

**THE CHANGING SIGNIFICANCE OF THE FIGURE OF DEATH IN  
VARIOUS EVERYMAN PLAYS**

**OPSOMMING**

*In hierdie artikel word die geskiedenis van die laaste tweeduisend jare eerstens in vyf periodes met verskillende houdings teenoor die dood ingedeel.*

*Daarna kon vasgestel word dat die Elckerlijc-spele wat op Engelse, Nederlandse, Duitse en Franse grondgebied ontstaan het, binne die tweede en vyfde periode van hierdie indeling val, dit wil sê aan die een kant die periode wat ongeveer 1000 begin, en 1700 eindig, en aan die ander kant die tydperk van die twintigste eeu.*

*As 'n mens nou die algemene houding teenoor die dood, in hierdie twee tydperke met dié vergelyk, wat in die Elckerlijc-spele deur die doodfiguur versimboliseer word, blyk dit dat die Elckerlijc-spele altyd 'n korrektiewe funksie op die algemene houding teenoor die dood probeer uitoefen.*

*In die vroeë Elckerlijc-spele gaan dit nóg oor die bewaring van 'n mens se fisiese lewe, nóg oor 'n handel met God om 'n ewige lewe, twee faktore wat in 'n tydperk van individualisasie en ekonomiese groei baie belangrik geword het, maar om die inkeer en berou wat 'n mens tot God lei.*

*In die latere Elckerlijc-spele gaan dit weer nie oor die vereensaming van die sterwende mens, wat deur die gemeenskap aan die mediese tegnologie oorgelaat word nie, maar om die oorwinning oor die fisiese dood deur 'n bewussynsaksie. Dit gaan ook nie meer oor die ontkoming van die ewige dood, soos in die vroeë Elckerlijc-spele nie, maar oor die bewuste*

*deelwees van 'n lewensproses wat altyd weer opnuut stry teen  
'n totale vernietiging van lewe deur die fisiese dood.*

When analysing the figure of death in the plays drawing on the theme of Everyman, we find that it does not depict the popular understanding of death at the time during which these plays were written. On the contrary, the figure of Death in these plays forms a corrective contrast to the general concept of death prevalent at any one time. The Everyman plays originated from the moral plays of the Late Middle Ages and have not lost their didactic tendency even in the twentieth century. Only the ethical criteria have changed.

Elckerlijck as portrayed in *Den Speyghel der Salicheyt van Elckerlijck* (s.a.) and *Everyman* (1974) are both based on Catholic theology, though influenced by mysticism and the *Devotio moderna*. *Hecastus* by Hans Sachs (1964:137) is inspired by Lutheran belief and *Cenodoxus* by Bidermann (s.a.:267) rests on the theology of the Jesuit order. *Jedermann* by Hoffmannsthal (1957), written in the twentieth century, in contrast, represents an anachronism that combines Catholic and Lutheran concepts, but also attacks the social-ethical dilemmas of its time. *Der Tor und der Tod* of Hofmannsthal (1949:74), in contrast, is a play that forms a relevant juxtaposition to the popular sense of death at its time in praising the free, aesthetic death of the individual. Even more modern is Ionesco's play *Le roi se meurt* published in 1962. The starting point of this play is the battle against being lost in nothingness.

We can distinguish two groups of Everyman plays on the basis of their chronology, and on the basis of the sacrosanctionism by authority of one kind or another. *Everyman*, *Elckerlijck*, *Hecastus* and *Cenodoxus* can, on this basis, be grouped together in one category and *Der Tor und der Tod* and *Le roi se meurt* in another category. As has been mentioned above, Hoffmannsthal's *Jedermann* lies outside this scheme with regard to the depiction of death. However, the *Jedermann* is symbolic of the newly awakened interest of European theatre in the medieval morality play<sup>1</sup> on the one hand and of the writing of the modern death

<sup>1</sup> The time from the 11/12th century to the middle of the 17th century concentrating on the problem of one's own death.

dances on the other (see Koller, 1982:409). But the latter are anachronistic in every respect and they fall outside mainstream literature. Only works like Strindberg's *Totentanz*, that place death within life itself, correspond to their times.

The theme of death has always been vital to Christian teaching. St. Augustine's fourfold categorization of death (see Rehm, 1967:22), has had a determining influence on Christian thinking in the Middle Ages. The just, according to St. Augustine, only face bodily death and a temporal parting of body and soul. The unjust, however, are exposed to eternal death and even spiritual death which takes place during their physical life already. This paved the way for the radicalization of death in the following two ways. On the one hand the notion of eternal death made physical death appear much more threatening. On the other hand, the notion of eternal life detracted from the devastating notion of eternal death. Both, however, were tied to a morally good life.

Tracing the exact development of attitudes towards death in northern Europe during the Early and High Middle Ages is made difficult by the scanty and scattered material available. As becomes evident from the cultural expressions of the Germanic tribes christianized from the fourth to the ninth century they responded to Christianity in their own special way, according to Schmidt (1979:172). The Germanic groups living on Franconian, English and Saxonian territory were specially impressed by Christ's victory over the devil and death; but they also emphasized the importance of good deeds in order to be rewarded with eternal life. Also, in the beginning of the Christian era individuals were converted to the Christian faith and this resulted in a feeling of personal responsibility which was partially lost when Christianity established itself as the official doctrine.

It is therefore not surprising to find an Old High German fragment of a poem "Maspilli" (see Schlosser, 1970:200) dating back to the beginning of the ninth century incorporating Old Germanic concepts. This fragment deals with the battle between the divine and the satanic army for the soul of man which is decided on the basis of man's conduct dur-

ing his life. This poem also incorporates a depiction of the Last Judgement in which people are held responsible for their actions in their individual capacity.

After the establishment of a Christian society that which Aries (1981:29)<sup>2</sup> claims to be true for the first millennium of Christianity, seems to have occurred. As everyone became a Christian by being born into a Christian environment the personal responsibility of the individual with regard to eternal life was no longer emphasized. This phase corresponds largely to the High Middle Ages.

With the rise of the eleventh and especially the twelfth century another shift in people's attitudes towards death can clearly be determined from their cultural expressions. The individual's preoccupation with death increased.

In the wake of the Cluniastic reform movement, a greater religious sensibility spread through Europe. At the same time the investiture dispute emphasized the struggle between state and church. Furthermore, eleventh-century Europe experienced an economic upswing in trade due to an increase in the population and the introduction of a greater division of labour. These developments provided the vital preconditions for a changed vision of death (Aries , 1981:29; Kinder et al. 1980:148 and Schmidt, 1979:205). Not only by the time of the Renaissance but already in the eleventh century the above-mentioned changes in the sphere of the church, the economy, and the political system brought about a gra-

<sup>2</sup> Kuno Boese (1983:10) writes that Aries' study is still the most impressive study around despite theoretical deficiencies and a missing historical integration of the findings. Aries has described the Early Middle Ages as exhibiting an attitude of tame death, i.e. death without fear for the individual who was an integral part of a Christian society and therefore expected to be saved after death. This point seems to be invalid at least as far as the German region is concerned. Aries' other epochs are:

a. The time from the 11/12th century to the middle of the 17th century concentrating on the problem of one's own death.

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dual dissolution of the ties between the individual and his community. The wealthy, the learned and the powerful started laying claim to special status, according to Aries (1981:605).<sup>3</sup> In this way, long before the advent of the Reformation, the preoccupation with the individual's relationship to death also became more marked. This religious change becomes apparent from the many iconographic depictions of the Last Judgement. In these portrayals the archangel Michael weighs the works of men and separates the sheep from the goats; heaven and hell are contrasted with one another. Man's nature is seen as belonging to the realm of evil; it is only through interceptors that man can be saved from the devil.

As life had to be accounted for in its entirety, the idea of human life as a biography came into existence. From this time, the *curriculum vitae* was to be retained in a book and took the form of a bookkeeping on good and bad deeds. The idea was that after death the individual's life was to be judged on the basis of this book.

Perhaps due to famine and plagues, as well as social upheaval under the cloak of heretic religious movements, all reinforcing one another and leading to a dramatic economic and demographic decline in Europe (according to Romano et al., 1967:9), death became an obsession even with the common people. After the fourteenth century the portrayal of the Last Judgement as cosmic drama lost its popularity (Aries, 1981:106).

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b. The end of the 17th century and the 18th century seeing death as both near and remote to man.

c. The 19th century emphasising the death of the other.

d. The end of the 19th and the 20th century where death becomes invisible.

These four epochs seem to be more valid than his first epoch.

<sup>3</sup> The concept of death reigning between the eleventh and the seventeenth century is set out in detail by Aries (1981:95 – 201). This forms the basis for my description of the development of the concept of death.

At that stage it was only the individual's salvation that was important. In this way, the hour of judgement was transferred to the hour of death. This notion is depicted in the *artes moriendi* which served as a contemplative aid for the preparation for the end of life. As life was now seen as ending in physical death, it was believed that there was no time left for interceptors to intervene after a person's death. The dramatic moment previously occurring at the Last Judgement, when the decision on a person's eternal life or death was taken, was now shifted to the deathbed. As these last minutes prior to death had, according to the blockbooks, assumed such vital importance, sudden death was especially feared. As was the case in the Early Middle Ages the death chamber was depicted full of people but now no one of those present seemed to take part in the last supernatural struggle of the dying person. Only the dying one himself saw the supernatural beings invading his room. The trial also no longer ended with God's judgement but with the arrow of death.

According to the depictions to be found as *ars moriendi*, death can become an accomplice of the devil as well as of God. God merely performs the function of an arbitrator between good and evil powers. The more the good and evil forces were seen to be part of an individual's own inner being, the more the position of God as arbitrator can be seen as an expression of respect for the decision taken by the individual himself. Man was seen to have become his own judge who either, at the last minute, won with the help of his guardian angel and his interceptors, or fell prey to the temptations of the devil.

The dying were expected to overcome two temptations; They had to believe in God's mercy despite the catalogue of sins with which the devil presented them, and they had to be prepared to leave all earthly belongings behind. The temptation of avarice, of the passionate love for earthly goods, was especially prominent. Furthermore, the dying people seemed to be much more strongly attached to material belongings than to their beloved. Wealth was not seen as being merely a means of production but as a treasure. This treasure, it was believed, enabled people to gain power, good social relationships and an enjoyable life.

Wealth, therefore, assumed a metaphysical quality. In this quality, it became a threat to eternal salvation. Some people were depicted as preferring to cling to their possessions on their deathbed rather than renouncing them in order to be saved. Others, however, were depicted as seeing a positive quality in money because it enabled them to buy eternal salvation by donating some to the church. Therefore the idea of the Everyman figures in *Everyman* and *Elckerlijc* of buying themselves off from death seems to be a logical one.

Money thus played a decisive role in the battle between heaven and hell. In the pictorial representation of the time the devil's chances of gaining a man's soul by tempting him with avarice are high. Therefore the devil placed the wealthy dying man's treasures where he could reach for them at the moment of death.

Death, therefore, was understood during the Late Middle Ages as well as during the Reformation, as the end of existence but also as the parting from possessions. Accordingly, this last battle replaced the Last Judgement. Consequently, death and the threat of eternal damnation were concentrated in one moment in time.

While the *artes moriendi* depicted the personal death of the individual, the macabre emphasised the physical decay which separates the living from the dead. The physical component of death is also depicted in the *dances macabres*. They often decorated the graveyards. The message of the *dances macabres* and their German counterpart, the dances of death, is above all social equality of all levels of society in death, and the uncertainty and suddenness of the hour of death.

The dancing couples depicted in the visual arts prior to the sixteenth century consisted of a living person and a mummy and probably represented the confrontation between the living person and his dead self-image. In the visual arts, personification of death itself only started with Holbein's dance of death, although it had made its appearance in literature at an even earlier stage. The couples are lined up according

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to social class. The merchant is usually situated in the middle or in the lower ranks. In the dances of death prior to the sixteenth century, the confrontation between mummy and man is never accompanied by force. Death appears to be gentle and rather warns than strikes. The wealthy may show regret, and the poor resignation. However, after an initial shock, they all succumb to death. But in the course of time death was depicted as turning into a blind, triumphant fate. The preoccupation with the physical decay of the body furthermore introduced the idea of life as a continual process of dying, with despair and rebellion against God in some instances.

Nevertheless, according to Aries, the *dances macabres* do not constitute a realistic depiction of the horror of death at the time of the plague, but rather an aestheticisation of the process of decay. Most people at the time still considered death as an end to eternal dying. But the notion of the macabre shows that at the same time underneath a great love for life established itself. Death could no longer be faced unveiled.

The above developments form the backdrop for the Everyman plays at the end of the fifteenth century. As has already been mentioned in the beginning, the morality plays always assumed a corrective function. Therefore the Everyman plays written during the fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries are less concerned with overcoming temptations, renouncing earthly possessions (although these ideas still feature) or with physical decay, than with expressing penitence before God. Death is seen neither as an end to eternal dying nor as a last decisive battle within the soul of man, but its threat is supposed to lead man to penitence before the hour of death.

Even if Everyman figures usually succeed in gaining forgiveness shortly before they die, the spectator at least is supposed to learn that he should start leading a godfearing life in time as he does not know when death and the judgement before God will come.

Here we find similarly high moral claims involving man's whole life as in the depictions of the Last Judgement more than two hundred years



earlier, only that now the sentence is passed at the moment of death itself. Though the *Everyman* plays, contrary to mainstream Catholic thinking, make allowance for last-minute repentance, this is definitely not an example for mankind; especially seeing that the hour of death is unknown. With this stringent concept of a morally good life leading to a good death the *Everyman* plays clearly form a contrast to the prevalent concepts of death during their time. They also differ insofar as the confrontation between an individual and death is reduced to one social class, usually that of a rich male or wealthy merchant. Therefore, the plays turn to a more dramatic confrontation between this one individual who, at the same time, represents all mankind, and death. This restriction to one social class, however, also partly annihilates the universality of the plays. The rich man is judged by God according to the same criteria as everyone else, but due to his wealth he has a harder time before God than the poor have.

The depiction of death in the early *Everyman* plays is in many ways similar. While Death in *Elckerlijc* does not carry any equipment, he takes the shape of a hunter with an arrow in *Everyman*, *Hecastus* and *Cenodoxus*. This allegorical representation of death also belongs to the Christian framework according to Rosenfeld (s.a.:16), as it goes back to Ps. 7, 12 - 14:

If he does not relent,  
 he will sharpen his sword;  
 he will bend and string his bow.  
 He has prepared his deadly weapons;  
 he makes ready his flaming arrows  
 He who is pregnant with evil  
 and conceives trouble  
 gives birth to disillusionment.

The change in the outward characteristics establishes itself as a prominent contrast between the depiction of death at the end of the Middle Ages and in the twentieth century.

The style and the literary sources *Elckerlijc* and *Everyman* have been

analysed by many scholars in order to establish the historical priority.

Nevertheless, no definite conclusion has been reached<sup>4</sup>. But if one chooses the figure of Death as a point of departure, one could conclude that *Elckerlijc* must have been written earlier. This is demonstrated by the mere fact that in *Elckerlijc* Death goes onto stage without weapons, and that he shows a very mild attitude towards man, in contrast to his counterpart in *Everyman*.

While in *Everyman* Death wants to execute God's wrath, in *Elckerlijc* he is shocked by his task, as the following words show:

Hi coemt hier gaende: help, god heere,  
Hoe luttel vermoet hi op mijn komen! (v. 63f.)<sup>5</sup>

The stronger emphasis on allegoric figures, i.e. the inclusion of the Seven Deadly Sins and the Seven Virtues, also seems to point to the fact that *Elckerlijc* is the earlier play. For there seems to be a general trend in the *Everyman* plays to reduce the allegorical figures as time moves on. Therefore *Elckerlijc* will be treated as the original play in this analysis of the significance of the figure of Death in the various *Everyman* plays.

In *Elckerlijc* and *Everyman* Death clearly acts as God's messenger who calls man to God's judgement in order to give an account of his works. *Everyman's* and *Elckerlijc's* lives indicate that they have forgotten their creator and saviour completely. Death does not strike immediately, but allows for time to do penitence. Death is to remind *Everyman* as well as the spectator of God's will and to prepare both for God's judgement. At *Everyman's* and *Elckerlijc's* physical deaths, the figure of Death is no longer present.

<sup>4</sup> See, for a detailed bibliography on this question, G.P.M. Knuvelder (1968:123).

<sup>5</sup> Translation: Here he is coming. Lord God help me! How little he suspects my coming.

In contrast to *Everyman*, *Elckerlijc* does not have a prologue to indicate the play's intention. Only God's speech shows that the play's target is money (insofar as it assumes the position of God) and other deadly sins, as well as impure dogma. All these are a sign that God has been forgotten by man. The mighty messenger Death is to remind of God's existence again.

The author of *Elckerlijc* is just as mysterious as the origin of the play (De Jager, 1943:117). The structuring of the plot shows that the author must have been a learned man belonging to the Rederijkers. The play was crowned at a "landjuweel" in Antwerp. Great influence was further exerted on the writing of the play by the Brothers of Communal Life, the Windesheimers, the Franciscans, the Devotio moderna and Humanism. Apart from these influences, Kazemier (1940:116) has established a connection with older mysticism, especially with Ruusbroeck, from Meister Eckhard's school of thought.

All of the above groups are revival movements within the Catholic Church who advocate a return to the original biblical norms. They tended to place high moral demands on man and to search for new forms of Christian life within a changing socio-economic climate.

This is what happened in the Netherlands in the context of an economic upswing. It is therefore unavoidable that the understanding of death in *Elckerlijc* runs contrary to the general tradition.

Even less is known about the author of *Elckerlijc* than about the writer of *Everyman*

I pray you all give audience  
And heart this matter with reverence,  
By figure of a moral play (11.1 - 3).

Scholars have assumed that the author of the play was a priest who might have depicted himself later in the play performing the function of the priest. On the other hand, Francis Wood (1910:1) has criticised

*Everyman* in a way that contradicts this:

In conclusion it may be said that, though *Ev.* in one or two instances may have improved on the original, *El.* as a whole is artistically superior. With the exception of a very few passages where the text is evidently corrupt, *El.* is written in fairly good language and meter. It is theologically correct and remarkably consistent and logical. It must have been the product of a trained mind. On the other hand *Ev.* is faulty in language and meter, wrong in theology, inapt in its biblical allusions, full of inconsistencies, and betrays on every page the hand of an unskilled workman who was not even capable of making a good translation. (Wood, 1910:24).

In his theological evaluation of the play Wood (1910:5) refers especially to the substitution of Contrition (Kennisse) by self-knowledge (Knowledge) which leads to confession and penance.

As we do not know the author and his background, it is difficult to establish which theological considerations led to the depiction of Death as a stern reminder to do penance in *Everyman*. One can only assume that it must have been a religious movement similar to those prevalent in the Netherlands. One thing is certain; the figure of Death here puts a greater emphasis on expressing love for one's neighbour by giving alms. Therefore *Everyman* may be closer to the mainstream of the Catholic Church than *Elckerlijc*. -

Although the timespan between *Elckerlijc*<sup>6</sup> and *Hecastus* by Hans Sachs only amounts to fifty years, the earlier play has undergone an enormous change which was effected mainly by the Reformation. Hans Sachs uses the depiction of imminent death to call into question a wrongly interpreted Lutheran freedom combined with remnants of a fossilized Catholic piety; as well as Humanism. The rich man in *Hecastus* soothes his conscience with the words:

<sup>6</sup> The German tradition of *Everyman* plays was not inspired by the English but by the Dutch play.

Wir sind gut Christn und hoeren predig

Geben almusen und sind ledig (ll.27f.)<sup>7</sup>

He also believes that he can handle the divine messenger with the help of his son who has studied law as well as five different languages.

In the work of Hans Sachs, Death has a double function. On the one hand Death performs the same role as in *Elckerlijc* and *Everyman* but under the name of a divine messenger. In this role, Death has to serve God. On the other hand, however, the figure of Death here appears as a companion of the devil (Rehm, 1967:147), and he also appears at Hecastus's physical end itself. Central to Lutheran doctrine is the belief that death has been conquered through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. (Rehm, 1967:149).

Thus death, being a consequence of original sin, is relegated to the realm of the devil and cannot, in the last instance, be depicted as a divine power. As in the *artes moriendi* Christian faith has to prove itself in the face of sin, death and evil. But this is only possible after the believer has done penance, received Holy Communion and been taught the correct doctrine.

The Counter-Reformation again changes the perspective of the Everyman plot. Bidermann's *Cenodoxus* does not only lash out against avarice but also against self-love. In the wake of Humanism, new values were established. At the same time, under the influence of Jesuit theology, an intensification in the discussion of evil took place. The latter leaves *Cenodoxus* with a great measure of responsibility for his own salvation. Death here acts entirely in favour of the devil. He strikes at a point in time when *Cenodoxus* is sure to be damned at God's final judgement, although presumably God makes allowance for his death at that point in time. The real death here, is the second, eternal death. That death can no longer be depicted allegorically.

<sup>7</sup> Translation: We are good Christians and listen to sermons. We give alms and therefore have no more obligations.

The conversion of Bruno and his companions in *Cenodoxus* gives rise to a far stronger identification of the spectator with the moral of the play than the previous Everyman plays allowed for. Here the hero of the play is damned so that the spectator, like Bruno and his companions, can do penance and be rescued. This dramatic threat exerted by the Jesuit order in the face of lax morals under Lutheran orthodoxy places much higher demands on man than all former Everyman plays did. In *Cenodoxus*, furthermore, the author of the play no longer only wants to lead the spectator to true penitence. He wants to urge man to flee the evil world in order to devote his life to God in an ascetic life-style.

Here too, it is the function of the depiction of death to serve as a vehicle for religious renewal movements and to lead to a holy life. This time, however, the movement is part of the mainstream Catholic Church. Apart from Hofmannsthal's *Jedermann*, this is the last Everyman play which is concerned with leading man to timely contrition and penance. In the Baroque this idea was already running contrary to popular conceptions of death at the time.

Aries (1981:608) shows how the concepts of death gradually change from the middle of the seventeenth century onwards. As life was no longer orientated along Christian values, people started to look for new philosophical concepts. In the wake of this development, the outlook on death changed as well. On the one hand, death was seen to be banned from life by rationality; on the other hand, death mysteriously started to preoccupy the imagination of man because the traditional framework of interpretation no longer held.

During the nineteenth century the fear of death was seen to be overcome by transcending it through the death of the other. Death developed into a private event. Upon the death of a beloved person, passionate outbreaks of grief were expressed. Thus the untamed nature of death was aesthetically humanised. Death was no longer experienced as evil but as the culmination of life. That also meant that an afterlife was no longer seen as linked to rendering account of one's life before God. It was seen, rather, as a reunion with the beloved person.

During the final years of the nineteenth and during the twentieth century, the intimacy of death became stronger. Accounts on dying show that the dying person and his relatives no longer communicate about death. A wall is erected between the living and the dying, which makes death seem dirty. Dirty death is then left to medicine in hospitals. In this way the society at the same time protects itself from taking part in the psychological process of dying. The solidarity between the community and the dying person has finally broken down. The community sees death only as a medical error that really should not occur. The natural power of death is now seen as evil. But it is an evil that only waits to be medically colonized.

The modern Everyman plays point towards future possibilities to evade this medical lapse called death. Their corrective function deals with the overcoming of physical death of the entire person. It is no longer concerned with a battle against the second eternal death.

Correspondingly, Death in modern Everyman plays always appears as an autonomous figure, that is, it is neither in the service of God nor in that of the devil. Besides, the figures of Death in *Der Tor und der Tod* and in *Le roi se meurt* assume allegorical forms distinct from those in the early Everyman plays. Death as musician and as queen gives special emphasis to the autonomous position of Death.

Although Death embodied by a musician (Rosenfeld, s.a.: 18) had been an allegorical form already known and used during the Middle Ages, it was less representative than other depictions of Death. This can be attributed to its non-biblical origin. Besides, Death as musician exerted a stronger magic spell during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance than is the case in *Der Tor und der Tod*. Here Death enters into a discussion with Claudio which enables Claudio to overcome Death, at least linguistically.

The female figure of Death in *Le roi se meurt* has also been known since the Middle Ages and can probably be attributed to the feminine article for death in the Romance languages. The feminine triumphant (Rosenfeld, s.a.: 12) figure of Death in medieval depictions could have served as

one of the prefigurations of a queen figure of Death. Besides, Queen Marguerite also incorporates the figure of Death as the Great Reaper (Rosenfeld, s.a.:10) through the scissors which she uses to cut the king loose from his surroundings.

In contrast to the popular modern conception of death, Death in the Everyman plays is no longer embedded in the family framework. On the contrary, already Claudio's insurmountable loneliness in *Der Tor und der Tod* points to a life that develops towards death. In *Le roi se meurt* we can clearly see how all connections with life, especially those portrayed by the figure of Queen Marie, are slowly removed from the king. Doctor and nurse leave him as well, so that in the end, he faces Death embodied by Queen Marguerite alone.

From these observations, it can be concluded that these plays belong to the intellectual tradition of the end of the nineteenth and the twentieth century, the roots of which Michel Foucault (1980:40) portrays.

The intellectual understanding of death is based on the scientific research of the nineteenth century. This is especially concerned with anthropocentrism which finds expression in anatomical clinical medicine and in the human sciences. Man here, especially at the practice of autopsy, becomes the centre of interest. Only death reveals the illness and therefore tells something about life. Only death singles man out from the masses. A singular death enables man to leave the monotony of life behind. This new physiological viewpoint corresponds to the feeling of morbidity. The latter, too, singles out man in his uniqueness. Foucault summarizes this as follows, "Death left its old tragic heaven and became the lyrical core of man: his invisible Truth, his visible secret" (Foucault, 1973:172). Man only understands himself through his own elimination.

Thus death now assumes the opposite function to the one which it played during the Middle Ages. During the Middle Ages, death was supposed to bring about equality by eliminating all differences. By contrast death in modern times is supposed to single out the individual from the



masses and to form the greatest moment in a person's life. But this is only true for the socially prominent people as becomes apparent from Juliette's conception of life in *Le roi se meurt*.

Concepts such as the death of man, the end of time, etc., that is, a teleological world view, are necessary for the uniqueness of man. With Nietzsche's postulate (Lemert & Gilian, 1982:66) of an eternal return which neither incorporates God nor finite man, death finally loses its power (Sheridan, 1980:81). Foucault can now maintain that death is no naturalistic universal but an historical event (Lemert & Gilian 1982:119). By being able to transcend the taboo of death, it is possible to fight death at the limits of life. "Death is not an experience. It is an absence, a void" (Lemert, & Gilian 1982:84).

In *Der Tod und der Tor*, the striving for freedom already becomes apparent in Claudio's name which associates him with the Roman hero of liberation. However, in the beginning Claudio does not seem to be free at all. He lives on his own, claustrophobically surrounded by objects of art and an aestheticism which make it impossible for him to find a way into life. Only longing leads him to the limits of life. Claudio suffers from his hypersensitive perception. He is deeply aware of the fact that he has never been able to involve himself in life. It is only by virtue of temporal, spatial and aesthetic distance that he longs for participation in life.

Into Claudio's dead, monotonous life, Death enters in aesthetic form. Nothing about him reminds one of the medieval awe-inspiring skeleton (p.83). Therefore the figure of Death interprets Claudio's fear of death as being purely conditioned by tradition. The new Death unites passion and aestheticism of a pagan sort within him. Death is the culmination of Life, the mystery and great moment of being. Death places a spell on Life and takes Claudio to the climax of morbidity and emotion.

For Claudio Death becomes the god with whom man fights until he is blessed by Him (p.84). Death leads Claudio into the past and provides his life with a depth which it had so far lacked. Therefore Claudio puts

the question to him, "Warum erklingt uns nicht dein Geigenspiel, auf wuehlend die verborgene Geisterwelt (...)" (p.42)<sup>8</sup>.

Claudio in effect emerges victorious from this battle because his interpretation of death enables him to extend his life:

Gewaehre, was du mir gedroht:  
Da tot mein Leben war, sei du mein Leben, Tod!  
Was zwingt mich, der ich beides nicht erkenne,  
dass ich dich Tod und jenes Leben nenne?  
In eine Stunde kannst du Leben pressen,  
Mehr als das ganze Leben konnte halten  
Das schattenhafte will ich ganz vergessen  
Und weih mich deinen Wundern und Gewalten.  
(...)  
Erst, da ich sterbe, spuer ich, dass ich bin.  
So wach ich jetzt, im Fuehlensuebermass,  
Vom Lebenstraum wohl auf im Todeswachen (pp. 92f)<sup>9</sup>

Linguistically, Death has been conquered in this case. The awakening in death is all transgression of the taboo of death, no transcendence (Lemert & Gillian,1982:133).

Thus man has really created a new space for himself which gives him more leeway in the view of death traditionally associated with man's ultimate constraint.

<sup>8</sup> Translation: Why do we not hear your violin play, arousing the hidden world of spirits (...)

<sup>9</sup> Translation: Allow me to have what you have threatened me with. Seeing my life was dead, be your Death my Life! What forces me who understands neither, that I call you Death and the other Life? You can condense more life into one hour than this whole life was able to hold. I want to forget this shadowy life completely and consecrate myself to your miracles and powers. (...) Only now that I die I feel that I am (...) So I wake now in an overflow of feeling from the dream of life to the waking state in death.

Wie wundervoll sind diese Wesen,  
 Die, was nicht deutbar, dennoch deuten,  
 Was nie geschrieben wurde, lesen,  
 Verworrenes beherrschend binden  
 Und Wege noch im Ewig-Dunkeln finden. (p.93)<sup>10</sup>

Much has been said by critics about the void in Claudio's life and his indifference towards other people but little about his ingenious over-coming of death.<sup>11</sup>

The battle between the king and Death in *Le roi se meurt* ends less successfully. One reason for this may be found in the fact that this play is not only concerned with the death of "every man" but also with the death of "every god" (Lemert & Gillian, 1982:67).<sup>12</sup>

The king is very attached to life and has great powers to prolong his life with the help of his physician, who is surgeon, executioner, bacteriologist and astrologist all in one. The king has always pushed death ahead of himself but after four hundred years he can no longer ward it off.

Marguerite: You kept on putting it off. At twenty you said

<sup>10</sup> Translation: How gorgeous are these beings who interpret what cannot be interpreted, who can read what has never been written, who are able to majestically order confusion and to find ways even in eternal darkness.

<sup>11</sup> Eg. Schaefer, Grete (1933:31) (*Neue Forschung 21/I. Arbeiten zur Geistesgeschichte der Germanischen und Romanischen Völker*) who tries to portray the difference between an aesthetic and a Christian way of life and Wolfgang Nehring (1966) who effects judgement on the hero.

<sup>12</sup> "Transgressive knowledge by contrast, is not a knowledge of finitude, nor an anthropological center. The absence or death of God is, for Foucault as it was with Nietzsche, the rejection of the theological nature of Western thought. Transgressive thought does not presuppose an ontic ground" (Lemert/Gillian. 1982:67).

you'd wait till your fortieth year before you went into training. At forty ...

(...)

At forty: why not wait till you were fifty? At fifty ...

(...)

At fifty, you wanted first to reach you sixties.

And so you went on, from sixty to ninety to a hundred and twenty-five to two hundred, until you were four hundred years old. Instead of putting things off for ten years at a time, you put them off for fifty. Then you postponed them from century to century (p.38).

(...)

King: Kings ought to be immortal.

Marguerite: They are provisionally.

King: They promised me I could choose the time when I would die.

Marguerite: That's because they thought you'd have chosen long ago.

But you acquired a taste for authority. Now you must be made to choose. You got stuck in the mud of life (p. 37).

His spatially unlimited kingdom has been falling apart for the last three days and the young king has become old and ill overnight. For this reason the Doctor, under the auspices of Queen Marguerite, i.e. the figure of Death, has now decided to put an end to the life of the king. Only in that way, according to Queen Marquerite, can new life sprout forth. Death here assumes the role of a preacher similar to the one he held at times during the Late Middle Ages and the Reformation.

That the king does not only have human but also divine qualities becomes evident from the fact that he is responsible for the cosmic, the technical, the political and the literary creation. With his death the whole kingdom, and thus the whole creation falls apart.

But the death of the king or the death of God does not only give rise to a return of the old, it is itself a repetition.

Doctor: We know every phase of the disease. It's always  
like this when a universe snuffs out.  
Marguerite (to Marie): It proves his universe is not unique.  
Juliette: That never entered his head (p.79).

Death, the great nothing (p.55), the mirror without reflection (p.92), conquers the creator and ruler. He limits the king's time by letting the space around him, which emerged from nothingness, sink back into nothingness. Only the dead king may sit on his throne again (p.93).

At the same time, however, Marguerite tries to depict the country of death to the king as his home country. According to Marguerite one can only reach this country with difficulty but it is not frightening in itself. Therefore the king should resume his dignity before the outside world during his final moments.

*Le roi se meurt* thus has overcome the extreme preoccupation with the self still highly prominent in *Der Tor und der Tod*. The play rather exhibits the total annihilation of the self which Michel Foucault has predicted as a consequence of the loss of a teleological world view.

To be face to face with death is not to be confronted with another visage. Death is the exterior space, the dissimulating time, in which subjectivity and the self cannot rejoin themselves in self-consciousness and self-knowledge. Death is not their object. Subjectivity and the self are not mirrored in death. Death is the disruption of the circularity of the self and subjectivity in the yawning of an uncloseable rupture. To be face to face with death is for the subjectivity to be dispersed into an indefinite space. Death is the absence of totality and plenitude. It is the sign of the failure of subjectivity to justify self-presence as the ground of being (Foucault, 1982:85).

In conclusion, the function of the figure of Death, in Hofmannsthal's anachronistic play, still has to be dealt with. Hofmannsthal retains the figure of God and sees the figure of Death in the medieval way as occupying a position between God and the Devil. He does not, however, find different names for these two opposing relationships. Even more strongly than in *Everyman* the divine messenger of death puts an emphasis on proving oneself before God through works of love:

Der sein Herz auf irdisch Gut geworfen  
Den will ich mit einem Streich treffen,  
dass seine Augen brechen  
Und er nit findet die Himmelsporten,  
Es sei denn, dass Almosen und Mildtaetigkeit  
Befreundt ihm waeren und hilfsbereit (p.8).

This quote shows that Death here appears mainly as a social admonisher. Hofmannsthal's social demands rest in Christianity. Hofmannsthal is therefore concerned with the relationships of man to his fellow human beings as shown by the scenes of the poor neighbour, of the indebted servant and his wife and of Jedermann and his mother in which she pleads with him to get married. Thus Death does not appear as a finite consequence of sin but as a *memento mori* as indicated by the prologue of the play. Within the limits of time man must perfect himself ethically. Although this reduction of Death to a defender of ethical principals in itself secularizes the figure of Death in *Jedermann*, the fact that the whole ethic of the play rests upon Christian doctrine turns it into an anachronism. The figure of Death in *Jedermann* can thus be ignored within the framework of this study as it does not seem to form a relevant contrast to the general perception of death at the time of its composition.

Let us now return to the starting point, that is, to the thesis put forward that the *Everyman* plays can be divided into two groups on the basis of the different concepts of death they exhibit. The concepts of death differ in their corrective function as follows: In the earlier *Everyman* plays the figure of Death was used as a regressive correction of the concepts

of death held in their authors' times. These writers heavily borrowed from earlier depictions of the Last Judgement. In the later Everyman plays, however, Death embodies a conception of death pointing towards the future.

In the earlier Everyman plays the relationship of the individual towards death is tamed by repentance, priestly intervention, belief and insight. The dying individual is not part of the community anymore. This becomes evident from the reactions of the friends and relatives of the dying. The dying person himself is, however, bound up in a religious understanding of life. In this manner the natural power of death is conquered. The timely turning towards God that the plays are supposed to advocate allows the spectator to hope for an afterlife, because man is thus saved from the power of evil.

In modern Everyman plays, the individual must find his own way out of death; he determines to what extent he manages to outwit Death. Death is no longer interpreted as a religious or a natural phenomenon but as a historical event. The concept of an afterlife gives way to an extension of the limits of life by a belief in the eternal return which is in itself an affirmation of life (Lemert & Gillian, 1982:108). In this respect, the modern Everyman plays with their positive power of transgression (Lemert & Gillian, 1982:67) stand in contrast to the thesis Aries (1981:613) has proposed for the popular conception of death:

But if there is no more evil, what do we do about death? To this question modern society offers two answers. The first is a massive admission of defeat. We ignore the existence of a scandal that we have been unable to prevent; we act as if it did not exist, and thus mercilessly force the bereaved to say nothing. A heavy silence has fallen over the subject of death. When this silence is broken, as it sometimes is in America today, it is to reduce death to the significance of an ordinary event that is mentioned with feigned indifference. Either way, the result is the same: Neither the individual nor the community is strong enough to recognize the existence of an ordinary event that is mentioned with feigned

indifference.

And yet this attitude has not annihilated death or the fear of death. On the contrary, it has allowed the old savagery to creep back under the mask of medical technology. The death of the patient in the hospital, covered with tubes, is becoming a popular image, more terrifying than the *transi* or skeleton of macabre rhetoric. There seems to be a correlation between the "evacuation" of death, the last refuge of evil, and the return of this same death, no longer tame. This should not surprise us. The belief in evil was necessary to the taming of death; the disappearance of the belief has restored death to its savage state.<sup>13</sup>

But Claudio in *Der Tor und der Tod* and Marguerite and the doctor in *Le roi se meurt* confirm the following view:

A small elite of anthropologists, psychologists, and sociologists has been struck by this contradiction (i.e. that the disappearance of the belief in evil has restored death to its old savage state). They propose not so much to "evacuate" death, but to humanize it. They acknowledge the necessity of death, but they want it to be accepted and no longer shameful. Although they may consult the ancient wisdom, there is no question of turning back or of rediscovering the evil that has been abolished. They propose to reconcile death with happiness. Death must simply become the discreet but dignified exit of a peaceful person from a helpful society that is not torn, not even overly upset by the idea of biological transition without significance, without pain or suffering; and ultimately without fear (Aries, 1981:614).

According to this, even the modern Everyman plays stay true to their intention, that is, for the people to be taught by the intellectual elite how to die.

<sup>13</sup> Translation: Him who has given his heart to earthly goods I shall strike with one blow so that his eyes will break and he cannot find the gates of heaven. He can only be rescued from this fate if alms and charity are his helpful friends.



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