

On Death:

The Paradox of Dying to Live in Early Modern British Literature

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In his book, *The Book of Dead Philosophers*, Simon Critchley follows the various philosophical perspectives of “190 or so dead philosophers” (1) in an effort to elucidate the societal investment with death throughout the centuries. Quoting Cicero, Critchley writes, “To philosophize is to learn how to die” (xv). Beyond simply thinking, reasoning, or arguing how death comes about (*ODE* definition 1.a.), Critchley’s work illustrates how death continues to influence culture and thought throughout the twenty-first century. Given the stated interest with death, I would like to call attention to the English writers, thinkers, and philosophers of the sixteenth and seventeenth-centuries. As the seedbed to modern thought, these works have influenced the way certain themes and values have been adopted into contemporary culture. Turning to the various Early Modern confrontations with death is relevant here because the work done throughout this literature provides the foundation for understanding death in our own experiences.

In an effort to illustrate the particular role that death plays in late Renaissance/Early Modern British literature, I have included a brief survey of the literature<sup>1</sup> that incorporates the theme of death throughout this two-hundred-year period. Beginning with the authority of the English monarchs, King Henry VIII is an example of how death serves as the overarching political threat to get individuals to conform with the sovereign powers. Thomas More revives the classical perspectives on suicide in *Utopia* when he advocates that “when life has become a mere prison cell...he should free himself, or let others free him, from the rack of living (96). Religious thinkers such as William Tyndale and John Calvin inescapably face the reality of death

when advocating for the education of the soul by reading the Bible or the principles of predestination (“Faith in Conflict,” 152-153). Martyrs such as Anna Askew faced death with “astonishing courage and determination” (“Faith in Conflict” 156), setting the precedent for what it means to die for one’s convictions. In Spencer’s *Faerie Queene*, the threat of death is repeatedly used as a catalyst meant to encourage the development of virtues throughout the “chivalric romance” (248). Many of the dramatic works of William Shakespeare begin with or lead to the eventual encounter with death, sighting here, *Hamlet*, *Much Ado about Nothing*, *King Lear*, *Merchant of Venice*, *Othello*, and *Macbeth*. The Jacobean Era beset the nation with the social, religious, and political complexities of death through the British Civil War and the execution of King Charles I. The metaphysical poets<sup>ii</sup> employed the profanities of death in comparison to the sacred nature of God. Thomas Hobbs articulates in *Leviathan* that the fear of death is one of “the passions that incline men to peace” (1412). Margaret Cavendish and René Descartes inevitably encounter death while engaging in arguments regarding nature of body and soul, and finally, John Milton attempts to elucidate the role of death in his heroic epic of man’s first beginnings in *Paradise Lost*.

Although each of these authors provide unique perspectives and interactions with death, due to the interest of time and space within this essay I will be focusing specifically on the way Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, Shakespeare’s *Much Ado about Nothing*, and the martyrdoms of Thomas More and Anna Askew illuminate the role of death in the twenty-first century production of the film *Room* (2015). Throughout these texts, the confrontation with death leads to an inevitable moment of choice, and it is precisely that moment of choice that I argue necessitates greater examination.

In *Paradise Lost*, Milton employs the Biblical narrative “of Man’s first disobedience” (1.1) as the basic structure of his epic work. Following the Christian genesis of Adam and Eve, evidence from Milton’s *Paradise Lost* points first and foremost to the struggle between life and death, or more appropriately, the fear of death in the pursuit of knowledge. In particular, it is Eve’s commentary on and rejection of the threat of death directly before she chooses to partake of the forbidden fruit that gives her the freedom to live a full life endowed with knowledge, reason, and choice. Without the fear of death, she is able to gain knowledge, and that knowledge gives her the chance to truly choose to be obedient to God.

In order for Eve to rise triumphant over death, Milton frames Adam and Eve as philosophers of death long before the ill-fated couple taste the bitter fruits of death. In the words of Critchley, “To philosophize [ ] is to learn to have death in your mouth, in the words you speak, the food you eat and the drink that you imbibe (*xvi*). In Book 4, Adam and Eve prove to have the words of death in their mouths when they recite the only mandate from God. God demands obedience, and he frames that obedience with death. Adam recalls that God has instructed “not to taste that only Tree / Of Knowledge, planted by the Tree of Life, / [that] So near grows death to life, whate’er death is, / Some dreadful thing no doubt” (*PL* 4.423-426) for if they do, they will die. Death is the motivator of obedience, but the only thing Adam and Eve know of death is to assume that it is “some dreadful thing” (*PL* 4.426). Terrible or unpleasant or outrageous—Adam and Eve view death as an object rather than a state of being—something God will give them.

Despite their limited perception of death, the dreadful *idea of death* manacles their impulse towards obedience with the same type of manipulated power and control articulated by Machiavelli’s prince. Critchley paraphrases, “Human beings—wretched creatures that they

are—will always break the bond of love... What is required, then, is a fear of death, ‘strengthened by a dread of punishment which is always effective’” (Critchley, 105). For Adam and Eve, the dread of punishment and the threat of death are one in the same. They cannot choose to be obedient without the threat of disobedience and death looming over them.

In complication of *death as a dreadful thing*, it is critical to note that although perceived as dreadful, Adam and Eve have no actual knowledge of death. Italian philosopher Count Alberto Radicati de Passerano articulates that “by definition, the fear of death *cannot be based in experience* as no one experiences death twice as it were” (Critchley, 149 emphasis added). This statement is particularly true for Adam and Eve because they are the first humans ever created; there has never been death before them. Not even Satan and his followers—though fallen from heaven—know what it means to die (*PL* 2.90-98). Without any experience, personally or vicariously, the threat of death can hold no meaning in regard to obedience.

Even though God’s warning that Eve would die if she ate the fruit was *true*, the fear of death limited her opportunity to honestly choose God (*PL* 4.426). In *Areopagitica*, Milton explains that a true choice is contingent upon understanding all consequences. He states, “He that can apprehend and consider vice with all her baits and seeming pleasures, and yet abstain, and yet distinguish, and yet prefer that which is truly better, he is the true warfaring Christian” (*Areopagitica* 1480). Adam and Eve are not afforded this opportunity to be *true warfaring Christians* because they do not have the knowledge between good and evil. By threatening death, God has limited their ability to choose. Eve concludes that God’s threat of death prohibits her from *choosing* to obey or disobey the commandment because she doesn’t understand what death actually is.

Eve contemplates, “If death / Bind us with after-bands what profits then / Our inward freedom?” (*PL* 9.760-762). Eve’s scrutiny of death is connected with what she sees as the opportunity to be a true warfaring Christian. If her fidelity to God is motivated by dreadful threats, it was never true fidelity to begin with. By choosing to reject the fear of death imposed by God, Eve becomes free to make choices to follow God out of love. This freedom brings opportunity for choice, and with choice, the freedom to live unafraid. Quoting Montaigne, Simeon Critchley concludes, “He who has learned how to die has unlearned how to be a slave” (*xvi*). In search of the freedom to sincerely obey and gain knowledge, Eve may be named among those who learned to die so that they might live. In this situation, accepting death leads to the opportunity to be obedient.

By partaking of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil—partaking of death—Eve’s decision parallels the words of the friar in Shakespeare’s *Much Ado about Nothing*.<sup>iii</sup> The narrative of the play hinges on a series of light-hearted deceptions that lead to Claudio and Hero being married. However, before the marriage can take place, Don John creates a scene that makes it appear that Hero has been unfaithful. When Claudio accuses his betrothed of being a harlot, the “virtuous Hero” faints before her betrothed and her cousin Beatrice believes her to be dead (Shakespeare, 4.1.120). Reputation defiled, the sort of death she experiences comes about as a result of public infamy.

Initially believing Claudio’s accusation that Hero has been unfaithful, Hero’s father Leonato declares that “death is the fairest cover for her shame” (4.1.122). In this way, Leonato’s view of death is framed as a punishment. When she stirs and awakens her father laments, “Do not live Hero, do not ope thine eyes” (4.1.131). Rather than being relieved that his daughter isn’t actually dead, Leonato views her accusations as reason to die, and even contemplate killing his

own child (4.1.134-135). His stark rejection of her is an indication of the death that Hero has already experienced. For Leonato, an unvirtuous Hero is the same as a dead Hero.

In contrast, when the friar suggests to “publish it that she is dead indeed” (4.1.215) because she was wrongly accused, that kind of death brings Hero a rejuvenated reputation. In both instances—with the friar and with Leonato—death serves as a way to cover Hero. The kind of death articulated by Leonato is a death that hides and conceals Hero’s lack of innocence, while the cover of death used by the friar is more closely associated with shielding, sheltering, or protecting. The friar admonishes the Lady Hero to “die to live” (4.1.266) in order to protect her virtue. If dead, Hero will be “lamented, pitied, and excused / Of every hearer” (4.1.227-228)—her reputation would have the chance to live again. In this way, the “Hero that is dead!” is the Hero who was slandered, giving space for her to be virtuous and chaste upon *coming back to life* (5.4.67). The friar’s words prove true when Claudio recites the epitaph that is hung on Hero’s monument: “The life that died with shame / Lives in death with glorious fame” (5.3.7-8). The fame that lives on is that Hero wasn’t a Harlot because she was innocent. The life Hero gains after her accepted death is one that affords her more social stability as a virtuous woman than if she never would have heeded the friar’s advice to “die to live.” Through her death, her reputation is able to live unblemished.

Moreover, the life that results from Hero’s death is not limited to her own reputation. In connection to Hero’s acceptance of death, Claudio also experiences a sort of death that changes his perception. When Claudio hears Borachio’s confession and acknowledges that he has falsely accused Lady Hero, Borachio’s words become poison in Claudio’s soul (5.1.256). Although Claudio doesn’t physically die, what does die is his confidence in a sensory epistemology of truth. Claudio accused Hero because he assumed that he could trust the things he perceived. He

believed because he saw and heard what *seemed* to be Hero being unfaithful that he had justifiable cause “To turn all beauty into thoughts of harm” (4.1.112) and leave Hero unwed.

The realization that comes when Borachio confesses is one that shatters what Claudio thinks he knows, and in response it provides the necessary space for truth to live.

Similar to the way that a slandered Hero could not live, knowledge that is *solely* based on a sensory epistemology does not leave room for truth to fully exist because the senses are inherently flawed. Multiple times throughout the text, Claudio allows a sensory epistemology to determine what he perceives as truth. Despite the known fact that Don John is malicious and “whose spirits toil in frame of villainies” (4.1.199), Claudio gives no consideration to the thought that Don John may be deceiving him. He places his own perception above what the community epistemology asserts about both the character of Hero and Don Jon. When he realizes that this approach to truth has led to the untimely “death” of Hero, he admits that he has been mistaken. To be mistaken—wrong, erroneous, or false—is the opposite of truth. Throughout this interaction, Shakespeare articulates that if truth is only found in one epistemological sphere, dependence on that knowledge will always kill truth—it will always be mistaken. There is no way to fully understand the truth from only one perspective. It is Claudio’s dependence on a sensory epistemology that must die in order for the full truth to live.

Throughout both of these examples—facing the fear of death and dying to live—death proves to be an experience with powerful repercussions. But why? Why does death carry such a monumental influence? When encouraging Lady Hero to die, the friar argues that when faced with death “we find the virtue that possession would not show us while it was ours” (4.1. 231-232). The friar’s logic in this statement depends on the assumption that we only see the true value of something once we are unable to possess it. In this case, we only value life once it has



been replaced with death. Therefore, death has power when it is being used to manipulate life, when it is forced upon an individual, when it is taking someone or something away.

The poet George Herbert describes this sort of death as a “uncouth, hideous thing” that threatens and invokes fears and sorrows (1275). In these descriptions, the hideousness of death only comes to light in comparison to the possession life. By focusing on life as a possession, it implies an intuitive form of ownership. When you are no longer the owner of your life, death gains power. However, evidence from the deaths of Sir Thomas More and Anna Askew complicate the dichotomy between life and death when the value of their lives could not be exchanged by the threat of death. When King Henry VIII broke away from the Catholic church and established himself as the head of the church of England, More refused to sign the oath supporting the king. Amidst the turbulent religious changes of the period, Askew was condemned for heresy because she spoke out against the Catholic Church. In each circumstance, their religious convictions became more valuable than life—More refusing to denounce the pope as the head of the Church and Askew refusing to renounce her Protestant faiths. When the importance and possession of life is no longer defined by the vulnerability of death, death loses its power. One is no longer bound by the threat of needing to die to appreciate the value of life because value is able to be found outside of the comparison of death. By accepting death, More and Askew are afforded the chance to more fully live within their convictions. Through this process, death ceases to be a stopping point, and rather becomes a moment of decision.

The decision between hope and despair, between fear and faith, between life and death seems to be very straightforward. But in each of the instances mentioned, the choice that brought life, wasn't life. It was death. Choosing to die in order to live. Connecting the sixteenth

and seventeenth-century British literary influences directly to contemporary experience, I have chosen to analyze *Room*, a 2015 production directed by Lenny Abrahamson. A film that also carries the theme of dying to live. Not depicted in the film, when Joy Newsome was seventeen years old, she was abducted, repeatedly raped, and held captive in a garden shed by a man she labels as Old Nick.

The plot picks up seven years after her initial kidnapping by introducing the viewer to Jack, Joy's five-year-old son who knows nothing of the outside world. In an effort to escape the garden shed, Joy attempts to convince Old Nick that Jack is sick and needs to go to the hospital. Rather than talking the boy to the doctor, Old Nick responds that he will bring some medicine the following day. The scene that balances the rest of the film comes later that night when Joy is watching her sleeping son. She realizes if she is ever going to get Jack out of that room, it will never be enough for him just to be sick. If they are ever going to escape, the only option is for Jack to die. At least pretend to be dead, rolled up in the rug, and sent away to be buried. The anguish and fear seen in her face as she comes to this realization echoes Herbert's accusation that death is a hideous thing (1275). Death is the only option. Jack must "die."

The choice to accept death proves to be beneficial throughout the rest of the film, and similar to the highlighted examples of Eve, Hero, Sir Thomas More, and Anna Askew, the moment of choosing death brings new possibilities or strengthen convictions. But what does all of this mean in a contemporary world? What does it mean to choose death?

In order to elucidate such a choice, I will be employing various philosophical reasonings on moral identity and virtue. Although numerous philosophers have each engaged with the paradox of virtue using differing names, I have chosen to adopt the phrase, "the problem of moral proximity" from Brandi R. Siegfried, a professor of British literature at Brigham Young

University, as a framework for talking about and defining what it means to die in order to live. At the center of understanding how weaknesses become strengths or how strengths become weaknesses, is the assumption that human qualities exist in a neutral form. Aristotelian virtue ethics identifies these qualities as “global character traits” (Moral Character). These traits are neither good nor bad, neither virtue nor vice. For example, the neutral quality of courage becomes a virtue when it is interpreted as bravery and a vice when it is seen as recklessness. In order for death to exist within this framework, it must first be viewed as a neutral quality.

I propose that when faced with death, the underlying quality that gives death power to be a strength or power to be a vice is vulnerability. To be vulnerable is a natural human condition. Dr. Brené Brown, research professor and social worker at the University of Houston, maintains that “in our culture, we associate vulnerability with emotions we want to avoid such as fear, shame, and uncertainty. Yet we too often lose sight of the fact that vulnerability is also the birthplace of joy, belonging, creativity, authenticity, and love.”<sup>iv</sup> Brown’s work focuses on teaching people to embrace vulnerability, leading them to live wholeheartedly. In order for vulnerability to be the pivotal moment in life that brings fear and shame while also having the potential to foster joy and authenticity, vulnerability must exist as a global character trait.

Death is the ultimate form of vulnerability. It is the inevitable reality that everyone will die that gives death power. All are susceptible to death. Because of the vulnerable nature of death within the framework of moral identity, death becomes a choice. When an individual fears death or tries to push it away, death overpowers. When death is chosen, when the vulnerability of death is accepted, it gives life. Each of the literary examples I have mentioned highlight different reconciliations with death, serving as parallels for the reconciliation with vulnerability. Eve chose to be vulnerable and admit to what she lacked. By doing so, she gained knowledge,

agency, and choice. Hero embraced the vulnerability of public scrutiny. Claudio acknowledged the vulnerable condition of epistemological truth. Anna Askew experienced the vulnerability of faith, and she chose to place her trust in that faith above the safety of her own life. Accepting vulnerability leads to accepting death—to freedom, to knowledge, to joy, to life. In a contemporary world where vulnerability is hidden or rejected, the admonition to “die to live” rings true. In the introduction of his book, Critchley admits to his readers that he hopes “by learning to die we might also be taught how to live” (xvii). Learning to live, is learning to die. Learning to die, is learning to be vulnerable. To be vulnerable is to die free.

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<sup>i</sup> The majority of the works referenced in this essay are from *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, Volume B the Sixteenth Century and the Early Seventeenth Century, tenth edition, edited by Stephen Greenblatt, Katharine Eisaman Maus, and George Logan. (2018)

<sup>ii</sup> Metaphysical Poets here being identified as George Herbert, John Donne, Henry Vaughan, and Andrew Marvell.

<sup>iii</sup> All quotes and references for *Much Ado about Nothing* come from the Folger Shakespeare Library edition edited by Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine. (1995)

<sup>iv</sup> Dr. Brown has published the lecture, "The Power of Vulnerability" as a series of audio files through the audiobook platform Sounds True. It was first published November 15, 2012.