

Assignment feedback

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Module code: HPHI6002

*Student ID
number:*
1400683

*Educational
support needs:*

Yes

Module title: Death, Dying and the Macabre in
the Late Middle Ages

Assignment title: Death, Dying and the Macabre – Portfolio 1: Chapter V of *The Art
and Craft to Know Well to Die* by William Caxton

Assignment due date: 20/10/16

Assignment Number: 1
(i.e. 1,2,3)

Marker's signature:

Date:

Provisional.

NB. All marks are provisional until confirmed by the final examination board.

SELF-REFLECTION SHEET.

PLEASE COMPLETE BEFORE SUBMISSION AND ATTACH TO YOUR WORK

Date: 17/10/2017

Module: HPHI6002

Name: Rosie Nye

Guidance: You might consider the following elements:

- Argument: does it have one/ is it backed by sufficient evidence/ how lucid is it?
- Structure: how clear is it / is my essay easy to follow/ does it help my argument?
- Analysis: is more/less analytical than narrative/ does it address the question?
- Reading: was this sufficiently broad/ have I referenced properly?
- How might I improve my performance in future?

Strengths

Critically looked at source to produce a commentary

Examined other sources in comparison

Referenced correctly

Weaknesses:

It was my first time of writing a commentary so it may not flow as well as I would have liked.

General Comments:

I found this piece of coursework difficult to do and to get my head around.

Please give a mark for your work: 2/2

(for eg: 1st = 70+: 2/1 = 69-60: 2/2 = 59-50: 3rd = 45-49: pass = 40-44: fail = 39-)

Death, Dying and the Macabre – Portfolio Part 1

Chapter V of *The Art and Craft to Know Well to Die* by William Caxton

Item if the sick man have long space of time, and that he be not oppressed of hasty death, the assistants ought to read before him histories and devout orisons, which before he delighted and took pleasure in; and men ought to remember him of God's commandments, to the end that he think the more profoundly if he could find anything in himself that he hath against the said commandments commised and trespassed. And if he be so sick that he hath lost the usage of speech, and hath his knowledge whole and entire, he ought to answer to these things by some sign outward, or by whole consenting of heart, for that sufficeth to his salvation.

Always ought [it] to be taken heed that the interrogations be made before or that the sick man lose the usage of speech; and if the answers of the sick person appear not sound nor sufficient to his salvation, let there be put thereto remedy—by necessary information—by the best manner that may be.

And also [it] ought to be showed to the sick person the great peril that might fall and come to him, notwithstanding though he thereby should be afeared. For better it is that by fear and wholesome dread he have compunciton and be saved, than by blandishing dissolution, or by noyous comfort, he be damned. In truth this thing is much strange and over periolous, and contrary to the faith and Christian religion, but it is a thing diabolical, that to a Christian man, being in the article of death, for to hide from him the perol of the death of his soul, and that by human dread men dare not trouble him...

Item [there] ought to be presented to the sick person the image of the crucifix, which always should be among the sick people, and also the image of our Blessed Lady, and of other saints which the sick man hath most loved and honoured in his life. Also (there) ought to be about them holy water, and oft cast upon them and about them to the end that the devils be put a-back from them. And if because shortness of time all these things aforesaid may not be done, yet they ought at least to purpose to them the orisons and prayers which [are] addressed unto our Lord Jesu Christ. And there ought never to be brought to their remembrance the carnal friends, nor wife, nor children, nor riches, nor other good tempral, but only as much as the spiritual health of the sick person demanded and requireth.

Whomsomever then will learn to die let him come and learn all the things foresaid before, or he have need in the article of necessity. For in truth in grievous infirmity the devotion of the person goeth away and passeth; and as much more as the sickness approacheth or increaseth, so much more the devotion fleeth from him. If thou wilt not then err nor be deceived, and that thou wilt be sure, do instantly all that thou mayst good, whiles that thou art whole and sound, and that thou hast the usage of reason and [art] well disposed, and that thou mayst be lord of all thy feats.

The concept of the “ars moriendi”, or a “good death”, is prevalent across academic literature. For example, Knox and Leslie (1923: 56-57) record the incident surrounding Richard ap Meredith's death. When Meredith was wounded in 1489 at Barnet, bystanders prayed, not for his survival, but to prolong his life sufficiently enough to make his last confession. The need for a “good death” is reiterated throughout Caxton's text. The translation of the *Ars Moriendi* by Caxton, and renamed *The Book of the Craft of Dying and other Early English Tracts* (1490),

are an insightful way of allowing modern academics to obtain an understanding into the desire of the medieval people to experience a “good death”.

Primarily providing a manual for the monasteries offering guidance with helping individuals cope with the anxiety accompanying the thought of death (Forcen, Forcen 2016: 556), Caxton’s text also highlights the religious determinations of medieval individuals. Aries (1977) recognizes that medieval attitudes towards death do not follow a simple linear trajectory (Thornton, Phillips 2009:2) but that several attitudes would be held simultaneously. The key attitude which encapsulates the instructions printed by Caxton is that the existence of life after death was a social fact; the text functioning as a way to maximize the chances of entering heaven (Thornton, Phillips 2009:2). Earlier texts, such as the *Book of Hours* (Fig.1) and the *Office of the Dead* further illustrates the desire for a “good death” through the conscious recognition of sins and the repentance of the individuals (Daniell 1997: 4). When examining the wider context that Caxton’s text was placed in to, it can be suggested that an English version of the “*ars moriendi*” was a significant aspect of their daily lives.



Figure 1. An image from the *Book of Hours* c. 1485-1490. Sourced from Flynn 2014: 710.

Addressing the attitudes present in the Middle Ages, Caxton’s (1490) translation states “for better it is that by fear and wholesome dread he have compunction and be saved...” further supporting the concept that to obtain a “good death” individuals need to understand the principles of sin, confessions and penance (Thornton, Phillips 2009: 2). From the translation it is possible to conclude that Caxton believed that the text, and one of the first printed books, contained knowledge of such importance that it was to be made accessible to all individuals; preserved for future generations. When examining the wider context in which Caxton’s translation resides, the medieval attitudes towards death, it can be implied that a universally accessible text concerning a matter so important as the preparation for a “good death” would

have been an essential part of day to day life. Especially when taking into consideration the inclusion of images which allowed not only the *literati*, but also the *laici*, to comprehend the meanings of the text (Aries 1977: 107). Further reiterating this is the inclusion of the earlier text *Office of the Dead*, and the *Book of Hours* (Fig. 1), in daily religious practice along with other contemporary texts, such as the anonymous *The Book of the Craft of Dying*. This can be considered to have provided comfort to the medieval populations and presented a methodology to ensure a “good death” through repentance (Duffy 1992: 311).

Another reason for the significance of Caxton’s translation is the explicit descriptions of the preparation for death. Firstly, it makes sense to examine Caxton’s instructions regarding the devotion to God in the last hours of an individual’s death. “He be not oppressed of hasty death, the assistants ought to read before him histories and devout orisons” (Caxton 1490: 74-79). Caxton’s translation implies that complete and utter devotion to God, repentance of sins, ensured a “good death”. Further supplementing the devotion to God in death, were the contemporary literature, aimed at relieving anxiety surrounding death (Forcen, Forcen 2016: 554). One popular example is that of *The Three Living and The Three Dead* (Forcen, Forcen 2016: 554). Contemporary *memento mori* had the objective of making society conscious of the importance of living and dying righteously (Forcen, Forcen 2016: 554). The constantly present theme of preparing for a “good death” is significant for a number of reasons, one of the most important being it allows modern academics to gain an understanding of past attitudes towards preparing for death. However, it is important to remember that being able to publish this translation was advantageous to Caxton as well. As one of the first books ever printed, printing this translation would solidify Caxton’s standing as a printer and obtain the approval of the higher classes, including the clergy. Nonetheless, having written and illustrated instructions allowed the population to feel, if not comfortable, then accepting of the continuous fear of death.

In regards to the constant reference to three of the five senses, Caxton and other more modern academic texts can be seen to describe the need for the senses to be intact. (Caxton 1490: 77) One example which references the senses to instruct that, in order to obtain a “good death”, individuals would need to be in full possession of their wits is “taken heed that the interrogations be made before or that the sick man lose the usage of speech...”; as recognized by Woolgar (2006: 6). However, other contemporary works do not emphasize the importance of the use of the senses. Instead, such texts and images, reference the need to commit themselves to God through penance and prayer (Fig. 2) as a key way, in the minds of both the clergy and the rest of the population, to prepare for death.

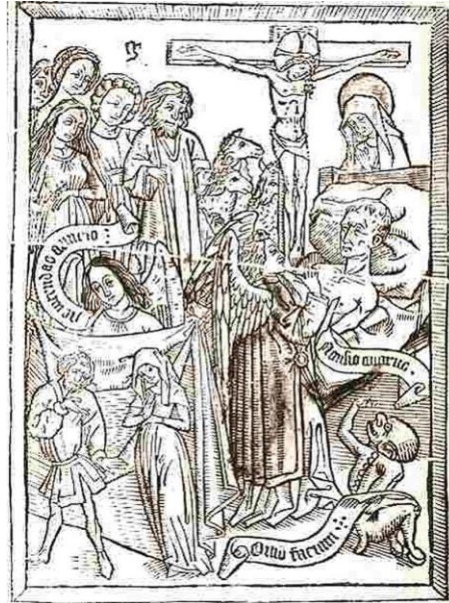


Figure 2. The Inspiration of Detachment. *Ars Moriendi* (*Editio princeps*, c. 1450) Sourced from Thornton and Phillips 2016: 3.

To conclude, Caxton's translation of the *Ars Moriendi*, in relation to the preparation of a good death, provides significant information regarding medieval attitudes to death in a number of ways. The emphasis on religious actions, such as prayers and being presented with a crucifix, is indicative of contemporary works and can demonstrate the way in which the need for a "good death" had a hold over the medieval population. Perhaps most significantly, Caxton's translation is important as it makes accessible knowledge that would have only been held by the clergy; allowing the main population to remain prepared for the *Ars moriendi*.

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