The foreground of Bosch’s *Death and the miser*

One of the very few representations of Hieronymus Bosch placed in an internal setting is the *Death and the miser*. The image is painted on a long, narrow and thinned panel which had originally formed part, as the outside of the left wing, of a triptych (fig. 1). The painting shows a bare and narrow, wooden-vaulted room where a naked man is seated in a tester bed. Death, aiming his long arrow at the dying man, enters the room at the left. An angel props the man upright and urges him to recognize the emanating crucifix in the gothic arched window.¹

The depiction is derived from a scene from one of the mortality books which, under the title *Ars moriendi* (‘the book that educated all of Europe’, as Male put it), circulated throughout the late Middle Ages in most of the countries of the continent, having originally appeared in manuscript form. From the middle of the fifteenth century, they were published as block-books, initially in Germany and the Southern Netherlands and later, too, in the Northern Netherlands. The prototype of the *Ars moriendi* is the struggle between Heaven and hell for the soul of the dying man, usually described and illustrated in five pairs of contrasting chapters, and concluding with the portrayal and illustration of the ‘blessed death’. They were written in Latin for the clergy or in the vernacular for the lay public. The first Dutch *Ars moriendi* block-book dates from circa 1460.

The depiction on Bosch’s panel, featuring an angel and devils, is clearly inspired by an illustration in one of the *Artes moriendi*. There the dying man knows that his end is approaching and he resigns himself to his fate; amidst the ritual of dying, he lies naked on his back, his countenance looking, as it must, upwards to Heaven. In all these mortality books, he is twice admonished about attachment to worldly goods (*Avaritia*); first in chapter nine and then again in chapter ten. In the former, entitled *Temptacio dyaboli de avaricia*, the dying man is shown, being tempted by the devil of avarice, as the title states. His riches are illustrated by costly representations of worldly pleasures, which he is being called upon to conserve; for example, a cellar containing many casks of wine and a steed with an attendant groom. Chapter ten is entitled *Bona inspiracio are?eli contra avariciam* (Inspiration of the angel against avarice). The angel warns him with the words: ‘Protect yourself against the putrid and deadly words of the devil, for he is nothing but a liar. ... In the end everything he does is deceitful.’

The figure of Christ on the Cross is an abiding feature of the illustration included in this chapter, serving to remind the stricken mortal of the extreme detachment from worldly things with which Our Lord approached His death. A little devil at the foot of the bed poses the question: *Quid faciam?* (What am I to do?) A choice example of this particular illustration is the woodcut included in a block-book published circa 1450 in Cologne (fig. 2). Standing beside the devil is the good angel, who, pointing to the crucifix, has come to console and support the dying man, who
is endangering his ultimate salvation by being tempted to indulge in the sin of avarice. To the right of the angel's arm is the text \textit{Non sis avarus} (Be not avaricious).\footnote{De Tolnay has observed that the dying man's fate in Bosch's portrayal is no longer determined, as in the \textit{Ars moriendi}, by the subsequent triumph of the angel or devil, that's to say, by metaphysical beings fighting for the soul passively delivering itself into their hands. In Bosch's representation, responsibility rests, for the first time, with the dying man himself, whose gestures express conflicting emo-}