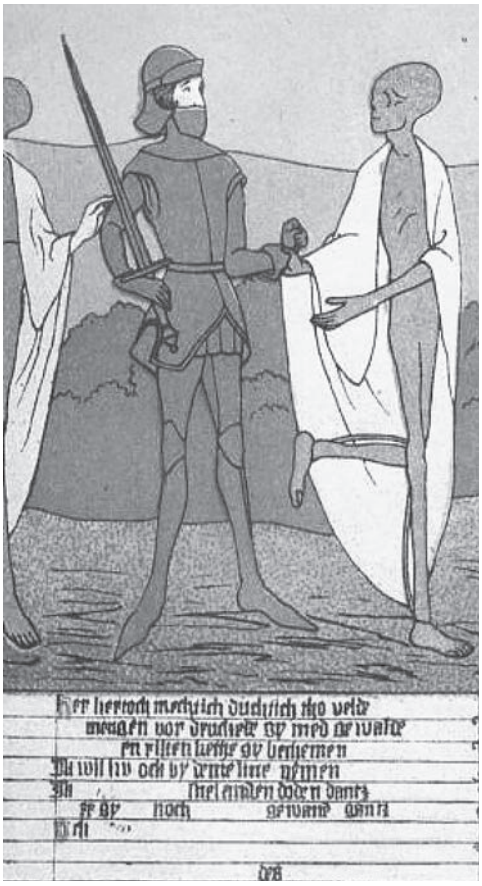

Figure 1. Mr. Duke (Her hertoch), from the *danse macabre* series in the porch of the Church of St. Mary, Berlin, c. 1484.

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The mockery of name becomes a cipher for the ridicule of all things earthly. What Suffolk sees as arrant impertinence is nothing less than the ready dismissal of splendid mortality. At the moment of death, name and station become worthless trinkets.

For his part, the St Mary's Duke stands earth-bound, his feet rigid on the ground; a departure from the earthly world he loves will not come easily for him. He leans back as if bewildered by Death's assault, his sword unsheathed, his fist clenched, his eyes set fearfully upon the face of his aggressor. That fear we detect, too, as Suffolk is summoned by his own Death figure, Whitmore, and at last comprehends his fate:

> SUFFOLK: I charge thee waft me safely across the Channel.
> WHITMORE: Come, Suffolk, I must waft thee to thy death.
> SUFFOLK: *Pene gelidus timor occupant artus*: it is thee I fear.
> WHITMORE: Thou shalt have cause to fear before I leave thee.
> What, are ye daunted now? Now will ye stoop?
> (IV.i.115-119)

Suffolk's Latin commentary serves almost as an aside to the observer: *Cold fear almost overpowers my joints*.[3] The Latin inscriptions of medieval *danse macabre* routinely record the despair of Death's captives and on Suffolk's face is written, no doubt, the undiluted terror of many such victims on cathedral or church walls. Familiar, as well, is the manner in which Whitmore mocks his prisoner by repeating the term "waft"—a common feature of the *danse macabre* where the skeletal emissaries not uncommonly steal the accoutrements but also the words of their victims as a final gesture of triumph and supremacy.

The Duke's suit of armour in the Berlin fresco, covering all but a part of his face, gives him a kind of anonymity by hiding his physical appearance from view, and this keys in aptly with the idea of death as the great leveller. He is Mr. Duke but really he could be anyone. Suffolk's ragged disguise similarly serves to underscore his unexceptionalism. He is a man like any other. He assumes that his George distinguishes him as a gentleman, a presumption that Whitmore dismisses immediately on the grounds that he, too, is a gentleman; and then unwisely parallels his own disguise with that of the immortal Jove, inviting the Lieutenant to retort that Jove was immortal but Suffolk most surely is not. Between them, Whitmore and the Lieutenant serve as Death-like levellers, undermining Suffolk's pretensions and preparing him for the fate of all men. Only fragments of the Duke's response to Death in the St Mary's *danse macabre* series exist but they suggest that he begs for

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[3] Translation from Evans *et al*., eds., *The Riverside Shakespeare*, 2nd Ed., 692.

mercy ("Och barmhertige"), that he feels utter despair ("groter druffheit") and that he raises the matter of his high social status ("wol gebaren"), possibly in a plea for special treatment—as happens in the case of some other victims in the same series.

Holbein was the most prolific of the sixteenth century emblematists. *Les Simulachres & Historiees faces de la Mort* (subsequently titled *Imagines Mortis*), a series of woodcuts collected into a single manuscript in 1538, ran through ten progressively enlarged editions in twenty-four years.[4] Holbein was particularly popular in England, where he worked as court painter to Henry VIII from around 1536 to his death in 1543, and is believed to have executed a dance of death series in the Palace of Whitehall, subsequently destroyed by fire. In the early sixteenth century image of "Der Hertzog" in *Imagines Mortis*, Death advances on his victim at the very acme of his powers (Figure 2). The Duke is flanked by the rich and privileged who whisper in his ear and receive his careful attention. But he has no interest in the plea of a peasant woman with her bare-footed child, bending low in deference at his feet, fending her off with the upraised palms of his hand. Shakespeare's Suffolk holds a similar disdain for ordinary people, reminding those who would kill him that they are not worthy to lay hands upon him:

> Obscure and lousy swain, King Henry's blood,
> The honourable blood of Lancaster,
> Must not be shed by such a jaded groom.
> Hast thou not kiss'd thy hand and held my stirrup?
> (IV.i.50-53)

That his aggressors are louse-ridden ("lousy") and ignoble ("jaded") seems much more important to Suffolk than the charges of treachery that have been levelled at him. He makes no effort to refute such accusations but relies exclusively on the privilege of rank to dismiss the possibility that his captors could judge or kill him. While Suffolk's responses are lengthy they are poorly argued and laden with emotion and presumption. His captors, by contrast, are much more methodical and incisive in their demolition of his pretensions. They out-talk him. This is the same logical patterning that meets victims in early modern artistic renditions of the *danse macabre*. The denials and pleas of the victims are countered by the hard facts and realities of the deathly emissaries. Sometimes victims are talked into resigned acceptance; at other times, they wriggle and wrestle against the inevitable. Shakespeare's Suffolk, it seems, falls into the latter case but it does him no good. Death comes to him as certainly as it will for the Duke in Holbein's woodcut,

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[4] Chamberlain, Arthur B. *Holbein The Younger, Vol. 1*. London: George Allen, 1913, pp. 212-214; Clark, James M. *The Dance of Death in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, Glasgow, 1950, p. 32.

Whitmore pronouncing matter-of-factly: "There let his head and liveless body lie" (Whitmore, IV.i.142). There is no triumphalism or explanatory speech, merely a mechanical report of mortality. For Whitmore, it seems almost as if it has been just another job.

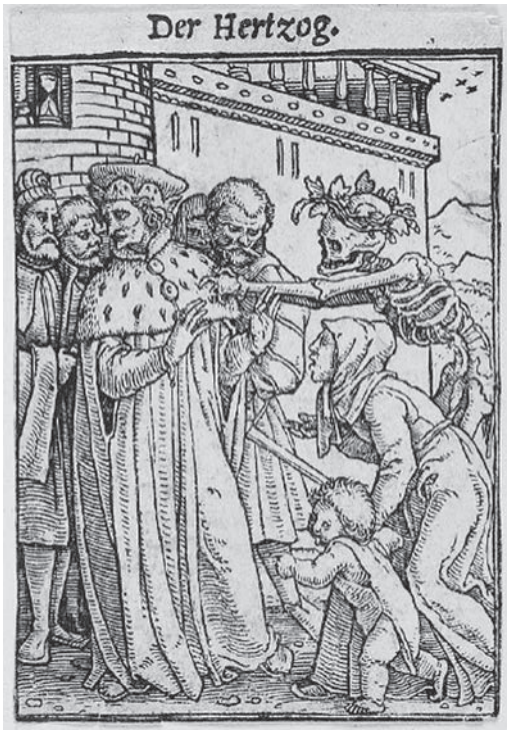

Figure 2. The Duke (Der Hertzog), draft version of 1526, from Hans Holbein's *Simulachres & Historiees faces de la Mort* (1538).

In Holbein's print, Death approaches with both arms extended, ready to seize his victim, in a mocking reversal of the Duke's own posture. His victor's laurel grimly counterpoints the Duke's coronet. A bony finger extends to tap the aristocrat's finery in a triumphant gesture of conquest. The Duke may be able to ignore the overtures of the poor but Death's wholly unexpected invitation cannot be rejected. At a turret window, top left, an hourglass signifies the transience of earthly life; the duke, like all men, must die but that self-knowledge has up to this point apparently eluded him. The image captures him in the moment before the terror of mortality dawns upon him, and provides a grim warning for all who look upon his predicament—live a better, more pious life and face death in good heart.

A French verse accompaniment to the 1538 publication follows the familiar pattern of dance of death moralising:

Vien, prince, auec moy, & delaisse	*Come with me, prince, and give up*
Honneurs mondains tost finissantz.	*Earthly honours which have all ended.*
Seule suis qui, certes, abaisse	*I alone have the power to humble*
L'orgueil & pompe des puissantz.	*The pride and pomp of the powerful.*

Death's personalisation of destructive power and execution ("I alone have the power to humble...") reiterates the personalised nature of death in the *danse macabre*. Death is not a universalised or randomised calamity; it is a tailored event with a Death skeleton or cadaver sent to capture a specific individual. Death knows the "truth" about his victim, and that knowledge often exceeds the self-knowledge of the victim himself or herself. Whitmore plays this role beautifully in *King Henry VI Part 2*, dismissing Suffolk's pretensions with an eloquence that belies his lowly status in life.

Suffolk's demeanour throughout the exchanges with his captors is one of entitlement and privilege, which connects appositely with the humbled "pride and pomp" of the nobleman in Holbein's cut. He presumes he has a right to better treatment because of who he is—and part of the dynamic of his interaction with Whitmore and the Lieutenant is his dislocation from the reality of his situation. Suffolk measures life in terms of money: "Rate me at what thou wilt, thou shalt be paid." But his expectation that he will escape his situation is matched by Whitmore's determination that he will not. It is as if Suffolk's neck already lies exposed on the execution block, that nothing could ever extend his life beyond this seemingly appointed hour. All that remains is for him to demonstrate his lack of self-knowledge by clinging to the vacuous vanities that have shaped his life on earth. He is allowed to have his say but for every argument the nobleman puts forward, his captors offer a succinct and compelling repudiation. There is no real discussion between the two men but, rather, a set of theses and rebuttals that eventually reduce Suffolk to a manic tirade against the social status of his captors and, ultimately, to the powerless final lament "Suffolk dies by pirates" (IV.i.138).

Holbein's Duke, like Shakespeare's Suffolk, presumes a similar privilege of social standing, and we might imagine that he too will be mystified that the rank and order of the world cannot to prevail on his behalf in the face of death. But prevail they do not. At the instant of mortality, the Duke will be divested of the pomp and pride of earthly life, his all-embracing powers slipping seamlessly from his domain and into the bony hands of the skeletal Death figure who has come to collect him.

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Why would Shakespeare take the story of the murder of the 1st Duke of Suffolk and attach to it clear *danse macabre* resonances? Part of the answer to that question may lie in the tumultuous schism that shuddered through Christendom in the early years of the sixteenth century. The Protestant Reformation divided the Christian church more profoundly than any event before or since, leading to the establishment of Lutheran and reformed churches across Europe (Spicer 2012: 1-16). The *danse macabre* had been an integral component of medieval Roman Catholic art. Its significances were stark and unnerving: live a better, more pious life and obey the teachings of the Church so that the moment of your death will be less terrifying. The Protestant Reformation liberated a great many Roman Catholic signs and sign systems from their normative semantic centres, enabling them to elude "the bookish realm of iconographic hermeneutics" (Owens 2005: 14) and allowing them to drift into more remote and idiosyncratic zones of meaning.

Ripped from its semantic fixings, the *danse macabre* in Shakespeare's theatre becomes a dynamically malleable sign, sometimes perhaps a sign system, open to sustained interpretation and re-interpretation. But however Shakespeare uses it, the original religious resonances of the Roman Catholic artistic form are all but absent. The killing of Suffolk is a very secular affair. He is reviled for his social presumptions, for embezzling the treasures of the realm, for his treacherous civil distractions, for causing Whitmore to lose his eye, for losing English possessions in France—but never, it seems, for impiety or offending God. And impiety and offending God were issues that lay at the philosophical core of the Roman Catholic *danse macabre* in its attempts to modify or consolidate the spiritual journeys of those who looked upon it.[5]

Elsewhere in Shakespeare's canon we see the *danse macabre* developed in a variety of different secular ways. In *King Richard II* and *King John*, for example, Shakespeare seems to use it as a speculative theatrical tool, testing and flexing its potential. It provides an emblematic counterpoint to some of the significances that run through these texts, revealing skeletal Death as terrifying but sometimes admirable, and even desirable. In the triumphal world of *King Henry V*, the *danse macabre* becomes a trope for English military prowess. The French nobleman Grandpré describes the assembled English host as "Yon island carrions, desperate of their bones," (IV.ii.39) whose horsemen "sit like fixed candlesticks" (line 45) on horses with "pale-dead eyes" (line 48). Uttered on the cusp of the Battle of Agincourt, that greatest of all English victories, no theatrical moment could be more saturated with irony than this one. In characterising the English soldiers

[5] For a discussion of the *danse macabre* in its Roman Catholic context, see James M. Clark, *The Dance of Death in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*.

as dead men, sitting stick-like upon dead horses, Grandpré inadvertently invokes the wrath of the *danse macabre* upon the assembled French ranks. The "knavish crows" (IV.ii.51), who Grandpré supposes are circling the English army "impatient for their hour" (IV.ii.52), will soon be pecking out French, not English, eyes. This connection of the *danse macabre* with the English warrior is developed cohesively throughout the play and reaches its curiously homoerotic high point in Exeter's description of the Duke of York's dying moments, in which he embraces and kisses the already-dead Earl of Suffolk:

> So did he turn and over Suffolk's neck
> He threw his wounded arm, and kiss'd his lips,
> And so espous'd to death, with blood he seal'd
> A testament of noble-ending love.
> (Exeter, *Henry V*, IV.vi.24-27)

Exeter's theatrical emblem on soldierly camaraderie is redolent of the "marriage with death" vignettes of fifteenth and sixteenth century *danse macabre* representation.

Though the *danse macabre* is alluded to on several occasions in *King Henry VI Part 2*, and apparently worked out in the dynamics of Suffolk's death, it is not developed in a consistent and cohesive manner as a renovated sign system. When the Lieutenant dismisses Suffolk as a man "whose filth and dirt/Troubles the silver spring where England drinks" (IV.i.71-72) there is a connectedness with John of Gaunt's English panegyric in *Richard II* (II.i.31-60). But while in *Richard II* Bullingbroke's war machine becomes persuasively linked with dance of death imagery, it is challenging to decipher a similar movement in *King Henry VI Part 2*, or indeed in the first tetralogy as a whole. *King Henry VI Part 2* is an early experimental play, and the killing of the Duke of Suffolk in IV.i is most likely an example of Shakespeare experimenting. In the end, it would not be a history play that delivered Shakespeare's most impressive *danse macabre* patterning but the tragedy *Romeo and Juliet*.[6] There, the nuance of deathly iconography moves with compelling innovation and assurance slipping seamlessly between public and private spaces. But while *King Henry VI Part 2* is a long journey from that destination, it can perhaps be viewed as an early and deliberate attempt to exploit an iconography that historical and religious circumstances had made available for new theatrical uses.

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[6] The complex role of the *danse macabre* in *Romeo and Juliet* has been explored by Clayton G. MacKenzie, "Love, Sex and Death in *Romeo and Juliet*," *English Studies: A Journal of English Language and Literature* 88 (1), 2007, 22-42.

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