James Shirley, the last of the pre-Restoration dramatists, was educated for the ministry but converted to Roman Catholicism, became a schoolmaster, found his true métier on the stage, and ultimately wrote upward of forty plays. Regular stage plays being forbidden under the Commonwealth, he produced a semidramatic entertainment, *The Contention of Ajax and Ulysses* (over the armor of Achilles), from which we reproduce the famous final dirge.

**Dirge**

The glories of our blood and state  
Are shadows, not substantial things;  
There is no armor against fate;  
Death lays his icy hand on kings:  
Scepter and crown  
Must tumble down,  
And in the dust be equal made  
With the poor crooked scythe and spade.

Some men with swords may reap the field,  
And plant fresh laurels where they kill;  
But their strong nerves at last must yield;  
They tame but one another still:  
Early or late,  
They stoop to fate,  
And must give up their murmuring breath,  
When they, pale captives, creep to death.

The garlands wither on your brow,  
Then boast no more your mighty deeds;  
Upon Death’s purple altar now,  
See where the victor-victim bleeds:  
Your heads must come  
To the cold tomb;  
Only the actions of the just  
Smell sweet and blossom in their dust.

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