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The Lively Corpse of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

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In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Pyramus voices an impossibility: the live experience of being dead: 'Now am I dead,/ Now am I fled;/ My soul is in the sky'). A few lines later, he is alive again to kill himself again ('Now die, die, die, die, die'). Shortly after, Bottom jettisons his (finally) dead character to bounce up at the suggestion that the Wall also is no longer alive to bury the dead ('the wall is down that parted their fathers. Will it please you to see the epilogue'), Theseus refuses courteously ('No epilogue, I pray you; for your play needs no excuse'), referring to a standard mock-humility topos in epilogues. But why does Theseus go on to add 'Never excuse; for when the players are all dead, there need none to be blam'd' (5.1.301-57)?¹

There are few dead cat bounces in early modern plays: when bodies leap up, it is generally to get things moving. Corpses revive inside plays with *esprit de l'escalier*, but in meta-texts with *esprit de corps*.

¹ All references to Shakespeare's plays are from *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G.

Blakemore Evans et al (Boston, 1997).

Fantasies about speaking when thoroughly dead are popular: from *ars moriendi*, to bust tombs that lecture church visitors, to erotic poetry about haunting former partners. Ghosts turn up in tragedies, some silent or terse (Banquo, Julius Caesar, the Duchess of Malfi), some talkative (Hamlet, Richard III's victims, Don Andrea). Even body parts will get things off their chest, according to one soldier: 'all those legs, and arms, and heads, chopp'd off in a battle, shall join together at the latter day and cry all, "We died at such a place" - some swearing, some crying for a surgeon, some upon their wives left poor behind them, some upon the debts they owe, some upon their children rawly left' (*Henry V*, 4.1.135-41). Characters who pretend to be dead then rise solve plot difficulties so life can go on. As the newly-risen Falstaff asserts cheerfully, 'to counterfeit dying, when a man thereby liveth, is to be no counterfeit, but the true and perfect image of life indeed' (*1 Henry IV*, 5.4.116-19). In the final scenes of Thomas Middleton's *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*, John Fletcher's *The Woman's Prize, or the Tamer Tam'd*, and Fletcher and Thomas Dekker's *Westward Ho!* problems between spouses (or between them and their families) are solved when funerals turn into resurrections, once the on-stage audience has voiced a change of heart. In these real or pretend deaths, the focus is on what should have been said or done before death, and is now, finally, being voiced with an *esprit de l'escalier*.

By contrast, characters who die then rise as actors are happy to kill the play to let the players relationship with the audience thrive. For instance, a jest book relates how a university actor, supposed to be dead on stage, was 'forced to cough so loud that it was perceived by the generall auditory, at which many of them falling into a laughter, hee rising up excused it thus: you may see Gentlemen what it is to drink in one's porridge, for they shall cough in their grave'.² The player's willingness to abandon the play remakes the show into a display of

² A. Armstrong, *A Banquet of Jeasts* (1630), p. 103.

authenticity and familiarity with its spectators. Similarly, Rafe, in Francis Beaumont's *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* produces his own in-show epilogue by entering with a forked arrow through his head for his final speech, 'I die, flie, flie my soule to *Grocers* Hall. oh, oh, oh, &c.' This gets from the Citizen's Wife an approving 'Well said *Raph*, doe your obeysance to the Gentle|men and go your waies, well said *Raph*', and she invites everyone present to applaud him, then come round to their house for refreshments (presumably, also served by Rafe).³ In these instances, the metatext brings together the theatre company and the audience, in an *esprit de corps*.

So Theseus's concluding comment is a delicate compliment: by refusing to let Bottom's proposed epilogue turn a tragedy into a comedy he is keeping up the wall that parts the play from the real world, the lively player from the dead Pyramus.

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³ F. Beaumont, *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* (1613), K3v.