

# THOMAS LOVELL BEDDOES

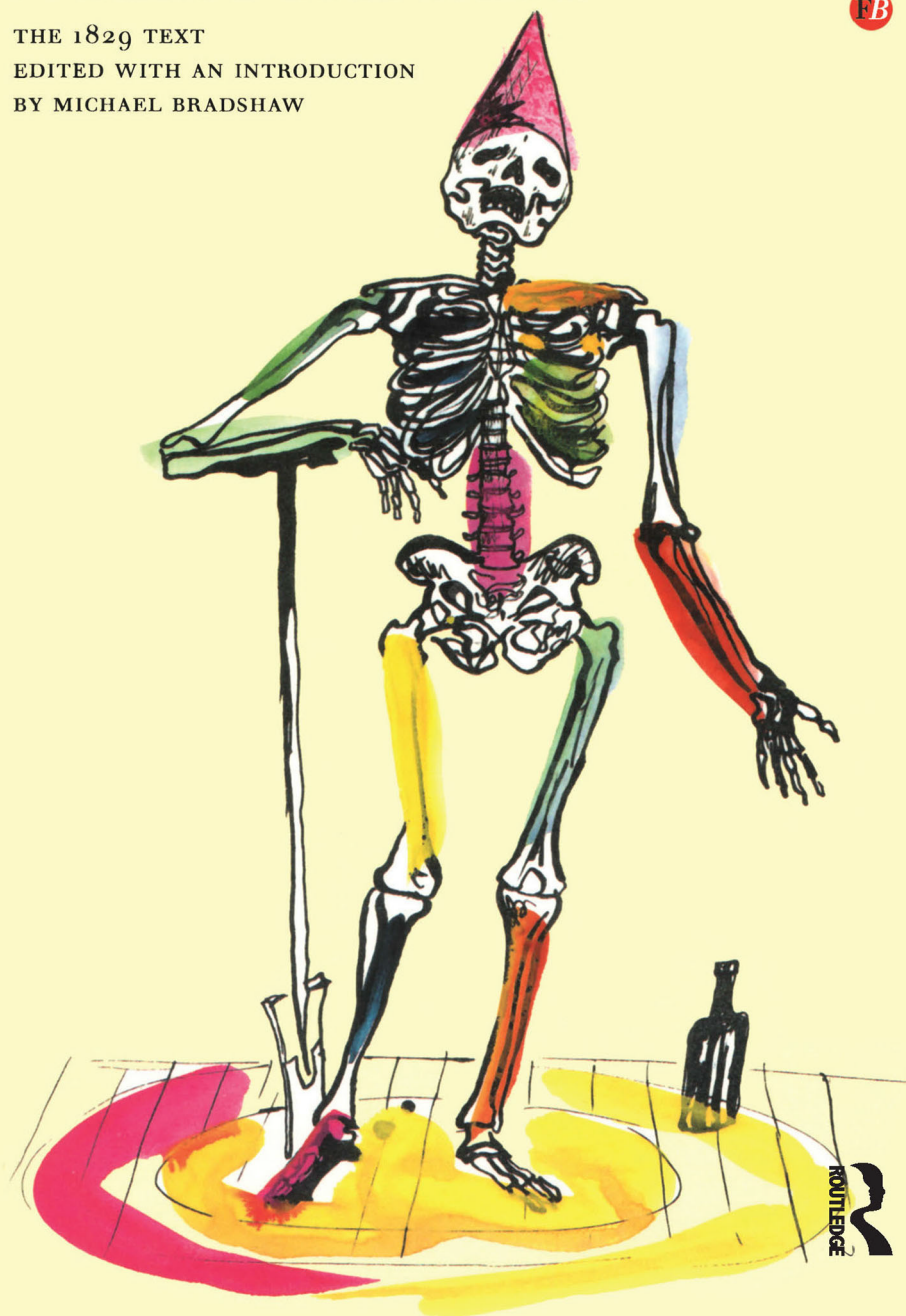
## *Death's Jest-Book*

THE 1829 TEXT

EDITED WITH AN INTRODUCTION

BY MICHAEL BRADSHAW

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## DEATH'S JEST-BOOK

THOMAS LOVELL BEDDOES (1803–1849) was born in Clifton in Bristol, the son of the renowned scientist and radical Thomas Beddoes and Anna, sister of the novelist Maria Edgeworth. He published *The Brides' Tragedy* (1822) to critical acclaim while still an undergraduate student at Oxford. Encouraged by this early success, he aspired to fame as a poet and dramatist: his passion for Shakespeare and early modern drama led him to draft several new tragedies in the Elizabethan / Jacobean style, which now exist only as collections of fragments. In his reading of modern writers, Beddoes was a devout admirer of Shelley, assisting with the publication of his *Posthumous Poems* (1824). In 1825 Beddoes committed himself to the study of medicine, travelling to Germany, where he enrolled at the University of Göttingen. At the same time as embarking on his medical studies, he began to write the text that was to become a lifelong obsession – *Death's Jest-Book*. Beddoes had an uneven medical career, complicated at times by his involvement in radical political movements: he travelled widely, settling in various university cities in Germany and Switzerland. He frequently fell prey to depression; and became increasingly isolated from friends and family in England, claiming to be more at home in German than in his native language. Beddoes never published *Death's Jest-Book* in his lifetime, but continued to revise and expand it right up until his death by suicide in 1849. Beddoes's work has never enjoyed unequivocal fame, but he is now widely recognised as one of the most intense and challenging of late Romantic voices.

MICHAEL BRADSHAW is a lecturer in English at the Manchester Metropolitan University; he is the author of *Resurrection Songs: The Poetry of Thomas Lovell Beddoes*, and co-editor of *Beddoes's Selected Poetry*; he has also published on George Darley, John Keats and Mary Shelley.

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FyfieldBooks take their name from the Fyfield elm in Matthew Arnold's 'Scholar Gypsy' and 'Thyrsis'. The tree stood not far from the village where the series was originally devised in 1971.

*Roam on! The light we sought is shining still.  
Dost thou ask proof? Our tree yet crowns the hill,  
Our Scholar travels yet the loved hill-side*

from 'Thyrsis'

In memory of  
Ron Beddoes  
and  
Dorothy Clarkson

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This is the first complete edition of *Death's Jest-Book* to be published for twenty-five years, and the first ever book to make this extraordinary text available to a wider range of readers, scholars and students as an affordable paperback. We are indebted to the Thomas Lovell Beddoes Society, and especially to its dedicated chairman, John Lovell Beddoes, not only for assistance with the publication of this edition, but more generally for raising the profile of the poet over the past decade. Contact details for the Society can be found at the end of this book.

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## INTRODUCTION

Thomas Lovell Beddoes was an exceptional poet, and *Death's Jest-Book* is his defining text, a pastiche Renaissance tragedy replete with treachery, murder, sorcery and haunting, the extravagant expression of the poet's lifelong obsession with mortality and immortality. It is a classic of the literature of death. The text contains some of the most powerful blank verse by any of the British Romantics, and is surely among the most intense of Romantic dramas, but has never been properly absorbed into the Romantic canon. *Death's Jest-Book* is rich in self-contradiction: a text which aims to marry despair and 'wildest mirth'; a work of late Romanticism wholly in love with the poetry and drama of the Renaissance; written with a deep critical knowledge of the European theatre and yet long considered unperformable as a play; the work of a neglected minor author, who nevertheless can count Browning, Gosse, Pound, Ashbery and Ricks among his many admirers.

Beddoes lived and wrote at the very end of what we now know as the Romantic period. His first major publication, *The Improvisatore* (1821), was published in the year of Keats's death; his second, and only successful publication, *The Brides' Tragedy* (1822) was published in the year of Shelley's death; Byron lived a couple more years. With the odd hindsight of literary 'periodisation' readers have always found it hard to account for Beddoes in terms of his own time – just too late to be a true Romantic, and too early for a fully fledged Victorian, Beddoes seems to inhabit a lost generation of English writers. Certainly in his own reflections on the literary scene of his day, Beddoes is sardonic and unsparing of himself and his peers alike, and often brooded over the death of Shelley, which he felt had left everyone in the dark, bereft of direction.

The poet's father was the celebrated scientist and democrat Dr Thomas Beddoes (1760–1808), the friend of Coleridge and mentor of Humphry Davy. Having resigned from his position at Oxford due to hostility to his overt sympathy with the French Revolution, Thomas Beddoes founded the Pneumatic Institute in Bristol, a progressive centre for medical and chemical experimentation,

specialising in the inhalation of gases or 'factitious airs'. A controversial and much revered figure, Dr Beddoes is thought to have instructed the young Thomas Lovell and his siblings with demonstrations of morbid anatomy. The poet's family on his mother's side was equally colourful; he was the nephew of the novelist Maria Edgeworth, and grandson of the radical educationalist and inventor Richard Lovell Edgeworth. At school and university, Thomas Lovell was both gifted and subversive; he quickly developed a taste for the extravagant and macabre in literature, and wrote some spirited 'Terror School' juvenilia. For a short while following the remarkable success of *The Brides' Tragedy*, Beddoes aspired to fame as a professional poet, but then made a firm commitment to the study and practice of medicine: in the summer of 1825, one of the watershed moments of his life, Beddoes travelled to Germany and enrolled in the University of Göttingen. At the same time as this, he began work on *Death's Jest-Book*, the fantastical dramatic experiment that was to occupy his literary talent for the rest of his life. The rejection of the completed manuscript of the drama by two of his friends was perhaps the defining crisis in both the life and works; it will be discussed further below. The perceived failure of the drama contributed to Beddoes's increasing depression; after a suicide attempt and some drunken escapades, he was expelled from the university in 1829. His next residence, at Würzburg, ended in expulsion from Bavaria in 1832 for his involvement with radical political groups. Beddoes then travelled to Switzerland, where he joined a growing community of political exiles and liberal intellectuals; he continued to study and practise medicine, and drafted new poetry, notably a long collection of tales and lyrics called *The Ivory Gate* that was to include the never-ending *Jest-Book*. Beddoes led an increasingly isolated and unsettled life, making occasional visits to England, where his friends and family found him difficult and irascible. In Basel in 1848 Beddoes attempted suicide by opening an artery in his left leg; he survived, but the leg was later amputated. In January 1849 he succeeded in killing himself, with poison. *Death's Jest-Book* was published the following year.

This is not a selected edition of an author, but a complete edition of one exceptional work; and we are primarily interested not in the history of Beddoes as such, but in the history of *Death's Jest-Book*. Fuller and more wide-ranging accounts of the life, works, evaluation and reputation of Thomas Lovell Beddoes are available

elsewhere.<sup>1</sup> Instead, this introduction will deal primarily with the *Jest-Book* itself – its inception, its style, its history and transmission, and certain key critical responses.

*Death's Jest-Book* was partly the offspring of Beddoes's literary precocity and ambition. In 1822, at the age of just nineteen, Beddoes had published his first five-act drama, *The Brides' Tragedy*. In the following year it received extremely complimentary reviews: between them, George Darley (writing in *The London Magazine*), Bryan Waller Procter (*The London* and *The Edinburgh Review*) and John Wilson (*Blackwood's*) effectively identified Beddoes as the next major dramatist of his day, holding the young poet up as an example for others to follow, and looking ahead to years of spectacularly fulfilled promise. In 1823 and '24 Beddoes wrote confidently and fast, working on three new tragedies, *The Last Man*, *Love's Arrow Poisoned* and *The Second Brother*, which now exist as fragments of varying sizes. Young and talented, always highly opinionated, and now fired up by such extravagant praise, Beddoes showed considerable authority in his assessment of contemporary drama, in a letter of January 1825:

Say what you will — I am convinced the man who is to awaken the drama must be a bold trampling fellow — no creeper into worm-holes — no reviser even — however good. These reanimations are vampire-cold. Such ghosts as Marloe, Webster &c are better dramatists, better poets, I dare say, than any contemporary of ours — but they are ghosts — the worm is in their pages — & we want to see something that our great-grandfathers did not know. With the greatest reverence for all the antiquities of the drama, I still think that we had better beget than revive — attempt to give the literature of this age an idiosyncrasy & spirit of its own, & only raise a ghost to gaze on, not to live with — just now the drama is a haunted ruin. (p. 595)<sup>2</sup>

Here, in one of his best-remembered statements on tragedy, Beddoes aptly summarises a stagnating contemporary taste for Elizabethan pastiche, and distances himself from it. And yet, coming from the author of *The Brides' Tragedy* and *The Second Brother*, the complaint seems to involve a measure of self-accusation: by this time Beddoes had published, and was once more in the process of writing, five-act blank verse tragedies in the Elizabethan / Jacobean style. But what might be said to distinguish

his dramas from contemporaries in this revival genre is his self-directed irony; certainly in the richly satirical *Jest-Book*, but even in the early *Brides' Tragedy*, there is no complacent acceptance of the early modern form, but a questioning dialogue with earlier styles that Beddoes typically expresses in his skilful use of controlled anachronism. Beddoes is aware, painfully so in many of his confessional letters, of his failure to renew the poetic drama and set it alight once more. Tropes of grave-robbing, dismemberment, haunting and galvanism reverberate through his many accounts of his writing process (and still continue today in postmodern critical interpretations).

Beddoes seems to have conceived and begun *Death's Jest-Book* in the summer of 1825, at roughly the same time as he embarked for the German states to begin his medical training at the University of Göttingen. In June he wrote from Oxford to his friend, later to be his literary executor, Thomas Forbes Kelsall, with his first announcement of the new tragedy:

I do not intend to finish that 2<sup>nd</sup> Brother you saw but am thinking of a very Gothic-styled tragedy, for w<sup>h</sup> I have a very jewel of a name —

DEATH'S JESTBOOK — of course no one will ever read it — Mr. Milman (our poetry professor) has made me quite unfashionable here, by denouncing me, as one of a 'villainous school'. (p. 604)

Clearly proud of and excited by the title he has hit upon, Beddoes is also apparently encouraged by the disapproval of authority figures such as Henry Hart Milman. He is noticeably cheerful as he reflects on the likelihood that no one will read the new drama: this ironic attitude to the prospects of publication, readership and fame were to grow steadily graver and more intense throughout the next two decades. In July 1825 Beddoes travelled to Germany and began his studies at Göttingen; we next hear of the *Jest-Book* in December, when he writes to Kelsall, excusing his recent lack of correspondence by detailing the industries of his average working day:

Up at 5, Anatomical reading till 6 — translation from English into German till 7 — Prepare for Blumenbach's lecture till 9 — Stromeyer's lecture on Chemistry till 10. 10 to ½ p. 12, Practical Zootomy — ½ p. 12 to 1 English into German or German literary reading with a pipe — 1 to 2 Anatomical lecture. 2 to 3

anatomical reading. 3 to 4 Osteology. 4 to 5 Lecture in German language. 5 to 6 dinner and *light* reading in Zootomy, Chem. or Anat<sup>y</sup>. 6 to 7, this hour is very often wasted in a visit, sometimes Anatomical reading till 8. Then coffee and read Greek till 10. 10 to 11, write a little Death's Jest book w<sup>h</sup> is a horrible waste of time, but one must now & then throw away the dregs of the day; read Latin sometimes or even continue the Anatomy — and at 11 go to bed. (pp. 608–9)

The writing of the momentous *Jest-Book* is dismissed overcasually, in a throwaway style that probably didn't fool Kelsall for a minute; ironic self-defence is a persistent feature of Beddoes's comedy. Yet even if he were trying to diminish its relative importance, it is interesting how Beddoes situates his drama here – embedded in and surrounded by a thick concentration of linguistic and biological studies. And among these Beddoes gives special weight to the anatomical. In the following passage from the same letter, Beddoes reinforces this connection between his scientific and poetic ambitions:

Again, even as a dramatist, I cannot help thinking that the study of anat<sup>y</sup>, physiol-, psych-, & anthropol-ogy applied to and illustrated by history, biography and works of imagination is that w<sup>h</sup> is most likely to assist one in producing correct and masterly delineations of the passions: great light w<sup>d</sup> be t hrown on Shakespeare by the commentaries of a person so educated. The studies then of the dramatist & physician are closely, almost inseparably, allied; the application alone is different; but is it impossible for the same man to combine these two professions, in some degree at least? The science of psychology, mental varieties, has long been used by physicians, in conjunction with the corresponding corporeal knowledge, for the investigation & removal of immaterial causes of disease; it still remains for some one to exhibit the sum of his experience in mental pathology & therapeutics, not in a cold technical dead description, but a living semiotical display, a series of anthropological experiments, developed for the purpose of ascertaining some important psychical principle — i.e. a tragedy. Thus far to show you that my studies, pursued as I pledge myself to pursue them, are not hostile, but rather favourable to the development of a germ w<sup>h</sup> I w<sup>d</sup> fain believe within me. (p. 609)

Far from being merely the poet's latest attempt at tragic theatre, *Death's Jest-Book* was clearly assuming a privileged status in his imagination, transcending the journeyman-work of 1822 to '24. *Death's Jest-Book* is presented now as an experimental fusing of arts and sciences. And in that last sentence, Beddoes offers a personal reassurance to Kelsall, who more than anyone encouraged and supported him with belief in the importance of his literary talent, that medicine was not claiming him away from poetry; on the contrary, he argues, the medical and the poetic have become mutually sustaining, co-operating towards a higher synthesis. In these heady early days of the *Jest-Book*, Beddoes shows himself to be full of cheerful cussedness and impetuous confidence:

Death's Jest-book goes on like the tortoise — slow & sure; I think it will be entertaining, very unamiable, & utterly unpopular. (p. 610)

Apollo has been barbarously separated by the moderns: I would endeavour to unite him. (p. 611)

But all these boasts are rather general: apart from fusing the medical and the literary in a psychological enquiry, apart from getting up the nose of the complacent English reader, what was *Death's Jest-Book* really about? What did it contain? It was in a verse letter to his friend the poet Bryan Waller Procter ('Barry Cornwall') in March 1826, that Beddoes gave the most spirited and startling account of the genesis of his new tragedy, and formally announced its theme:

... I have been  
 Giving some negro minutes of the night  
 Freed from the slavery of my ruling spright  
 Anatomy the grim, to a new story  
 In whose satiric pathos we will glory.  
 In it Despair has married wildest Mirth  
 And to their wedding-banquet all the earth  
 Is bade to bring its enmities and loves  
 Triumphs and horrors: you shall see the doves  
 Billing with quiet joy and all the while  
 Their nests's the scull of some old king of Nile:  
 But he who fills the cup and makes the jest  
 Pipes to the dancers, is the fool o' the feast.  
 Who's he? I've dug him up and decked him trim

And made a mock, a fool, a slave of him  
Who was the planet's tyrant: dotard death:  
Man's hate and dread: not with a stoical breath  
To meet him like Augustus standing up,  
Nor with grave saws to season the cold cup  
Like the philosopher nor yet to hail  
His coming with a verse or jesting tale  
As Adrian did and More: but of his night  
His moony ghostliness and silent might  
To rob him, to un-cypress him i' the light  
To unmask all his secrets; make him play  
Momus o'er wine by torchlight is the way  
To conquer him and kill; and from the day  
Spurned hissed and hooted send him back again  
An unmasked braggart to his bankrupt den.  
For death is more 'a jest' than Life: you see  
Contempt grows quick from familiarity.  
I owe this wisdom to Anatomy — (pp. 614–15)

The writing of the tragedy is described as a furtive nocturnal labour, a rival to the claims of his legitimate study of anatomy, and yet also closely related to it in its morbid fixation and its attempt to unmask and expose. With repeated images of stripping down, Beddoes self-consciously adapts the methods of the dissecting room to his satirical mission to expose the fraudulence of human death. Death is to play Momus, 'the fool o' the feast'. Both the writer and the original reader of this letter were fully aware of the structural irony here: when we create a fool for our own amusement, his commission may lead him to redirect the laughter at us. Fools are double, unstable creatures, who love to backfire on their creators. Sure enough, when the clown Mandrake emerges from the tomb in Act III, Scene iii, believing himself to have died and risen again, he speaks a direct parody of this rash statement of ambition by Beddoes: death is a minor hiccup, and we have been needlessly living in fear; Mandrake will expose death for a fraud by recording his experiences in published essays. In the verse letter, one could argue, Beddoes is noisily courting disaster, marking out the inevitability of his failure; in Mandrake's 'resurrection' Beddoes delivers the punchline. Self-defeat, and the sardonic embrace of defeat, are hardwired into this drama from the outset: the failure to unmask death, the failure to resurrect the

Muse of tragedy, the failure to unite the two aspects of Apollo, the failure to achieve a theatre of the human psychology – all are amply dramatised by this most self-reflexive of texts. But as the tragedy of its own tragic theme, as an ironic investigation into human obsession and self-deception, *Death's Jest-Book* is a magnificent challenge to the modern reader; and in the fascinating intricacy of its writing in verse and prose, *Death's Jest-Book* is a thrilling success.

*Death's Jest-Book* is a revenge tragedy. The plot concerns two brothers who have sworn revenge on the corrupt Duke of Münsterberg, Melveric. They are Wolfram, a generous and heroic knight who gives up his search for vengeance and befriends the Duke, and Isbrand, disguised as a jester, who nurses his sense of grievance and becomes an obsessive and sadistic revenger in the classic Jacobean style. The Duke has been taken prisoner on a crusade; Wolfram makes an expedition to rescue him from captivity, and saves his life; but by this time the two friends have become rivals for the love of Sibylla, and once freed the Duke murders Wolfram at the end of Act I. When Wolfram's body is shipped home, Isbrand smuggles it into the vault in which the Duke's wife is buried, there to lie in wait for him, a shock accusation on Judgement Day; the clown Mandrake has also hidden in this tomb. Isbrand has joined the Duke's two sons, Adalmar and Athulf, in a conspiracy to overthrow the Duke: disguised, the Duke joins the conspirators in their nocturnal carousing. Later, the Duke uses his necromant slave to try and raise his wife from the dead, but of course doesn't get what he expected: first Mandrake appears, with some fine comic speeches, and then the risen ghost of Wolfram, to plague Melveric with his own guilt. This long scene of resurrection takes place in a ruined cathedral decorated with a 'Dance of Death' frieze. The rest of the plot concerns the rise and fall of Isbrand as a replacement tyrant; the conflict between the two princes, also rivals in love; and the 'wooing' of Sibylla by the ghost. Isbrand is summarily executed by Mario, a symbolic character devoted to Liberty; in the final lines of the drama, the Duke is led off 'still alive, into the world o' th' dead' by Wolfram.

As previously with *The Brides' Tragedy*, Beddoes's considerable knowledge of Elizabethan and Jacobean theatre is in evidence throughout, but *Death's Jest-Book* has often been treated unfairly as an exercise in hollow pastiche or revivalism. Beddoes is expert at