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Death
in the Theater
of Alejandro Casona

H. KAY MOON*

Alejandro Casona, born March 25, 1903, achieved in his lifetime perhaps greater international renown than any other Spanish playwright, with the possible exception of García Lorca. Yet, ironically, his plays for years were banned and therefore scarcely known within his own homeland. In 1936 political pressures forced him out of his beloved Spain, but a year or two before his death he returned to put a happy end to his exile and to the obscurity in which his work had remained in his own country. No such felicitous conclusion has yet obtained regarding another strange accident—his plays are still virtually unknown in the English-speaking world, though today he is probably the most popular playwright in Madrid.

With characteristic dignity, on September 17, 1965, Alejandro Casona discovered the last of life's mysteries.

The theme of death represented a substantial pattern in the fabric of Casona's theater. It is omnipresent, but not necessarily awesome and fearful, and indeed may be "... a comforter, a consoler, even a messenger of the Lord." Death was

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the least of life’s three great words. The other two, far more important, are God and Love.

Life to Casona was more than mere happenstance. It was fraught with purpose and divinely ordained. In short, he regarded it as a duty, and failure to comprehend it thus was in his view reprehensible. In a theater curiously preoccupied with suicide, only one of Casona’s characters, Angelica in La Dama del Alba, actually takes her own life, and that only after the author has established firmly that it was the one generous act of which she was still capable, having squandered her honor and her right to share in Martin’s life. Thus her death actually contributes to others’ happiness, since they are ignorant concerning her delinquency and the details of her demise. Casona’s position is largely reflected in the advice that Uriel receives from his mother in La casa de los siete balcones. Uriel is unable to find respite from the painful realities that torment him. His mother cautions, “Escucha, Uriel. Para pasar aquí, conmigo, tienes que esperar tu hora. Si un día lo intentas por otro camino, nunca más volveremos a encontrarnos. ¡Nunca más! ¿Lo oyes bien?”

It is apparent, then, that Casona is traditional in his view of death. He believes, with the great majority of the Golden Age masters, that death represents a reward for some, condemnation for many. Gracián conveys this idea in his portrayal of it as an awesome queen, beautiful and desirable if viewed from one side, grotesque and frightening if viewed from the other. Casona recognizes that death may be untimely and tragic, as the Peregrina herself suggests when she states that she prefers never to be about when children are playing near the fire. Or it may be a peaceful, happy condition—a fulfillment.

Perhaps it is the inevitable nature of death that leads Casona to personalize it with an aura of life. Pablo in La tercera palabra, though he cannot see it, senses its presence and prepares to protect Marga’s inert form with his own person, as

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8Alejandro Casona, Obras Completas, ed. F. C. Sainz de Robles, II, p. 893. Since all quotations of Casona are from this edition, subsequent references will appear parenthetically in the text. “Listen, Uriel. To come over here, with me, you have to wait for your hour. If one day you should try to do it any other way, we would never see each other again. Never! Do you hear?”
against an anthropomorphic foe. In Las tres perfectas casadas—the least “other-worldly” of all Casona’s plays—death’s aura is clearly felt, as one sometimes senses the presence of another human being. Ada is speaking to Ferrán when she says “Ayer, cuando te pedí la muerte, era sincera, ¡te lo juro! La mereces bien. Pero ahora, al sentirla aquí, tan cerca, me da miedo.”4 (O.C., II, p. 554.) Later, after Ferrán is shot, she asks, “Pero entonces, ¿qué es?” He answers, “Nada ya . . . Es, sencillamente, la muerte. No me cierres los ojos . . . quiero verla llegar.”5 (O.C., II, p. 567.)

Casona’s thought is related in many respects to that of the great mystics. Certainly, death is not always to be feared. In La casa de los siete balcones, the characters who return to visit Uriel—Madre, Abuelo, and Alicia—are dressed in immaculate white, a suggestion of purity. Their movements are never hurried, and they give the illusion of perfect peace. When Uriel joins them, he says, “Ni me di cuenta siquiera. Pero ¿cómo puede ser tan maravillosamente fácil? ¿Cómo puedo sentirme de repente tan libre y tan tranquilo?”6 (O.C., II, p. 947.) Earlier, before finding this peace, he tries to persuade Alicia to reveal to him how to pass over into the next world, and their dialogue is a beautifully poetic expression of death’s fulfillment:

 Uriel.—No.
 Alicia.—(La saca de su bolsilla.) Mírala. ¿No es preciosa?
 Uriel.—Es preciosa, sí. Pero ¿qué pasó después . . . , cuando la alcanzaste?
 Alicia.—Nada. Me quedé allí quieta, en el fondo, y empezó a hacerse de noche.
 Uriel.—¿Y no te dio miedo la oscuridad?

4”Yesterday, when I asked for your death, I did so sincerely, I swear! You deserve it. But now, when I feel it here, so near, it frightens me.”
5”Then, what is it?” . . . Nothing, now. It is, simply, death. Don’t close my eyes . . . I want to see her come.”
6”I didn’t even realize. . . . How can it be so incredibly easy? How is it possible for me suddenly to feel so free and calm?“
Alicia.—¿Por qué? Tenía una estrella para mí sola. (O.C., II, pp. 895-896.)

The multiple aspects of death as spoken of by Gracían are, of course, most thoroughly treated by Casona in *La Dama del Alba*. Pablo de A. Cobos speaks briefly of the symbolism embodied in the names of Death of this play:

La muerte tiene en la comedia un nombre genérico, Dama del Alba, y un nombre específico, Peregrina, Dama del Alba es el nombre más hermoso y más optimista de todos los que usa la muerte para andar por el mundo; Casona no podía elegir otro; con él se nos viene la muerte al día, triunfo de la mañana naciente sobre la noche olvidada. Con el nombre de Peregrina se expresa la andariega condición y hasta se implicita un sentido piadoso que no desdice nunca. Peregrina se nos viene a la vida como la Dama del Alba se nos viene al día.

It is significant, in light of Casona’s idea regarding death as a fulfillment, that he departs from the macabre tradition of death as a masculine personage. Casona’s Peregrina is a blend of human warmth and supernatural allegory. Let us explore first her supernatural character:

The setting of *La Dama del Alba* is appropriately timeless, as is the Peregrina, who comes to visit the home of Martín Narcés, which has been plunged into grief by the disappear-

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7 Uriel.—There must be a hidden passage, . . . a secret door, . . . something! How did you do it?
Alice.—Without realizing it. I only remember that it was on a beach. Between the rocks on the ocean bed I could see a sea star. I had never seen anything more beautiful! But it was down so deep, so deep. . . . I thought I would never reach it. Have you ever seen a sea star?
Uriel.—No.
Alice.—Look at it. Isn’t it lovely?
Uriel.—Lovely, yes. But what happened then. . . . when you reached it?
Alice.—Nothing. I stayed there calmly on the bottom and it began to grow dark.
Uriel.—And the darkness didn’t frighten you?
Alice.—Why should it? I had a star all my own.

8 Pablo de A. Cobos, "Peregrina, in 'La dama del Alba,'" *Insula*, num. 190 (septiembre, 1962), p. 15. "Death in the comedy has a generic name, Lady of the Dawn, and a specific name, Pilgrim. Lady of the Dawn is the most beautiful and optimistic of all the names that death uses to walk through the earth. Casona could choose no other, with it, he brings death up to date—the triumph of newborn morning over forgotten night. The name Pilgrim expresses the wandering condition of death, and even implies a sense of pity, which is never denied. Pilgrim comes into life like the Lady of Dawn comes into day."

DEATH IN ALEJANDRO CASONA

ance and apparent death of Angélica, the wife of Martín. Before the Peregrina appears, she is announced by the incessant barking of the dog, which is able to sense intuitively the ominous strangeness of the visitor. The general feeling she leaves with the adults is one of mystery and fear. The sagacious Abuelo seems to remember her, and the recollection plagues his mind, for though he is unable to recall for certain where or when he has met her, it does not seem to be a pleasant memory. He questions her at length: When has she been in the village before? She explains that she has come on several occasions and names them. One of them was at the time of the tragic explosion in the mines, which took the lives of many of the village men. The Abuelo was there, injured, and he saw her among the dead—claiming her own. He remembers, and his immediate reaction is one of terror for his grandchildren, who were playing games with her a few moments before. He says to Telva, the servant, "¡Sube con ellos! . . . ¡Cierra puertas y ventanas! ¡Caliéntalos con tu cuerpo si es preciso! ¡Y llame quien llame, que no entre nadie!" (O.C., I, pp. 526-527.)

Alone with the Peregrina, he says:

Mirame a los ojos y atrévete a decir que no me conoces. ¿Recuerdas el día que explotó el grisó en la mina? También yo estaba allí, con el derrumbe sobre el pecho y el humo agrio en la garganta. Creíste que había llegado mi hora y te acercaste demasiado. ¿Cuando, al fin, entró el aire limpio, ya había visto tu cara pálida y había sentido tus manos de hielo! (O.C., I, p. 527.)

She does not deny her identity. The Abuelo begs her to leave his house, which she consents to do, but not without first explaining her position:

Peregrina.— . . . Soy buena amiga de los pobres y de los hombres de conciencia limpia. ¿Por qué no hemos de hablarnos lealmente?

Abuelo.—No me fío de ti. Si fueras leal no entrarías disfrazada en las casas, para meterte en las habitaciones tristes a la hora del alba.

106"Go up to them! . . . Close all doors and windows! Warm them with your own body if necessary! And regardless of who calls, let no one enter!"

114"Look me in the eye and dare to say you don't know me. Do you remember the day the fire damp exploded in the mine? I was there, too, pinned beneath the debris with the acrid taste of smoke in my throat. You thought that my hour had arrived and you came too close. When, finally, the clean air entered the vein, I had already seen your pale face and felt your icy hands!"
Peregrina.—¿Y quién te ha dicho que necesito entrar? Yo estoy siempre dentro, mirándote crecer día por día desde detrás de los espejos. (O.C., I, pp. 529-530.)

She expresses here her timelessness. As life is eternally present, so, naturally, is death.

She explains that she once loved a child and could not resist the temptation to express her love. The child is now an old man, a beggar, Nalón el Viejo.

Peregrina.—... Cuando era niño tenía la mirada más hermosa que se vio en la tierra; una tentación azul que me atraía desde lejos. Un día no pude resistir... y lo besé en los ojos.

Abuelo.—Ahora toca la guitarra y pide limosna en las romerías con su lazarrillo y su plato de estanño.

Peregrina.—Pero yo sigo queriéndole como entonces! Y algún día he de pargarle con dos estrellas todo el daño que mi amor le hizo. (O.C., I, p. 531.)

Her supernatural qualities are sometimes tragic, but she seems to possess power beyond the grave to repair the harm her love has caused.

Martín enters to interrupt the conversation between the Abuelo and the Peregrina, carrying the unconscious Adela. It is Martín whom the Peregrina wished to claim, but since she fell asleep and was unable to meet him at the appointed time, there is no longer any immediate danger. He has had an accident, but all that remains of the experience is a red spot on his temple, which the Peregrina gently removes. Adela regains consciousness, but she is exhausted and soon faints again. The Abuelo is quick to cast an anxious, questioning glance at the Peregrina, who knows by virtue of her supernatural perception that Adela still lives; she assures the Abuelo that she is merely sleeping.

12Pilgrim.—... I am a good friend to the poor and to men of clear conscience. Why can’t we talk like loyal friends?

Grandfather.—I don’t trust you. If you were loyal, you wouldn’t enter houses in disguise to get into grief-filled rooms at the hour of the dawn.

Pilgrim.—Who told you I need to enter? I’m always inside, watching you grow day by day from behind the mirrors.

13Pilgrim.—... When he was a child he had the most beautiful glances that the world had ever seen; a blue temptation that attracted me from afar. One day I could not resist... and I kissed his eyes.

Grandfather.—Now he plays the guitar and begs at the village festivals with his dog and tin cup.

Pilgrim.—But I still love him as I did then! And some day I shall give him two stars to compensate for the harm my love has done him.
Martín was supposedly destined to die the night the Peregrina arrived, but Adela, who sought death, was not so destined. There is evidence of supernatural intervention by a power superior to that of the Peregrina. She is puzzled:

Peregrina.— (Pensativa.) No lo entiendo. Alguien se ha propuesto anticipar las cosas que deben madurar a su tiempo. Pero lo que está en mis libros no se puede evitar. (Va a tomar el bordón.) Volveré.

Abuelo.—Aguarda. Explícame esas palabras.

Peregrina.—Es difícil, porque tampoco yo las veo claras.

Por primera vez me encuentro ante un misterio que yo misma no acierto a comprender. ¿Qué fuerza empujó a esa muchacha antes de tiempo? (O.C., I, p. 538.)

This is the first time she has encountered a mystery she could not comprehend—further definition of her supernatural character.

She explains that she is to visit this house and take with her a drowned girl, but not this night. "Todavía faltan siete lunas." The Abuelo begs her to forget the poor Adela, thinking that she will be the drowning victim, to which the Peregrina answers, "Impossible. Yo no mando; obedezco,"—another allusion to a power superior to her own.

She returns, as she has promised, to keep her rendezvous with "someone in this house," but she is still not certain for whom her visit is intended. This she learns from Martín, who confesses his love for Adela, and in doing so reveals the story of his wife Angélica: Angélica is not dead, but ran away with another man three days after her wedding, a fact which Martín has concealed from everyone. Upon hearing this, the Peregrina is certain of her mission. She explains it, symbolically, to the children:

Peregrina.—... Un día la muchacha desapareció en el remanso. Se había ido a vivir a las casas profundas donde los peces golpeaban las ventanas como pájaros fríos; y fue inútil que el pueblo entero la llamara a gritos desde arriba. Estaba como dormida, en su sueño de

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Pilgrim.—(Penive) I don't understand. Someone intended to precipitate things that should mature in their own time. But what is in my books cannot be avoided. (She starts to pick up her staff.) I shall come back.

Grandfather.—Wait. Explain those words to me.

Pilgrim.—It's difficult, because I don't see them too clearly, either. For the first time, I am facing a mystery that I don't quite understand. What power drove that girl on before her time?

5 It's still seven months away.

16 "Impossible. I don't give orders; I obey."
niebla, paseando por los jardines de musgo sus cabellos flotantes y la ternura lenta de sus manos sin peso. Así pasaron los días y los años. . . . Ya todos empezaban a olvidarla. Sólo la Madre, con los ojos fijos, la esperaba todavía. . . . Y por fin, el milagro se hizo. Una noche de hogueras y canciones, la bella durmiente del río fue encontrada, más hermosa que nunca. Respetada por el agua y los peces, tenía los cabellos limpios, las manos tibias todavía, y en los labios una sonrisa de paz . . . como si los años del fondo hubieran sido sólo un instante. (Los niños llaman un momento, impresionados.)

Dorina.—¿Qué historia tan extraña! . . . ¿Cuándo ocurrió eso?

Peregrina.—No ha ocurrido todavía. Pero ya está cerca. . . . ¿No os acordáis? . . . ¿Esta noche todos los ríos del mundo llevan una gota del Jordán! (O.C., I, pp. 576-577.)

She has explained, prophetically, exactly what will occur this very night. Angélica returns, as the Dama has predicted, expecting to occupy her former position in the home, a position now occupied by Adela. When she enters, the Peregrina, without seeing her, senses her presence, recognizes her, and calls her by name. The Dama proceeds to convince her of the futility of her position, which she is at first reluctant to accept. She exclaims, “¡No habrá fuerza humana que me arranque de aquí!” (O.C., I, p. 596.) She is unaware of how profoundly true these words are! She tells the Peregrina of her despair when her lover abandoned her, and the Peregrina reads her thoughts:

Peregrina.—(Con voz de profunda sugestión como si siguiera en voz alta el pensamiento de Angélica.)

Pilgrim.—. . . One day the girl disappeared in the backwater. She had gone below to live in the deep houses where fish knock on the window panes like cold birds; and the whole town called to her from above, but she did not hear. She was as though in a misty sleep, strolling through the moss gardens, her hair a floating wispy, her weightless hands a tender slowness. There she spent days and years. . . . Finally everyone began to forget her. Only her mother, her gaze steady, still waited. . . . And finally, the miracle happened. One festive night—a night of bonfires and singing—the sleeping beauty was found, lovelier than ever. The water had respected her beauty, for her hair was clean, her hands still warm, and on her lips a smile of peace. . . . as though the years below had been but an instant. (The children are silent for a moment, impressed.)

Dorina.—What a strange story! When did it happen?

Pilgrim.—It hasn’t happened yet. But it is near. . . . Don’t you remember?

Tonight all the rivers in the world carry water from the River Jordan!

“No human force is capable of tearing me from this place!”
DEATH IN ALEJANDRO CASONA

Aquella noche pensaste que más allá, al otro lado del miedo, está el país del último perdón, con un frío blanco y tranquilo; donde hay una sonrisa de paz para todos los labios, una serenidad infinita para todos los ojos. . . . ¿Y donde es tan hermoso dormir, siempre quieto, sin dolor y sin fin?

Angélica.—(Se vuelve mirándola con miedo.) ¿Quién eres tú que me estás leyendo por dentro? (O.C., I, p. 597.)

Angélica continues to protest, until the Dama convinces her in a scene which expresses another poetic facet of death as a fulfillment:

Peregrina.—Yo te enseñaré el camino. Ven conmigo, y mañana el pueblo tendrá su leyenda. (La toma de la mano.) ¿Vamos . . . ?

Angélica.—Suelta. . . . Hay algo en ti que me da miedo.

Peregrina.—¿Todavía? Mírame bien. ¿Cómo me ves ahora . . . ? (Queda inmóvil con las manos cruzadas.)

Angélica.—(La contempla fascinada.) Como un gran sueño sin párpados. . . . Pero cada vez más hermosa. . . .

Peregrina.—[Todo el secreto está ahí!] Primero, vivir apasionadamente, y después morir con belleza. (Le pone la corona de rosas en los cabellos.) Así . . . como si fueras a una nueva boda. Animo, Angélica. . . . Un momento de valor, y tu recuerdo quedará plantado en la aldea como un roble lleno de nidos. ¿Vamos?

Angélica.—(Cierra los ojos.) Vamos. (O.C., I, pp. 600-601.)

The village people find her in the river, serene in death, as the Peregrina foretold. Everyone accepts Angélica’s reappear-

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99Pilgrim.—(With a deeply suggestive tone, as though she were following along Angela’s thoughts.) That night you thought that over there, on the other side of fear, is the country of ultimate forgiveness, with a calm, white cold; where there is a peaceful smile for all lips, an infinite serenity for all eyes . . . and where it is beautiful to sleep, forever quiet, without pain and without end.

Angela.—(She turns, looking at her fearfully.) Who are you that you know how to read my thoughts?

Pilgrim.—I’ll show you the way. Come with me, and tomorrow the town will have its legend. (She takes her by the hand.) Shall we?

Angela.—Let go. . . . There’s something about you that frightens me.

Pilgrim.—Still? Look at me carefully. How do you see me now?

Angela.—(Contemplating her, fascinated.) Like a great, startled dream. . . . But more and more beautiful. . . .

Pilgrim.—There is the whole secret! First live passionately, then die beautifully! (She places the crown of roses in her hair.) There . . . as though you were going to a new wedding. Courage, Angela. . . . One moment of courage, and your memory will be rooted in the village like an oak full of nests. Shall we?

Angela.—(Closing her eyes.) Yes.
ance as a miracle, and another of the Dama's predictions is fulfilled.

Conesa does not sacrifice characterization to the symbolic nature of the Peregrina. She possesses human qualities which redeem her from the purely allegorical. When she first appears, she has not lost her way, but "las fuerzas para andarlo"; she is tired and cold. At length, the children ask her if she knows any games. She answers that she has forgotten them all, but adds, "... si me enseñáis, puedo aprender." She begins to play, and she soon discovers the miracle of laughter, but she finds difficulty in controlling it. Her laughter increases in almost frenzied crescendo, until a convulsive burst frightens the children, and she herself is astonished: "¿Qué es lo que estoy haciendo? ... ¿Qué es esto que me hincha la garganta y me retumba cristales en la boca?" (O.C., I, p. 520.)

Though she is unaccustomed to such merriment, she is capable of it; but it soon tires her, and she finds that she must rest. She even falls asleep, leaving instructions that she be awakened promptly at nine o'clock. She is fallible, for she oversleeps, and Martín, whom she was to meet, is spared. "Sólo un niño podía realizar tal milagro," she declares. This expression reflects a human tenderness for children. "Los niños son buenos amigos míos," she says. Later, during the festivities of the Noche de San Juan, Andrés, the youngest child, exclaims, "¡Yo voy a saltar la hoguera como los grandes! ¿Vendrás con nosotros?," to which she answers, "No. Cuando los niños saltan por encima del fuego no quisiera nunca estar allí." (O.C., I, p. 565.)

She is aware of the terror that people feel for her and is distressed. She desires understanding and longs to feel welcome. She tells the Abuelo, who has invited her to leave, "Sólo quisiera, antes de marchar, que me despidieras sin odio, con una palabra buena." (O.C., I, p. 529.) Her love and her emotions are tragic, as she herself explains:

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21"... the strength to travel it."
22"... if you teach me, I can learn."
23"What am I doing? ... What is this that swells in my throat and reverberates in my mouth with the ring of crystal?"
24"Only a child could accomplish such a miracle."
25"Children are good friends of mine."
26"I'm going to jump over the bonfire like the big guys! Will you come with us?"
27"No. When children jump over fires, I would prefer never to be there."
28"I only wish, before I leave, that you should bid me good-bye without hatred, with a kind word."

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Peregrina.—También yo quisiera adornarme de rosas como las campesinas, vivir entre niños felices y tener un hombre hermoso a quien amar. Pero cuando voy a cortar las rosas todo el jardín se me hiela. Cuando los niños juegan conmigo tengo que volver la cabeza por miedo a que se me queden quietos al tocarlos. Y en cuanto a los hombres, de qué me sirve que los más hermosos me busquen a caballo, si al besarlos siento que sus brazos inútiles me resbalan sin fuerza en la cintura? (Desesperada.) ¿Comprendes ahora lo amargo de mi destino? Presenciar todos los dolores sin poder llorar. . . Tener todos los sentimientos de una mujer sin poder usar ninguno. . . ¡Y estar condenada a matar siempre, siempre, sin poder nunca morir! (Cae abrumada en el sillón con la frente entre las manos. . .)\(^{29}\)

Noting her emotion, the Abuelo is moved:

. . . Se acerca y le pone cordialmente una mano sobre el hombro.

Abuelo.—Pobre mujer.

Peregrina.—Gracias, Abuelo. Te había pedido un poco de comprensión y me has llamado mujer, que es la palabra más hermosa en labios de hombre. (O.C., I, p. 532.)\(^{30}\)

Those of us still "en este lado de todas las preguntas"\(^{31}\) may resent Casona's untimely encounter with his own private Peregrina, but we are forced to concede that "la muerte es más hábil que nosotros,"\(^{32}\) and we find comfort in the hope that Casona, now "en el lado de la única contestación,"\(^{33}\) has found in his union with the Peregrina the fulfillment he expected.

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\(^{29}\)Pilgrim.—I too should like to adorn myself with roses like the peasant girls, live among happy children, and have a beautiful man to love. But when I go to cut roses, the whole garden freezes. When children play with me, I have to turn my head for fear that they will remain still when I touch them. And as for men, what good does it do me that the handsomest of them come looking for me on horseback? When I kiss them I feel their useless arms slide limply from my waist. (Desperately.) Do you understand now the bitterness of my destiny? To witness all grief without being able to cry. . . . To have all the sentiments of a woman without being able to use any of them. . . . To be condemned to kill always, always, without ever being able to die! (She falls, overwhelmed, into the armchair with her forehead between her hands. . . .)

\(^{30}\) . . . He draws near and puts his hand gently on her shoulder.

Grandfather.—Poor woman.

Pilgrim.—Thank you, Grandfather. I asked you for a little understanding and you called me a woman, which is the most beautiful word on a man's lips.

\(^{31}\) "over here where all the questions are . . ."

\(^{32}\) "Death is more skillful than we. . . ."

\(^{33}\) "over there (where the only answer is . . .)"