Play, Death, and Apotheosis

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We cannot look directly at either the sun or death, says La Rochefoucauld. If we could not blink at death as we do at the sun, it would blind us. Let that saving reflex begin to lag, and anxiety emerges: in Kierkegaard's unforgettable phrase, the sickness unto death. A reflex makes a useful analogy for behavior that can be ambiguously conscious and unconscious, automatic yet sometimes overridden. This is the context in which Ernest Becker places heroism as "first and foremost a reflex of the terror of death." In this chapter I want to examine play-death as one expression of that essential blinking reflex, not only because play-death enables the mortal mind to acknowledge death while shutting it out, but more specifically because it is a special instance of the universal process Becker describes, in which imagination generates heroism in order to master the prospect of its own annihilation.

It is difficult to think about death. Because death is nothingness and nature abhors a vacuum, imagination has to construe it vicariously, through symbolic equivalents. In life no less than art death is a complex symbol that varies from one individual and culture to another, and reflects the values of living imaginations. The dead sleep, go to their reward, lay down their burden, and so on. This cognitive peculiarity reinforces "the almost universal human recourse to magic and irrationality" in handling anxiety about mortality, and helps to explain the persistent belief that "death is a fictive experience"—that is, a kind of play-death.

Let me make this subject less alien by evoking a particular child's concrete experience. One summer evening when my daughter Vanessa was nearly four years old she asked me with an uneasy stammer if I was going to die. When I answered yes, someday, she asked if she too would die. On the spot I offered her abridged versions of venerable consolations, putting as natural and reasonable a face on the problem as I could. The next evening I overheard her singing under her breath—too loudly to be ignored, too softly to be questioned—"My name's Vanessa, and I'm never going to die, never going to die...

Listening without contradicting her, as she intended me to, I was participating in an impromptu ceremony that corroborated her wishful immortality. Like Sir Toby singing "But I will never die" (TN 2.3.106), she wanted company to celebrate a wishful defiance of reality. A day or two later Vanessa demanded: Was it really true, what people had been telling her, that after you die you go to heaven? Many people, I answered, believed that it was true, although no one had come back from heaven to prove it. After a moment's thought, the not-quite-four year old countered: "But after you go to heaven, then where do you go?" Where indeed? Who moves the prime mover? The child's question leads directly into the traditional labyrinths of speculative eschatology. It points out the inherent inadequacy of the categories through which we approach the ultimate framework of thought.

As it happened, we were in a vast supermarket—even for a jaded adult an impressive storehouse of biological and cultural vitality—and all at once Vanessa began pushing the grocery cart. Bragging how strong she was, she climactically puffed herself up to boast: "I could pick up this whole building, all these people, with one hand!"

The moment seemed to offer a glimpse into the formation of heroic claims out of the self's discovery of its incomprehensible groundlessness. Commanding a storehouse of food-energy, promising (or threatening) to hoist the world in one hand, she was unwittingly evoking ancient archetypes. I am not trying to regerminate Western culture out of one anecdote or claiming that a supermarket epiphany explains the origins of Attic corn goddesses, Atlas, or the medieval image of God cupping the great globe in his hand. Rather, I want to make vivid the fundamental dynamic of under- and overestimation that accompanies our engagement of reality: the reflex by which we minimize death and maximize the self. My daughter was not merely repressing dread but also converting it into idealizing energy. And as she must have known perfectly well, she was falsifying reality. Her act was also an "act" before an audience happy to sanction a bit of escapist madness as child's play. Like the song she had chanted under her breath ("I'm never going to die, never going to die"), her boast was part—ordi-
narily a forgotten, "unconscious" part—of a lifelong process of creating a conviction of immortality.

Insofar as Vanessa’s boast emulated storybook and television heroes, it was not only the survival wish of one person but also the cry of a particular culture.² In fact, both of us, parent and child, were engaged in culturally determined acts of creative denial. For in my blandly consoling role as Wise Old Professor I too was appealing to heroic authority in order to counter the spectre intruding on us.

While this view of human development may seem morbid, it does not mean that all experience is simply escapism or reducible to anxiety. As a rule the creation of heroic significance out of dread is an adaptive strategy, a means of releasing and channeling creative energy:

as man cannot perform efficiently in the absence of a fairly high degree of reasonably persistent emotional activation, cultural mechanisms assuring the ready availability of the continually varying sort of sensory experience that can sustain such activities are equally essential. Institutionalized regulations against the open display of corpses outside of well-defined contexts (funerals, etc.) protect a peculiarly high-strung animal against the fears aroused by death and bodily destruction; watching or participating in automobile races (not all of which take place at tracks) deliciously stimulates the same fears.³

If play-death and heroism, too, “deliciously stimulate” fears, they become a means of optimizing excitement: crucial means by which culture turns a source of numbing paralysis into an enabling force.

Sometimes we can better appreciate our own embeddedness in culture if we look to the past. In Siena there is a painting by Simone Martini (1284–1344) in which a mother and four passersby watch in horror as a child falls from a loggia toward the stone street below, and Saint Augustine Novello (d. 1309) swoops down from heaven trailing a plume of cloud, exactly like Superman, to effect a midair rescue at the point of death.² The picture deploys a patriarchal hero not only to counter fears—most obviously maternal fears—for the imperiled child, but also to recreate and to transcend the traumatic childhood discovery of death. For the spectator may identify with the infant who has innocently plummeted out of its mother’s protection into the knowledge of annihilation, causing the saint to reveal himself.

Simone Martini’s painting is a culture-specific style of blinking at the unthinkable horror. The painter reinterprets the human family to illustrate orthodox medieval Christian doctrine, so that the loving if careless mother (who, like fallen Eve, can give only mortal life) is superseded by a supernatural father who can bestow a second, symbolic birth on the child. It could be argued that when my own daughter took her conceptual plunge toward mortality, I unconsciously played out a twentieth-century middle-class American version of Augustine’s patriarchal rescue, offering consolation in exchange for her agreement to believe in the authority I mediated.

Every society, Ernest Becker contends, can be understood as “a symbolic action system, a structure of statuses and roles, customs and rules for behavior, designed to serve as a vehicle for earthly heroism” (Becker 1973, pp. 4–5). Each script is unique. Yet despite this diversity,
it doesn't matter whether the cultural hero-system is frankly magical, religious, and primitive or secular, scientific, and civilized. It is still a mythical hero system in which people serve in order to earn a feeling of primary value, of cosmic specialness, of ultimate usefulness to creation, of unshakable meaning. They earn this feeling by carving out a place in nature, by building an edifice that reflects human value: a temple, a cathedral, a totem pole, a skyscraper, a family that spans three generations. The hope and belief is that the things that man creates in society are of lasting worth and meaning, that they outshine death and decay, that man and his products count. [p. 41]

Beaten by his enemies, Brutus seems willingly to choose death until we realize that he is dreaming of personal transcendence: “I shall have glory by this losing day / More than Octavius and Mark Antony / By this vile conquest shall attain unto” (JC 5.5.36–38). Death is less real to him than the cultural code that transfixes him in noble, competitive, and vindictive triumph.

Denial is the inescapable condition of humanity. For as a creature whose consciousness is a function of symbolism and therefore potentially limitless, man is godlike and yet trapped in the body of an animal doomed to rot in the ground and disappear forever. Mind may contemplate symbolic perfection, yet the body lives by killing and chewing other creatures, digesting them into foul-smelling waste. From that appalling dilemma springs the effort to construct a world that can withstand engulfing reality:

Babies are occasionally born with gills and tails, but this is . . . hushed up.[6] Who wants to face up fully to the creatures we are, clawing and grasping for breath in a universe beyond our ken? I think such events illustrate the meaning of Pascal's chilling reflection: “Men are so necessarily mad that not to be mad would amount to another form of madness” . . . Mad because . . . everything that man does in his symbolic world is an attempt to deny and overcome his grotesque fate. He literally drives himself into a blind obliviousness with social games, psychological tricks, personal preoccupations so far removed from the reality of his situation that they are forms of madness—agreed madness, shared madness, disguised and dignified madness, but madness all the same.

[Becker 1973, p. 27]

Most people forget the sort of dissonance that first reveals our madness—if it was ever really allowed to sink in. For example, we give children cuddly stuffed animals to play with, animals usually proportioned to represent the young. Then one day at dinner the child thinks to ask what we are eating, and the tribal elders answer with blandly violent dissociation that we are eating a steak. And what is a steak? Not what but who: the moo cow or Porky Pig; old friends, versions of ourselves. A host of inventions, from manners to culinary nomenclature, disguises the truth that we live by killing, in quotidian madness.

It needs to be emphasized that for Becker heroism means not merely particular conventional roles but individual and cultural value systems. Heroism is whatever produces a conviction of importance and worth, from religious texts to crass propaganda, from ownership to war. Moreover, elements of a given system are apt to be highly integrated and imply some transcendent ground. Dr. Dee, for instance, celebrated number for its “strange participation between things supernatural, immortal, sensible, compounded and divisible” even as he was urging the military need for mathematics in the ordering of ranks, citing “Northumberland's young heir, with his addiction to arithmetic on the field of war: he kept the rules in a gold case round his neck.”

“Number” here interacts with other sources of potency: religion, astrology, science, social privilege (the admirable heir of Northumberland), economic symbolism (the amulet-like gold case), law and, not least, the technology of violent conquest.

In my daughter's reaction to the discovery of her death the urge to heroic denial is plain. Yet her denial was a creative act. Making up a naive dirty (“I'm never going to die”), she was using art to substantiate a troubling wish. In her Herculanean posture she turned role-player. So far I have been emphasizing the terror that vanishes with repression. But heroism is value-making activity, and the denial of death can be turned inside out to focus on the creativity that makes denial possible.

Let me use these categories to suggest the historical context into which Shakespeare's fantasies of play-death emerged. In Simone Martini's painting death has empowered rather than destroyed Saint Augustine. As a demigod, he mediates between heaven and earth. He not only promises eternal life to the faithful, his rescue of the child represents the arrival of a sense of security, even immortality, in everyday life. The great medieval churches tried to substantiate such supernatural security by impressively boxing the personal relics of saints on their
greatness is primarily a command over other people's imaginations. . . . At the lowest level, it is style, effective self-dramatization; at the highest, it is a means of overcoming time, death, and the world. . . . The audience for greatness in Antony and Cleopatra is multiple: it is, first, the small group of people on stage at any time; second, the entire known world to whom Antony and Cleopatra play and which seems always to regard them with fascination; it is also a timeless, superhuman audience, the heroes of history and legend and the gods themselves; finally, it is the audience of posterity, of whom we in the theater are a part.10

So plain is this preoccupation with value and value-making that for the moment I want to bypass it in order to concentrate on play: the dramatist's means of creating the cognitive conditions—the state of mind—that make a sense of immortality possible.

"Rebirth," Jung concedes, "is not a process that we can in any way observe. We can neither measure nor weigh nor photograph it."11 Be that as it may (the stricture scarcely silenced Jung), criticism can analyze the cognitive conditions in cultural production that prompt people to speak of ineffable reality. It is instructive, for example, to watch Shakespeare's Cleopatra dissolve her worldly identity in order to project one less perishable, whether we call the result mystification or mystic rebirth.

Cleopatra's transformation works by momentarily merging conceptual categories that are as a rule fatally distinct. The text of her leave-taking is a bewildering interplay of mental worlds or mind-sets. Conceptually, Shakespeare's fundamental procedure is to generate such a wealth of meanings and affect that the mind registers all the nuances, transcendent claims included, without having time to analyze them.12
The queen is playful yet earnest too. As jokes about the fatal phallic worm breed among her "immortal longings" (5.2.281), the mind-boggling wordplay and fertile associations produce multiple perspectives. Undertaking her death onstage, the woman's action is clear enough, even riveting, yet the overtones of her behavior are potently elusive.

As meanings proliferate, so do Cleopatra's roles. At once she is queen, lover, priestess, wife, mother, and more. Her own identity becomes a kind of pun, a ripple of meanings that she could expand infinitely the way the Clown would endlessly develop his jest upon the worm if her insistent farewells did not stop him. The expansion of

premises. Yet the abiding contradiction between immortal spirit and a few odds and ends of bone and hair expressed cognitive dissonance that in time the Reformation explosively resolved by discrediting relics in the name of pure faith. This is the tension Huizinga found in "the dominant thought" of the medieval period, that it "hardly knew anything with regard to death but these two extremes: lamentation about the briefness of earthly glory, and jubilation over the salvation of the soul. All that lay between—piety, resignation, longing, consolation—remained unexpressed and was . . . absorbed by the . . . too vivid representation of Death hideous and threatening. Living emotion stiffens among the abused imagery of skeletons and worms."

Among other things, it seems to me, a votive scene like Simone Martini's attempts to reconcile contradictory attitudes toward death by dramatizing its story of play-death and rescue. Where doctrine and empirical fact tend to be static and incontestable, the painting keeps ideas in play. It tries to visualize eschatological power in active human form. While it remains predominantly wishful, it does seek to incorporate elements of the mortal world in the family roles and mundane street it depicts.

By analogy, English dramatists beginning with Marlowe conceived the problem of death in secular, tragic terms over the course of several decades. In a way, as Professor Spencer recognized, the dramatists rediscovered death.7 Their tragic heroes played out emerging contradictions between medieval and humanistic attitudes toward death. In Becker's terms, they improvised new systems of symbolic immortality as old habits and categories lost their persuasiveness. Like the mediating Augustinian superman, they enabled imagination to explore what Huizinga calls the living emotion that lay between the conceptual extremes of dust and glory. It is in this historical context, with its unprecedented innovations in artistic and heroic forms, that Shakespeare's responses to death crystallized.

II

Cleopatra's final moments vividly illustrate some of the processes that generate symbolic immortality. The play is justly famous for its rhetoric of heroism. It celebrates the queen "Whom every thing becomes" (1.1.49) as an infinite source of value. The lovers' rhapsodies pitch from peak to peak of praise. In the play
cognitive space in the spectator is accompanied by a commensurate expansion of the queen's identity. She sublates the "basest life" of a conventional self into the "fire and aire" (289–90) of an expanded identity. She "plays" the impalpable elements, so to speak, while reclaiming herself "marble-constant" (240). What "becomes" of Antony and Cleopatra flows from their beingness. . . . They act on each other and on their audiences. They act on and act out their becomingness, striving even in death to become themselves, in both senses of the phrase" (Goldman, p. 126).

As Plotinus reasoned, role-playing is a reassuring model of rebirth: "If dying is but changing a body as the actor changes a costume, or even an exit from the body like the exit of an actor from the boards when he has no more to say or do—though he will still return to act on another occasion—what is there so very dreadful in this transformation of living beings one into another?" In such a reincarnation existence matters more than any particular identity, though of course the theater metaphor implies a controlling dramatist. Since personality is always richer than conventional social forms can express, role-playing can be creatively truthful as well as escapist. The dramatist stabilizes this dizzying equivocation by calling Cleopatra's end a sleep, one more—perhaps not even the last—of her "conclusions infinite / Of easy ways to die" (354–55).

Dissolving the boundaries of identity, Cleopatra also blurs conventional reality itself. In addition to wordplay, allusion, and irony, her farewell uses the inherent multiplicity of symbolism and paradoxical ideas to achieve her supralogical fecundity of meaning. Given the usual wordplay on "dying" and orgasm, "the pretty worm of Nilus" (243) joins killing and sexual regeneration in a way that suggests cyclical renewal in nature. "Age cannot wither" the woman herself, for "she makes hungry / Where most she satisfies" (2.2.234–37), echoing the paradox of vitality in exhaustion. Such imagery opens toward the ideas of Renaissance scientists like Paracelsus, who taught the interdependence of life and death, following Aristotle in his view that "decay is the beginning of all birth. . . . It brings about the birth and rebirth of forms a thousand times improved. . . . And this is the highest and greatest mysterium of God." As Friar Lawrence formulates it in Romeo and Juliet, "The earth that's nature's mother is her tomb; / What is her burying grave, that is her womb" (2.3.9–10).

Shakespeare creates the impression of transformed vitality, then, partly by expanding some basic conceptual categories. A related device is suddenly to shift focus, as in the trick of perspective that awes the lovers who awaken from a "death-counterfeiting" midsummer night's sleep to find the "things" of conventional reality suddenly seeming "small and indistinguishable, / Like far-off mountains turned into clouds" (MND 3.2.364, 4.1.187–88). In Cleopatra's farewell the shape-shifting "far-off mountains" are the archetypes latent in the text: ideas distinct yet too remote to be empirically interrogated. The asp, say, implies not only the eternal serpent that bites its own tail but also the tempter of Eden, who raises behind Cleopatra the shadow of Eve. As the "baby at my breast, / That sucks the nurse asleep" (5.2.309–10), the poisonous killer becomes the symbol of new life, insinuating the queen into the role of mother-goddess, the paradox removed from close scrutiny into a mystified background, a conceptual "beyond."

One way of understanding the effects of Cleopatra's rhetoric is to consider the way it mimics primordial or-mythic thought in which time is construed as an eternal present or an "eternal return." Mythic thought lacks the concept "nevermore" or takes it to be illusory. It does not attribute radical—and fatal—individuality to personality. Hence "the growth of ego-consciousness, the development of death as a problem, and the actualization of the linear time that unfolds in past, present, and future belong together." E M. Cornford could have been characterizing play-death when he described the essence of reincarnation as the belief "that the one life of the group or tribe extends continuously through the dead members as well as through the living; the dead are still part of the group, in the same sense as the living. This life, which is perpetually renewed, is reborn out of the opposite state, called 'death,' into which, at the other end of the arc, it passes again." Out of the group's collective soul or "Daemon" the king and the hero apparently emerged as the first individual souls. The soul of the king or hero is nonetheless immortal "primarily because it is, in a way, still the super-individual soul of the group, which outlives every generation of its members."

Vestigial forms of these ideas appear in Renaissance ghost lore and theories of monarchy such as "the king's two bodies," in which the monarch is simultaneously a corporeal person and the supernatural spirit of his subjects. The ghosts who ply Shakespeare's stage perpetuate the forms of life in death and seek to influence the living. The many reflexive jokes in the plays imply that life and death mingle
backstage, and that every prologue marks a rebirth. Cleopatra envisions “Some squeaking Cleopatra boy[ing] my greatness” in the future (220), even as a boy-actor was impersonating her onstage in London: an utterance which is at once a sophisticated metadramatic joke and a primitive intuition that the present somehow contains the future and, from the spectator’s vantage point in a London which was consciously replaying the glories of Rome and shimmering Egypt, that the present preserves the past as well.

Art itself “lives” by appearing to transcend the flawed categories of conventional experience. Shakespeare’s plays, for instance, are aggressively ordered and yet vitally irrecducible. They are ideal forms full of brawling ambiguities. Just as Egyptian funeral arts transform the king’s corpse into a mummy, which is both a real person and a static representation of life, the plays exploit the ambiguous status of the actor. They demonstrate the power of formal perfection over transitoriness in ways far more elemental and profound than trivial neoclassicism can appreciate. Criticism rarely makes much of the spellbinding energies that relate drama to primitive forms of immortalizing art such as the polished copper mirror, whose glow the ancient world identified with the sun, and whose reflection of the human image became associated with vitality, generation, and regeneration. Given its customary handle in the shape of a papyrus stalk and its solar glow, the mirror embodied the energy of seasonal death and renewal. The reflected image is a self apart, as the soul was thought to be and an actor is, and the mirror dramatizes the ability of an artistic object to capture dynamic vitality.

Among other things, *Antony and Cleopatra* is itself a vicarious form of funeral art. It invites spectators to mourn and celebrate the deaths of heroes. Like Charmian, who cries “Your crown’s awry, / I’ll mend it, and then play” (5.2.318–19), the play’s emphasis on formal perfection integrates dissolution into life and makes play possible—indeed, *it* plays. Hence the image of death as sleep which, like mumification, suspends rather than terminates life, allowing the symbolized value accumulated in the heroic figure to be at once relinquished and conserved. A timeless sleep evokes the teasing promise of immortalizing art, as does the “statue” of Hermione in *The Winter’s Tale*, which, again like a mummy, is at once a real person and an artifact, as well as a state of mind in the beholder. When Caesar invokes the “sleeping” Cleopatra—“As she would catch another Antony / In her strong toil of grace” (5.2.347–8)—the play seems to be consoling its spectators by depicting an immortal image of her rather as Giotto and Fra Angelico painted the escaping soul as a naturalistic miniature of the dying person.

Dramatizing Cleopatra’s end, Shakespeare combines deflation and reverence, dispassionate objectivity and a mystified wishfulness. As in the “natural perspective” created by Sebastian’s return from “his watery tomb” in *Twelfth Night* (5.1.217, 234), death both is and is not. The mythic and objective modes of thought somehow coexist. The natural perspective gives form to the equivocation by which people ordinarily protect themselves from the terror of death. Cleopatra’s end objectifies and tests the equivocal mentality of spectators in the theater. Our denial of death, says Robert Jay Lifton, “is indeed formidable. . . . But that denial can never be total; we are never fully ignorant of the fact that we die. Rather we go about life with a kind of ‘middle knowledge’ of death, a partial awareness of its side by side with expressions and actions that belie that awareness.”

Robert Jay Lifton stresses that we symbolize death and immortality through equivalents. He speaks of a sense of immortality as “the individual’s experience of participation in some form of collective life-continuity,” a “compelling and universal inner quest for continuous symbolic relationship to what has gone before and what will continue after our finite individual lives” (Lifton, p. 17). He means that people imagine themselves connected to the world that will survive them, through biology, posterity, significant deeds, and nature, for example. Defined this way, the post-Freudian psychiatrist’s “sense of immortality” begins to resemble the archaic mentality Cornford describes, which also emphasized the indestructible connectedness of all living things. True, Lifton means his concept of immortality to be frankly symbolic and tacit, coexisting with awareness of annihilation, where the archaic imagination presumably made no clear distinction. But there is always some question about how far people are capable of separating the literal and the symbolic in a subject as ultimate as immortality. A “middle knowledge” of death depends in part on leaving certain categories undifferentiated. Even Lifton’s modern social-scientific “sense of immortality” is ambiguous in ways that bring it closer to the mentality of play-death than objectivity warrants.
III

*Antony and Cleopatra* does more than attenuate the reality of death: it celebrates the personages it destroys onstage. Again and again, as if by reflex, the play invests death with significance, whether we think of it as Aristotelian dignity, ritual sacrifice, or some deconstructible rhetorical chimera. Sensing the compensatory nature of the lovers’ grandeur, for example, one critic contends that a “bedrock of nihilism underlying the mountainous passion of Antony and Cleopatra is . . . finally exposed.” Yet no matter how nihilistic the play may seem to be, it insinuates that death is finally play-death—and by using the consoling metaphor “bedrock nihilism,” the critic naively supports the characters’ aspirations to superhuman permanence. The play’s heroes may be abject shadows yet they cannot be nothing.

Just as the play achieves its climactic significance by ending itself, so Cleopatra disintegrates her conventional identity in order to sublimate herself in a plethora of roles, in fire and air and of course the words the spectators take out of the theater in memory. Insofar as her death consists of withdrawal and symbolic substitution, it is a form of play-death.

To some extent human behavior is always sublimated and compensatory. Every cognitive structure excludes other possibilities. Repression constrains imagination so it can function in the wondrous flux engulfing it. We restrict awareness even as, by idealizing, we inflate ourselves in an effort to stand up to the overwhelming forces around us. So fundamental is this process of self-diminishment and self-aggrandizement that ordinarily it goes unremarked. Yet the dynamic of withdrawal and symbolic substitution is a basic source of the fantasy of play-death and immortality. In this section I would like to look at Olivia’s withdrawal into a house of mourning in *Twelfth Night* as an example of that dynamic.

Olivia’s withdrawal is an act of identification with the structure that shelters her. A house may symbolically enlarge and substantiate the self it encloses, becoming a carapace more durable and imposing than the human body, so that a recluse may feel invulnerable. The process of identification begins in childhood, in the creation of defenses that allow a child to feel a sense of self-worth and control. In culture the process becomes transparently ideological, as when metonymy equates a queen and her palace. The “house” of a patriarch may encapsulate his ancestors and posterity as well as a present household. A single play may present a sequence of analogous dwellings or shells. The ship torn apart on Illyria’s coast figuratively resurfaces as Olivia’s battened-down house, becoming in time Malvolio’s cell, a tomb, and a wedding chapel.

In *Twelfth Night* we hear that Olivia is the daughter of a count
That died some twelvemonth since, then leaving her
In the protection of his son, her brother,
Who shortly also died; for whose dear love,
They say, she hath abjur’d the company
And sight of men.

Twice stung by death, Olivia has withdrawn into her house not only to fortify herself like a snail in its shell, but also to “season” or preserve “A brother’s dead love, which she would keep fresh / And lasting in her sad remembrance” (1.1.29–31). Playing dead, bequeathing her beauty to the world (1.5-2.44–49), she would create an imperishable imaginative space where she can keep her brother’s love, and its validation of her, alive.

Critics regularly deplore Olivia’s delusions the way Gertrude and Claudius scold Hamlet for his morbidity. Yet death has shocked Olivia, and her obsession merely exaggerates the ordinary process by which people may restrict and harden themselves in order to preserve in memory childhood bonds on which identity is based. Whether it signifies mad fixation or loyalty to the highest human ideals, obsession provides some of the essential continuity and purposefulness that make character possible. In her grief Olivia counterfeits death in order to preempt it. If her alternative is to feel annihilated, her tears are creative inasmuch as they support a saving illusion of rescuing her brother from doom. With its roots in guilt and dread, her immobility comes close to what Lifton calls a “mimetic death,” a form of numbing in which the “survivor ‘undergoes a reversible form of symbolic death in order to avoid a permanent physical or psychic death’” (Lifton, p. 180). In this way Olivia’s focus on the dead resembles Juliet’s urge to be hidden in a chamber house “with a dead man in his shroud” (RJ 4.1.86) before magically undoing death with the vitality of Romeo’s love.

Olivia’s mourning is at once a fantasy of self-sacrifice and heroic
rescue. With its connotation of tear-salted meat, her "seasoning" of her brother's love is a grotesque form of mummification. She would preserve him in memory like a nun meditating upon (in effect, immortalizing) the Savior. This scenario answered to complex cultural needs. It fulfilled patriarchal wishes for surrogate immortality, capturing a child/woman who would perpetuate a departed master's will. Olivia's situation caricatures the Renaissance conviction that to be remembered is to escape annihilation: "[T]he blankness of being forgotten was of all thoughts the most tormenting" (Spencer, p. 133).24 The obsessed house becomes a funeral monument.

The role of grieving voytry is often gender-determined—consider the Princess of France at the close of Love's Labor's Lost or the scannymphs hourly tolling the lost father in Ferdinand's lament (Tem. 1.2.397–405). But the role also parodies the old religion's chantries. For Olivia grief is a form of employment, and not without its rewards. Mourning enables her to play godlike guarantor of immortality while also insuring her independence. It enables her to subordinate her male kinsmen, living (Sir Toby) and dead, and to resist the gentle yoke of marriage. Which is to say that Olivia's play-death is also a means to autonomy.

Olivia's alter ego is "drowned Viola" (5.1.241), who also keeps a brother alive in imagination (1.2.19–21). At first Viola is drawn to Olivia as if her tomblike mourning house could be a mother's sheltering womb: "O that I serv'd that lady / And might not be delivered to the world / Till I had made mine own occasion mellow / What mine estate is" (42–44). Compromising with her wish for perfect autonomy, she recreates herself in her brother's image, enabled by this narcissistic emulation to establish a bond with the duke. Where Olivia remains in a shell until a "resurrected" brother reanimates her feelings, Viola frees herself to act by taking shelter in the role of "Cesario," a comic form of Caesar. As Viola/Sebastian, she is both the burlesque warrior-hero Sir Toby mocks and the puissant stranger who in fact puts Toby to rout. Once "Cesario" is strong enough, Viola can marry Orsino. Analogously, narcissism stirs Olivia to infatuation with the girlish boy Cesario, who can become the more fully masculine and alien Sebastian once Olivia has subdued her dread and herself played the masculine part of wooer.

The anagrammatic pair Olivia and Viola complement one another. They are two possible responses to annihilation, two modes of assum-

ing form. Although obsession and the vicariousness of play are different modes, the play insinuates that they are interdependent. After all, Viola spends most of the play psyching out Olivia. Olivia's mourning prepares her to love Sebastian even as Viola's transformation allows her to reach out to share the autonomy and power of the duke. Together, that is, the women act out the process of withdrawal and substitution by which play-death in Shakespeare evokes symbolic immortality.25 The outcome is the astonishing return of a lost brother from his "watery tomb" (5.1.234)—compare "house of tears"—and the nuptial promise of undying posterity.

Twelfth Night projects two Renaissance solutions to the problem of death and explores the conflict between them. The play challenges the idea that mourning insures immortality because mourning blocks marriage, the immortality rite that perpetuates society. Ecstatic love opens Olivia's house and draws her back into life, and love tacitly compensates her for accepting mortality. Yet the play is deeply equivocal about these ideologies. Implicitly it argues for the efficacy of mourning as a means to immortality by insinuating that the mourners' devotion contributes to the resurrection of the lost brother. Correspondingly the play jokes that Olivia's ecstatic love is so capriciously overpowering that it amounts to mad self-loss. Seen from this angle, Twelfth Night's comedy indulges wishes ("what you will") while unfolding a dilemma.

IV

Although the term may seem extravagant and obsolete, I call the ultimate goal of play-death apotheosis. The word can mean "ascension to glory, departure or release from earthly life; resurrection" (OED 4). But its primary meaning is "transformation into a god, deification; divine status" (OED 1). If unconsciously we believe ourselves immortal, as Freud maintained, then we live continually on the verge of apotheosis. Since identity is a symbolic process, and imagination seemingly perfectible and unbounded, human experience is always incipiently godlike.

The drive toward apotheosis may prove benevolent, as in the rescue fantasies of the late romances, or vicious, as in the exterminating fury played out by Tamburlaine and Macbeth. It may be the foundation of political order, as in the rites that celebrated "the rather complete apotheosis of [Queen] Elizabeth, variously regarded as Deborah,
Phoebe, the Fairie Queen, Chastity, Peace or the Fortress of Perfect Beauty. Mythological gods and goddesses surrender their claims on deity in her presence, the one who seemingly embodies all virtue.  

When Bolingbroke proves merciful, the Duchess of York prostrates herself: “A god on earth thou art” (R2 5.3.136). On the other hand, Julius Caesar’s celestial ambitions fatally antagonize crucial followers.

Apotheosis takes its force from triumph over death. In the Renaissance at every turn the eye met doom and glory juxtaposed in Christian imagery. The transfigured Christ serenely displayed his mortal wounds. In apocalyptic lore the risen Savior was to become a warrior-lord smiting Antichrist, crushing death. Saints faced their last agonies with superhuman indifference. In a painting by the Venetian Vittore Carpaccio (1465—1526), the Crucifixion and Apotheosis of the Ten Thousand Martyrs of Mount Ararat, a multitude of semi-nude, athletic warriors are suffering crucifixion in fantastic trees while their heathen enemies fail to notice in the sky behind them the celestial spheres: a multiringed formation exactly resembling a flying saucer, from which angels are emerging to receive the souls of the expiring martyrs gathered on the mountain.

A competitive female version of this apotheosis appears—even including the ten thousand martyrs—in a letter Arbella Stuart wrote to her uncle Gilbert (8 December 1603) vowing that women as a sex are more virtuous than men: “Ours shall still be the purer and more innocent kinde. Theare wentt 10000 Virginys to heauen in one day, looke but in the Almanack and you shall finde that glorious day.”

In Shakespeare too superhuman status depends on mastery of death. Julius Caesar claims to be “constant as the Northern Star, / Of whose true-fix’d and resting quality / There is no fellow in the firmament” (3.1.60—62). Yet in swimming the roiling Tiber, Caesar nearly drowned, causing Cassius to play the mythic hero Aeneas and rescue the father figure Anchises, “the tired Caesar.” Hence Cassius’s contempt: “And this man /Is now become a god” (JC 1.2.119—16). It could be argued that Antony routes the conspirators by resurrecting Caesar in his eulogy, turning the pitiful corpse into a mythic hero in the public imagination, acting out the slain man’s will by proclaiming his will. The plays are critical of divine ambitions and idolatry. In the tragedies, sacredness “goes with the recognition of the human impossibility of being divine, realized in a dread attempt, which brings destruction.”

Christian iconography usually visualized heaven as a process of per-
sonal validation. The elect bask in palpably valuable gold, their individual faces framed by golden haloes. In paradise an imperial God crowns the Virgin before an audience of saints, in an idealized temporal rite. All the might in heaven and earth focusses on one humble woman, raising her from mortal insignificance to cosmic life. The Jesus tortured in crucifixion imagery becomes the risen Lord, divinity with an individual human face.

In Shakespeare as in the world outside the theater, rulers and patriarchs are predictably the most eligible for promotion to divinity, and in later chapters I examine the grounds and consequences of that pattern. The late plays, however, conspicuously elevate regal women. Evoking the Virgin’s exaltation, The Winter’s Tale’s Queen Hermione returns from an apparent grave and, with echoes of the New Testament’s promise of eternal life, delivers a kingdom deadened by grief (3.3.102–3). Like the Queen of Heaven, Hermione is a model of long-suffering virtue, not to mention the mother of a redemptive child. She becomes both an agent of deliverance and the object of universal reverence, giving the trite epithet “most sacred lady” (2.2.76) uncanny validation. Although Hermione is individualized, as I noted in Chapter 2, parallels between the two figures suggest that the Jacobean audience took special satisfaction in seeing an abused wife and mother revered with a nostalgic piety suggestive of the old religion. As C. L. Barber puts it, “the problematical role of women in Shakespeare ... reflects the fact that Protestantism did away with the cult of the Virgin Mary. It meant the loss of ritual resource for dealing with the internal residues in all of us of the once all-powerful and all-inclusive mother” (Barber 1980, p. 196).

By contrast, it is Henry V’s violence that makes him a star more glorious than Caesar and the object of his followers’ prayers (I H6 1.1.62–76). In the following chapter I show how Henry’s awful righteousness, no less than Hermione’s patient love, becomes the ground of behavior for an entire society. Through hero worship individuals may participate in a conviction of apotheosis. Those who survive Henry V, for instance, act as if his supernatural will empowers them to throw off conventional restraints on violence and hate. Caliban inflates himself by making gods of Trinculo and Stephano. To Sicilia the statue-queen Hermione almost literally becomes a life-giving idol.

Finally, I use the term apotheosis because it captures the scope of the imaginative striving in Shakespeare and the world around us. In the Capulets’ orchard—“the place death, considering who thou art”—Romeo envisions himself reborn, “new baptiz’d; / Henceforth, I never will be Romeo” (2.2.64, 50–51). Juliet would make his “gracious self / ... god of my idolatry” (113–14). Like Antony and Cleopatra, they would seek out new heaven and new earth. The rhythm of play-death and apotheosis expresses a desire to remake the world that may be as natural as breathing and yet a project of messianic scope.

It goes without saying that fantasies of transcending are often latent in criticism as well as in Shakespeare. In their imagery critics carry on culture’s undeclared war against the grim invader, as in this melodramatic agon: if the bond of love holds in Romeo and Juliet, “Death is robbed of the greater glory; the ending is a triumph, a transcending the limits of mortality by holding fast, in a union of suffering, to what is best in the mortal condition.” In his Letters (1926) W. A. Raleigh claimed immortalizing powers for criticism itself, vowing that “the main business of criticism ... is not to legislate, not to classify, but to raise the dead. Graves, at its command, have wak’d their sleepers, op’d, and let them forth.” In her famous study of imagery Professor Spurgeon finds anxious realism in every image of death but the one that she declares to be Shakespeare’s personal attitude (Sonnet 146); and that one she makes triumphant: “Here we see ... the greedy feaster on the flesh of men ... annihilated ... by the spirit of Man grown strong.”

35. Like a magician or actor, Harry Berger, Jr., notes, the ascendant Prospero “prefers the security of the one-way window relationship in which he may observe without being observed,” and “hides either behind a cloak of invisibility, or behind a role, a performance, a relationship, which has been prepared beforehand.” See “Miraculous Harp: A Reading of The Tempest,” Shakespeare Studies 5 (1969): 275. In Prospero, according to this view, self-effacement and assertion deeply reinforce one another.


38. In a letter about the present chapter Calderwood reminds me that Shakespeare “is also the ‘father’ of the audience, inasmuch as he, like Prospero, is employing his parental illusions toward the audience’s ‘education.’ Surely part of the irony of Puck’s epilogue is that in it Shakespeare self-effacingly plays the role of pleasing child to the audience’s parent while actually playing the role of parent who has (like Oberon taking control of the [changeling] child by way of illusionary strategies) manipulated his child audience for its own good.”

39. Raymond Southall’s The Courtly Maker (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964) recognizes the Elizabethan world picture itself as a majestic public fiction attempting to mediate among men: “The doctrine of World Order was inconsistent—both with the spirit of the old courtly tradition and with the new spirit of the Reformation; its promulgation as state doctrine by Elizabeth is simply a sign that the Reformation had been called to a halt.” (p. 55).

Chapter 3


3. At the time my daughter vowed to elevate the supermarket, television featured the animated cartoon “Masters of the Universe,” whose villain Skeletor unmistakably descends from the grim reaper of medieval iconography, and whose hero, He-Man, bulges with pink, muscular, well-fed health.

4. Geertz, Interpretation of Cultures, p. 80.

5. “Il Beato Agostino Novello e Quattro Suoi Miracoli Dopo la Morte.” See Figure 1. Born into a noble Spanish family in Taormina, Sicily, holder of a doctorate in law from Bologna, the Augustinian friar became papal legate and confessor to Pope Nicholas IV.

6. Common in Renaissance England are pamphlets advertising news of “strange,” “monstrous,” or “misshapen” births. The pamphlets testify to the dread of the body that Becker is describing, though they invoke a religious context that moralizes the horror in cosmic terms and thereby promises to tame it. The same dynamics are evident in Christian iconography that gave demons grotesque body parts while idealizing the bodies of angels, say, with eternally youthful features.


12. In Shakespeare's Creation I have analyzed some of the strategies by which Shakespeare creates illusions of ineffable meaning. See also Sigurd Burckhardt, "The Poet as Fool and Priest," in Shakespearean Meanings (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1968); and Stephen Booth, An Essay on Shakespeare's Sonnets (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1968). "Perhaps the happiest moment the human mind ever knows is when it senses the presence of order and coherence and before it realizes the particular limits of (and so the particular limbs) of the perception. At that moment . . . the mind is unlimited." (p. 14).


14. Robert Grudin, Mighty Opposites: Shakespeare and Renaissance Contrariety (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), p. 26. In Rites and Symbols of Initiation (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), originally published as Birth and Rebirth (1958), Mircea Eliade analyzes alchemy as a fantasy about death and rebirth whose outcome puts the practitioner in the heroic role of "attaining to deliver nature from the consequence of the fall, in short, to save it." (p. 154). The adept must return to his mother's breast or even w womb in order to produce regeneration. Eliade quotes Paracelsus: "[H]e who would enter the Kingdom of God must first enter with his body into his mother and there die." (pp. 97-98).


20. While he tries to honor the claims of objectivity and the "sense" of immortality, Professor Lifton himself minimizes the mind's ability to blur the distinction between literalness and tactility. Qualifying Becke's concept of denial, he argues that human kind lives as much through the creation of connections and transcendence as in denial of death. However—saturate though it is to point this out in a footnote—Lifton consistently weakens the idea of annihilation. One of his modes of symbolic immortality, e.g., is "the perception that the natural environment around us, limitless in space and time, will remain," and he illustrates it with an ancient oriental saying: "The state may collapse but the mountains and rivers remain." (p. 22). This mode of immortality—and all the others he adduces—fudges the threat of nothingness. Paleontologists speak of periodic mass extinctions on the earth, and astronomers foresee the death of the sun and the solar system, with incomprehensible questions beyond. It is the idea of being dead that jars the foundations of thought. Where powers of abstraction are restricted, anxiety will also be limited. In this light Lifton's study has an unspoken consolatory function that may be—give the anxieties of publishers and the public—incalculable. Science is not privileged, even though "the biocentric, medical model of disease, our prevalent model, assumes that death is always the result of a disease process; if there were no disease, there would be no death." But this view, concludes Dr. James F. Fries, "is hard to defend." ("Aging, Natural Death, and the Compression of Morbidity," New England Journal of Medicine 193:115). The medical model, i.e., resembles the pribordial belief that death is always either an accident or the result of malice. Wahl ("The Fear of Death") notes that psychoanalysts "significantly" avoid the problem of death (p. 19), and Becke (The Denial of Death) firmly concur, pp. 93-124.


23. C. W. Thomas MacCary: What is such 'brotherly love' but the libidinal investment of the self in the sibling of the opposite sex, and when this narcissistic choice of object is lost, there is a mourning of the most profound kind, because the self itself is called into question." Friends and Lovers: The Phenomenology of Desire in Shakespearean Comedy (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958), p. 184. Also see Coppélia Kahn, "The Providential Tempest and the Shakespearean Family," in Representing Shakespeare, ed. Murray M. Schwartz and Coppélia Kahn (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), pp. 218-19.
24. In *Sixteenth Century England* (Harmondsworth, Eng.: Penguin, 1984), Joyce Youings quotes a father who equates self and house/estate in his testamentary deliberations (1598): "If I shall leave my land and living equally divided among my children... then shall the dignity of my degree, the hope of my house... be quite buried in the bottomless pit of oblivion" (p. 380). To go on living his property—like a body—must be kept intact.

25. Cf. the drowned father in Ariel's song, whose apotheosis is a "sea-change / Into something rich and strange" affirmed "hourly" by mourning "Sea-nymphs" (*Tem.*, 1.2.397–405).


27. See Pompeo Molmenti and Gustav Ludwig, *Vittore Carpaccio* (London: J. Murray, 1907). The painting's vocabulary of torment represents a conventionalized social vision, as witnessed by the many poses Carpaccio adapted from agonies perfected by other painters. See Jan Lauts, *Vittore Carpaccio: The Paintings and Drawings* (New York: Phaidon, 1962). Compare Carpaccio's holy war and apotheosis to a twentieth-century Islamic version in which a volunteer fighting in Afghanistan reports that as he "watched by the graves of two martyrs, a shaft of light, like white neon, came out of the graves and shot straight up into the sky" in a sign of divine recognition (*The International Herald Tribune*, July 23, 1986, p. 2).

28. Sara Jayne Steen, "Fashioning an Acceptable Self: Arbella Stuart," *English Literary Renaissance* 18, no. 1 (1988): 87–88. Stuart's boast is especially poignant since she spent most of her adult life under various forms of house arrest designed to curb her autonomy for dynastic reasons. Cf. Plutarch's account of eschatological promotion to godhead in *Of Isis and Osiris; the Philosophy Commonly Called the Morals*, tr. Philenon Holland ([1603] 1677), which Walter Cappedge has pointed out to me: "But others hold, that there is a transmutation of Bodies as Souls: and like as we may observe, that of earth is ingendered Water, of Water Air, and of Air, Fire, whiles the nature of the substance still mounteth on high: even so the better Souls are changed, first from Men to Heroes or Demi-gods, and afterwards from them to Daemons, and of Daemons some few after a long time, being well refined and purified by vertue, came to participate in the Divination of the gods" (p. 1079).


Chapter 4
