

“Deth Wyll Us Quell”

An Anthology of the Theme of Death in the Short
Verse of Early Modern Britain

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Introduction

In looking at the short verse of Early Modern Britain, the topic of death is a consistent theme. The poets in this collection, however, approach death in a variety of ways. Some express a fear of physical death, and others fear the unknown of the afterlife. Some depict the physical horrors of real death while others personify death in remarkably different ways. Metaphysical poets understand death as a state of elemental being, while others lament the brevity of life and cherish the present moment. Despite their different approaches, the poets included in this anthology imagine death in unique and interesting ways.

Skelton's "Upon a Deedman's Hed" is a meditation on the inevitability of death and the hope for salvation, inspired by the decaying head of a dead man. Skelton is convinced by the haunting image of the head to seek the guidance of Jesus Christ and to hope for spiritual salvation in the afterlife. Michael Drayton's "My hart was slaine..." is a poem about heartbreak that uses a murder mystery as a metaphor for the heart-breaker and the broken hearted. Though more a love poem than a death poem, it employs the imagery and language of murder and death to illustrate the pain and violence of love.

Wither's "An Epitaph upon a Woman and Her Child" and Milton's "On the University Carrier" both portray personified versions of death. Wither's death is a cruel and ruthless tyrant, an indiscriminate killer whose subjects (the living) rebel against their ruler by continuing the life cycle and rendering his efforts futile. On the other hand, Milton's personified death is a diligent

professional and gentle workman. In his eulogy of the carrier, Milton leaves his readers with the impression that the carrier has been escorted into death in a pleasant and respectful manner. There is a stark contrast between Wither's murderous death and Milton's humanistic death.

Donne's "A Valediction Forbidding Mourning" and Graham's "Written on the Eve of His Execution" find hope in metaphysical interpretations of the afterlife. Donne proposes that sadness is not warranted upon the death of a loved one, because in death there is a universal oneness through which all things are connected. Graham likewise admits no fear or sorrow when faced with the near and inevitable prospect of his own death by execution. Graham trusts in the unlimited power of God to allow his soul to transcend the physical violence of death in order that he may rise to heaven.

Herrick's "To Daffadils" and "On His Departure Hence" both lament the brevity of life. "On His Departure Hence" is a brief farewell in which the poetic voice "passes by," as if life were a short and simple journey that ends too soon. The poem itself, mirroring life, is quick and abrupt. "To Daffadils" compares our short human lives to those of daffodils. The poetic voice pleads with the flowers to "Stay, stay," though knowing that their death, like human mortality, is imminent.

Death is a mystery. It is fascinating. That is as true today as it was when John Skelton received the gift of a rotting human head, and was so impressed by the experience that he wrote "Upon a Deedman's Hed," his awe-inspired

meditation on death and salvation. The poems collected in this little anthology are relevant today in part because of the timeless appeal of death as a theme in the arts.

Table of Contents

John Skelton. Upon a Deedman's Hed	6
Michael Drayton. My hart was slaine, and none but you and I	9
John Donne. A Valediction Forbidding Mourning	10
George Wither. An Epitaph upon a Woman and Her Child, Buried Together in the Same Grave	12
Robert Herrick. To Daffadils	13
Robert Herrick. Upon His Departure Hence	14
John Milton. On the University Carrier	15
James Graham. Written on the Eve of His Execution	16

Upon A Deedman's Hed

By John Skelton

Your ugly tokyn
My mynd hath brokyn
From worldly lust:
For I have dyscuss
We are but dust,
And dy we must.

It is general

To be mortall:

I have well espied

No man may hym hyde

10

From Deth holow eyed,

With synnews wyderyd¹,

With bonys shydered,

With hys worme etyn maw,

And his gastly jaw,

Gasping aside,

Naked of hyde,

Neyther flesh nor fell².

Then, by my councell,

Loke that ye spell

20

Well thys gospel:

For wher so we dwell

¹ Withered (OED).

² "The skin or hide of an animal" (OED).

Deth wyll us quell,
And with us mell.

For all our pampered paunchys,

Ther may no fraunchys³,

Nor worldly blys,

Redeme us from this:

Our days be datyd,

To be checkmatyd

30

With drawwtys of deth,

Stoppynge oure breth;

Oure eyen synkyng,

Oure bodys stynknyng,

Oure gummys grynnynge,

Oure soulis brynnynge.

To whom, then, shall we sew,

For to have rescew,

But to swete Jesu,

On us then for to rew⁴?

40

O goodly child

Of Mary mylde,

Then be oure shyld!

That we be not exiled

To the dyne dale⁵

Of boteles bale⁶,

Nor the lake of fendys blake⁷.

³ Immunity, exemption (OED).

⁴ "To send out rays...to shine" (OED).

⁵ Valley (OED).

⁶ "A great consuming fire, a conflagration" (OED).

But graunt us grace
To se thy face,
And to purchase 50
Thyne hevenly place,
And thy palace,
Full of solace,
Above the sky,
That is so hy;
Eternally
To beholde and se
The Trynyte!
Amen.
*Myrres vous y*⁸. 60

⁷ A loss of color, pale (OED).

⁸ "Behold yourself therein" (Google Books).

My hart was slaine, and none but you and I

By Michael Drayton

My heart was slaine, and none but you and I,
Who should I thinke the murder should commit,
Since but yourselfe, there was no creature by,
But onely I, guiltlesse of murth'ring it?
It slew it selfe; the verdict on the view
Doe quit the dead, and me not accessarie.
Well, well, I feare it will be prov'd by you,
The evidence so great a prooffe doth carry.
But O, see, see, we need inquire no further:
Upon your lips the scarlet drops are found,
And in your eye, the boy that did the murther,
Your cheekes yet pale since first they gave the wound.
 By this, I see, however things be past,
 Yet heaven will still have murther out at last.

10

A Valediction Forbidding Mourning

By John Donne

As virtuous men pass mildly away,
 And whisper to their souls to go,
 Whilst some of their sad friends do say,
 "Now his breath goes," and some say, "No."

So let us melt, and make no noise,
 No tear-floods, nor sigh-tempests move;
 'Twere profanation⁹ of our joys
 To tell the laity our love.

Moving of th' earth brings harms and fears;
 Men reckon what it did, and meant;
 But trepidation of the spheres¹⁰,
 Though greater far, is innocent.

10

Dull sublunary¹¹ lovers' love
 —Whose soul is sense—cannot admit
 Of absence, 'cause it doth remove
 The thing which elemented it.

But we by a love so much refined,
 That ourselves know not what it is,
 Inter-assurèd of the mind,
 Care less, eyes, lips and hands to miss.

20

Our two souls therefore, which are one,
 Though I must go, endure not yet
 A breach, but an expansion,
 Like gold to aery thinness beat.

⁹ "The act of profaning...desecration or violation" (OED).

¹⁰ The celestial spheres:"... the fundamental entities of the cosmological models developed by Plato, Eudoxus, Aristotle, Ptolemy, Copernicus, et.al..." (Wikipedia).

¹¹ Beneath the moon (OED).

If they be two, they are two so
 As stiff twin compasses are two;
Thy soul, the fix'd foot, makes no show
 To move, but doth, if th' other do.

And though it in the centre sit,
 Yet, when the other far doth roam,
It leans, and hearkens after it,
 And grows erect, as that comes home.

30

Such wilt thou be to me, who must,
 Like th' other foot, obliquely run ;
Thy firmness makes my circle just,
 And makes me end where I begun.

**An Epitaph upon a Woman and Her Child, Buried Together in
the Same Grave**

By George Wither

Beneath this marble stone doth lie

The subject of Death's tyranny –

A mother, who in this close tomb,

Sleeps with the issue of her womb.

Though cruelly inclin'd was he,

And with the fruit shook down the tree,

Yet was his cruelty in vain,

For tree and fruit shall spring again.

To Daffadils

By Robert Herrick

Faire Daffadils, we weep to see

 You haste away so soone;

As yet the early-rising sun

 Has not attain'd his noone.

 Stay, stay,

 Until the hasting day

 Has run

 But to the Even-song¹²;

And, having pray'd together, we

Will go with you along.

10

We have short time to stay, as you,

 We have as short a spring;

As quick a growth to meet decay,

 As you, or anything.

 We die

 As your hours do, and drie

 Away,

 Like to the summer's raine;

Or as the pearles of morning's dew,

Ne'er to be found againe.

20

¹² "The time of the evensong; the hour at sunset" (OED).

Upon His Departure Hence

By Robert Herrick

Thus I

Passe by

And die:

As one,

Unknown,

And gone:

I'm made

A shade,

And laid

I' th' grave:

There have

My cave.

Where tell

I dwell,

Farewell.

On the University Carrier

By John Milton

*Who sickened in the time of his Vacancy, being forbid to go to London by reason of the
Plague.*

HERE lies old Hobson. Death hath broke his girt,
 And here, alas! hath laid him in the dirt;
 Or else, the ways being foul, twenty to one
 He's here stuck in a slough, and overthrown.
 'T was such a shifter that, if truth were known,
 Death was half glad when he had got him down;
 For he had any time this ten years full
 Dodged with him betwixt Cambridge and *The Bull*¹³.
 And surely Death could never have prevailed,
 Had not his weekly course of carriage failed;
 But lately, finding him so long at home,
 And thinking now his journey's end was come,
 And that he had ta'en up his latest Inn,
 In the kind office of a Chamberlin
 Showed him his room where he must lodge that night,
 Pulled off his boots, and took away the light.
 If any ask for him, it shall be said,
 "Hobson has supped, and 's newly gone to bed."

10

¹³ The Bull Inn, Bishopsgate, was Hobson's stopping place in London (Wikipedia).

Written on the Eve of His Execution

By James Graham

Let them bestow on every airth¹⁴ a limb,
Then open all my veins, that I may swim
To thee, my Maker, in that crimson lake,
Then place my parboiled¹⁵ head upon a stake;
Scatter my ashes, strow them in the air.
Lord, since thou knowest where all these atoms are,
I'm hopeful thou'lt recover once my dust,
And confident thou'lt raise me with the just.

¹⁴ "A point of the compass; a direction" (OED).

¹⁵ "Partially cooked by boiling" (OED).

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