

**“...they no power have, unlesse to dye”: Margaret Cavendish’s ‘Of the Shortnesse of Mans Life, and his foolish Ambition’ (1653) and Edward Collier’s *Still Life with a Volume of Wither’s ‘Emblemes’* (1696)**

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**Abstract**

This article explores the vanity of human life as represented in a poem, ‘Of the Shortnesse of Mans Life, and his foolish Ambition’ (1653) by Margaret Cavendish, and a *vanitas* painting, *Still Life with a Volume of Wither’s ‘Emblemes’* (1696) by Edward Collier. These artefacts will be explored within the wider context of post-Civil War 1650s Britain and its prosperous recovery in the 1690s, demonstrating how both artefacts, produced in very different environments, could be seen to constitute a traditional early modern emblem in their portrayal of the brevity of human life.

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Britain in the 1650s was preoccupied with reminders of death, due largely to the widespread consequences of two Civil Wars (1642-1646 and 1648-1651). The execution of Charles I in 1649 validated the conviction of death as the ultimate destiny, regardless of social standing or personal wealth. The chaos caused by the breakdown of the monarchy and its consequences upon the people provided the seeds for much of the poetry written in this period.

By the 1690s, Britain had regained the economic stability lost during the Civil War years. This is demonstrated by the increased trade in luxury goods from overseas, which included Middle Eastern textiles and precious stones and metals from the New World and Africa. Ornate silverware reverted to its original status as a symbol of wealth when previously it had been melted down and used to fund the Civil Wars.<sup>1</sup> Such was the increasing demand for still life paintings of luxury artefacts, a genre which originated in the Netherlands in the early seventeenth century, that Dutch artists flocked to England to make their fortune.<sup>2</sup> In certain still lifes, artists critiqued the self-satisfaction of the emerging middling classes, who would buy these artworks to enhance the sense of their newly-acquired prosperity afforded by an expanding global trade. Known as *vanitas* paintings, these illusionistic renderings of luxurious objects amongst symbols of death reminded the discerning observer that the pursuit of material wealth as an end in itself was futile.

This article will explore two artefacts which represent seventeenth-century preoccupations with the vanity of earthly life. The first artefact, ‘Of the Shortnesse of Mans Life, and his foolish Ambition’ (See Appendix),<sup>3</sup> from *Poems and Fancies* (1653) by Margaret Cavendish (1623-1673), is taken from the turbulent period in the aftermath of the second Civil War.<sup>4</sup> Cavendish was a Royalist, and had composed her book whilst in

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<sup>1</sup> *Dead Standing Things: Still Life Painting in Britain 1660-1740*, ed. by Tim Batchelor (Exhibition booklet for the display *Dead Standing Things: Still Life Painting in Britain 1660-1740*, Tate Britain, 21 May – 16 September 2012) (London: Tate, 2012), p. 24.

<[http://www.york.ac.uk/media/historyofart/ccc/documents/Dead\\_Standing\\_Things%20Final%20version%20with%20revisions%203%207%2012.pdf](http://www.york.ac.uk/media/historyofart/ccc/documents/Dead_Standing_Things%20Final%20version%20with%20revisions%203%207%2012.pdf)> [accessed 1 January 2015].

<sup>2</sup> Batchelor, p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> This title will be hereafter shortened to ‘Of the Shortnesse of Mans Life’.

<sup>4</sup> *Poems and Fancies* was revised twice, in 1664 and in 1668, by which time Cavendish’s fortunes had been much altered; her approach in these two editions consequently centres on retrospective knowledge. I will be using the first edition of 1653, which remains ‘the issue of a uniquely lonely and difficult period of Cavendish’s life’. See Judith Elaine Walker, ‘“Torment to a Restlesse Mind”: An Analysis of Major Themes in *Poems, and Fancies* (1653) by Margaret Cavendish’ (unpublished MPhil. thesis, University of Birmingham, 1996), pp. 2-3.

London. The second artefact, *Still Life with a Volume of Wither's 'Emblemes'* (1696) (see Appendix, Figure 1), is a *vanitas* painting by Edward Collier (c. 1642-1708).<sup>5</sup> Collier moved from Leiden to London in 1693 in order to take advantage of the growing popularity for still life paintings in England.<sup>6</sup> This particular *vanitas* painting is noteworthy for several reasons. Firstly, it features *A Collection of Emblemes* (1635), an emblem book by George Wither (1588-1667). By the time Collier had executed this painting, Wither had been dead for almost thirty years. Collier depicts in this painting the idea that Wither's text and portrait are all that remain. The significance of this will be discussed in conjunction with Cavendish's philosophy of immortality and self-preservation in writing.

Of equal importance is the concept of the emblem as a brief motto, picture (*pictura*), and accompanying moralistic text in verse form (*subscriptio*). Wither composed 'Metricall Illustrations' of thirty lines to allegorical designs by Gabriel Rollenhagen (1583-1619), which completed each emblem.<sup>7</sup> 'Of the Shortnesse of Mans Life' and Collier's painting together seem to constitute such an emblem. Cavendish's poem of thirty lines finds its visual counterpart in Collier's painting which includes a Latin inscription taken from the Old Testament Book of Ecclesiastes 1.2, 'VANITAS VANITATUM ET OMNIA VANITAS' ('Vanity of vanities, all is vanity').<sup>8</sup> Although Cavendish and Collier were driven by different motivations of an earlier and later period respectively within the latter half of the seventeenth century, both captured the concept of man's delusion and the futility of earthly life, and both attempted to negotiate death in their art.

Margaret Cavendish's first published work, *Poems and Fancies* (1653), was written, she claimed, 'in my Husbands absence, to delude Melancholy Thoughts, and avoid Idle Time'.<sup>9</sup> Cavendish suffered deeply from the rampage of the Civil Wars. A maid-of-honour to Queen Henrietta Maria, the French wife of Charles I, her ineptitude with French,<sup>10</sup> coupled with her tendency to be 'Bashfull',<sup>11</sup> meant that she was often regarded as 'one of the most insignificant of Court personages'.<sup>12</sup> In addition to these feelings of inadequacy within the Court, she spent most of her twenties in exile abroad in the service of Henrietta Maria, during which time four members of her beloved family died back in England. Her childhood home in Colchester was also destroyed during this period by Parliamentary forces.<sup>13</sup> Understanding that the estates of her husband William, the marquis of Newcastle, were to be dispersed, she travelled to England in 1651 in the hope of claiming 'a small annuity to relieve their penury'.<sup>14</sup> The petition, however, was unsuccessful, and the lonely Margaret was made to suffer even more in a bleak London which had barely recovered from the second Civil War.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Edwaert Colyer used many different variations of his Dutch name, but used an anglicised version ('Edward Collier') when resident in England. See Batchelor (ed.), p. 4.

<sup>6</sup> Batchelor (ed.), p. 1.

<sup>7</sup> Norbert Schneider, *Still Life: Still Life Painting in the Early Modern Period*, trans. by Hugh Beyer (Köln: Benedikt Taschen, 1994), p. 17; Michael Bath, 'Introduction', in George Wither, *A Collection of Emblemes* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1989), pp. 1-11 (pp. 2-4).

<sup>8</sup> <<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/collier-still-life-with-a-volume-of-withers-emblemes-n05916>> [accessed 31 December 2014].

<sup>9</sup> Margaret Cavendish, 'TO POETS', in Margaret Cavendish, *Poems and Fancies. 1653* (Menston, Yorkshire: Scolar Press, 1972), pp. 121-23 (p. 122). Note that, on occasion, the pages are misnumbered.

<sup>10</sup> '...I understand no other *Language*; not *French*, although I was in *France* five yeares'. Margaret Cavendish, 'To Naturall Philosophers', in Cavendish, *Poems and Fancies*, unpaginated.

<sup>11</sup> Margaret Cavendish, 'A true Relation of my Birth, Breeding, and Life', in Margaret Cavendish, *Natures Pictures Drawn by Fancies Pencil to the Life* (London: J. Martin & J. Allestrye, 1656), pp. 368-91 (p. 381).

<sup>12</sup> Sara Heller Mendelson, *The Mental World of Stuart Women: Three Studies* (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1987), p. 19.

<sup>13</sup> See Cavendish, 'A true Relation of my Birth, Breeding, and Life', pp. 375-76. See also Mendelson, p. 27.

<sup>14</sup> Kathleen Jones, *A Glorious Fame: The Life of Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle, 1623-1673* (London: Bloomsbury, 1988), p. 75. See also Cavendish, 'A true Relation of my Birth, Breeding, and Life', pp. 379-80.

<sup>15</sup> Katie Whitaker, *Mad Madge: Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle, Royalist, Writer and Romantic* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2003), pp. 138-39.

While she wrote poetry in order to occupy sleepless nights away from her husband, her decision to publish her writing stemmed partly from William's 'need to affirm their aristocratic status in the aftermath of the Civil War'.<sup>16</sup> The printing of her work as a lavish folio volume, funded by William, contributed to their image of a continued magnificence.<sup>17</sup> Cavendish, however, was not content merely to contribute to her husband's refusal to succumb to social oblivion; she longed for fame for herself. While she attempts, in her considerable amount of prefatory and postscript material in *Poems and Fancies*, to justify her writing as a woman ('it is *harmlesse* and *free* from all *dishonesty*'; '*Wives, Sisters, & Daughters*, may imploy their time no worse then [*sic*] in *honest, Innocent, and harmlesse Fancies*'),<sup>18</sup> she admits candidly that her decision to publish was one of vanity. Vanity was '*naturall* to our *Sex*, as it were unnaturall, not to be so', and all she desired was '*Fame* [...] wherefore I with my *Book* may set a worke every *Tongue*'.<sup>19</sup> It is important to note, however, that she sometimes attempted to exonerate herself by stating her childlessness.<sup>20</sup> She entreats the reader to '*Condemne me not for making such a coyle | About my Book, alas it is my Childe*'.<sup>21</sup> The act of publishing was her alternative since she had no children; it was her way of ensuring that she would be remembered by posterity. The dichotomy between what she aspired to, an honourable fame achieved by merit,<sup>22</sup> and an iniquitous '*Ambition*', which '*inclines to vain-glory*', is apparent throughout *Poems and Fancies*.<sup>23</sup> Her inner conflict is redolent of the restlessness which is prevalent throughout this work, and '*Of the Shortnesse of Mans Life*' illustrates her self-doubt with regard to her own '*ambition*' for fame.<sup>24</sup>

As noted previously, death and the fluctuation of material wealth were fixated in Cavendish's mind as a consequence of the loss of her family members and her husband's fortune. Man's covetousness is depicted in the '*Houses, thick, and strong, and high*' (l. 5), which he builds as if he would live forever, but which she knows is not the case from the experience of her ruined childhood home and the confiscated estates of her husband. What is more, Cavendish ends the poem with a lament on man's '*high Ambition*' (l. 27) which can only meet with death and nothingness. The poem's central concern is the futility of man's materialistic pursuits but also her preoccupation with fame, which she concludes at least in this poem to be simply a word which will recede, as man will also, ultimately into silence.

The transience of life and the meaninglessness of human ambition are also explored in Edward Collier's *Still Life with a Volume of Wither's 'Emblemes'*. In contrast to Cavendish's pecuniary misfortunes, Collier was financially successful as a professional artist working in London in the last decade of the seventeenth century. Collier was known not only for his *trompe l'oeil* paintings of letter racks,<sup>25</sup> but also his *vanitas* still lifes, of which one was in the collection of William of Orange at his Het Loo palace.<sup>26</sup>

It is noteworthy that the *vanitas* painting presents difficulties as a self-contradictory genre. While the *vanitas* attempts to capture the falsity of worldly possessions, the

<sup>16</sup> Hero Chalmers, *Royalist Women Writers 1650-1689* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004), p. 27.

<sup>17</sup> Chalmers, p. 28.

<sup>18</sup> Margaret Cavendish, 'TO ALL NOBLE, AND WORTHY LADIES', in Cavendish, *Poems and Fancies*, A3.

<sup>19</sup> Cavendish, 'TO ALL NOBLE, AND WORTHY LADIES', A3.

<sup>20</sup> '*For first, I have no Children to imploy my Care, and attendance on*'. See Margaret Cavendish, 'To the Reader', in Cavendish, *Poems and Fancies*, unpaginated.

<sup>21</sup> Margaret Cavendish, 'An excuse for so much writ upon my Verses', in Cavendish, *Poems and Fancies*, unpaginated.

<sup>22</sup> Jean Gagen, 'Honor and Fame in the Works of the Duchess of Newcastle', *Studies in Philology*, 56.3 (1959), pp. 519-38 (p. 525).

<sup>23</sup> Cavendish, 'A true Relation of my Birth, Breeding, and Life,' p. 389.

<sup>24</sup> All references to this poem will be taken from Margaret Cavendish, '*Of the Shortnesse of Mans Life, and his foolish Ambition*', in Cavendish, *Poems and Fancies*, pp. 97-98.

<sup>25</sup> Approximately sixty variant *trompe l'oeil* paintings of letter racks by Edward Collier survive, which is a testament to his popularity. See Batchelor (ed.), p. 23.

<sup>26</sup> Dror Wahrman, *Mr. Collier's Letter Racks: A Tale of Art & Illusion at the Threshold of the Modern Information Age* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 25.

painting itself is a valuable commodity. What is more, the *vanitas* painting portrays the transience of objects, yet it effectively prolongs the life of those objects by preserving them in an image which lives on for the duration of the painting's life. This contradiction of principles mirrors Cavendish's *Poems and Fancies*, in which her ceaseless internal conflict of values between her longing for a merited fame and her recognition of an innermost 'ambition' is played out.

More specific points of affinity between 'Of the Shortnesse of Man's Life' and *Still Life with a Volume of Wither's 'Emblemes'* are discernible. Cavendish's poem opens with an immediate appeal to the senses by referring to the 'sweet' gardens (l. 1). She continues to explore the senses with extravagant imagery for the eyes ('Houses, thick, and strong, and high' (l. 5); 'Heavens Mansions' (l. 13)), finishing with an aural conceit of life and fame as 'an empty sound' (l. 19). Collier goes further, appealing to all five senses in his painting. Both the musical score and Wither's text demand to be picked up and examined visually. The tangibility of the carved flowers on the silver porringer and the texture of the imported silk cloth, illusionism achieved by an absence of brushstrokes, invites the viewer to touch.<sup>27</sup> Taste and smell are represented by the fruit and glass of wine on the table. The musical instruments, particularly the broken strings on the violoncello and the score, refer to music as a fleeting pleasure for the ears. With the subtle depiction of the senses, both Cavendish and Collier are criticising the tendency of man to be seduced into false pursuits.

Further correspondences can be made. Cavendish's 'Hoard' of a 'Masse of Wealth' (l. 7) is represented amply in Collier's jewellery box, watches, instruments, and porringer. The absence of 'Soule' and 'Substance' (l. 20) is found in the skull, its 'lack of external flesh and internal brain' symbolising the loss of human physical beauty and ability to reason.<sup>28</sup> It is significant that the head in Wither's portrait is inclined in the same direction as the skull, as if to indicate that the famous poet met this fate. The poet's transient state is emphasised in the epigram directly underneath his portrait, which reads:

*What I WAS, is passed by;  
What I AM, away doth flie;  
What I SHAL BEE, none do see;  
Yet, in that, my Beauties bee.*

The poem which follows in the real emblem book, 'The Authors Meditation upon sight of his Picture', proclaims 'How vaine it is, our Portraitures to leave | In Lines, and Shadowes, (which make shewes, to day, | Of that which will, to morrow, fade away) (ll. 2-4).<sup>29</sup> Wither ends this poem with the hope that his industry, or his 'dutifull intent, | To doe the Worke I came for, e're I went', will mean that he 'to others, may some Patterne be, | Of Doing-well [...] (ll. 71-73); in other words, he wishes to be remembered for his good works rather than by a portrait.<sup>30</sup> Wither's book from this point goes on to include emblems on the subject of death (see Appendix, Figure 2). Significantly, Collier does not paint an entirely faithful representation of the book. While he portrays fairly accurately the respective title page and Wither's portrait and epigram (see Appendix, Figures 3-4), giving the impression of true reality, he is in fact representing a falsehood as there is no known edition of Wither's text which prints the portrait page directly after the title page in this manner.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Wahrman, p. 27.

<sup>28</sup> Kristine Koozin, *The Vanitas Still Lifes of Harmen Steenwyck: Metaphoric Realism* (Lewiston, New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1990), p. 86. Koozin's book focuses on the paintings of Harmen Steenwyck, but her general statements about the *vanitas* genre referred to here are helpful.

<sup>29</sup> George Wither, 'The Authors Meditation upon sight of his Picture', in Wither, *A Collection of Emblemes*, unpaginated.

<sup>30</sup> Wither, 'The Authors Meditation upon sight of his Picture', unpaginated.

<sup>31</sup> Peggy Muñoz Simonds, 'The Aesthetics of Magic and Meaning in Edward Collier's "Still Life with a Volume of Wither's Emblemes"', in *Deviceful Settings: The English Renaissance Emblem and its Contexts. Selected Papers from the Third International Emblem Conference, Pittsburgh, 1993*, ed. by Michael Bath and Daniel Russell (New York: AMS Press, 1999), pp. 225-47 (p. 236).

The inclusion of Wither's book represents in many ways what Collier wished to impart to the discerning viewer. In his inaccurate depiction of the book's page order, he ultimately concluded that his art was simply a skilful illusion, 'a deceitful vanity of vanities, an idol without spirit'.<sup>32</sup> However, the book is also important because the text has remained and it is captured in this picture, despite the fact that the poet is long gone. The text will last as long as future generations continue to read it. This is precisely what Cavendish was hoping to achieve by writing; she wished to preserve her name and live on in word, if she could not in flesh. Furthermore, in recognising the precariousness of life in the body, she occasioned not nihilism, but rather productivity.<sup>33</sup> She appealed in particular to women, who 'hath so much waste Time, having but little employments,' believing that writing, the '*harmlessest Pastime*', has the ability to tame the '*wilde thoughts*' which produce 'unprofitable' and 'indiscreet' actions.<sup>34</sup> With its injunction not to pursue material wealth devoid of spirit, Collier's painting also encourages the viewer to make the right choices in this short earthly life, indicated by the hourglass and funerary urn. The painting depicts a series of luxurious commodities in an unnatural situation; a forgotten, shadowy place, emphasised by the lack of any natural source of light within the painting. The instruments are left unused and the watch waits to be wound up; the objects do not fulfil their intended purpose. The unused tomes behind Wither's text reflect Cavendish's observation that '*The worst Fate Bookes have*' is to be 'laid aside, forgotten like the *Dead*'.<sup>35</sup>

Together, Cavendish's poem and Collier's painting seem to comprise nothing less than an emblem; a composition of motto, image, and text which presents a moral vision about the meaning of earthly life in its 'frank recognition of life's temporariness'.<sup>36</sup> Cavendish's poem, in the manner of an emblem, presents a direct reference to a scene, subsequently expounds its moral significance, and finishes by commending the application of a moral to the reader, which is to be deciphered by the reader himself;<sup>37</sup> Collier's painting provides a visual framework for interpreting this moral. Both observed that poetry and art can 'outstrip the limitations of the natural world'.<sup>38</sup> They used their respective mediums to convey their shared message, in order that, in the words of Wither on his title page (which are tellingly removed from Collier's painting), '*Instruction, and Good Counsell*, may bee furthered by an Honest and Pleasant *Recreation*'.

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<sup>32</sup> Muñoz Simonds, pp. 229-30.

<sup>33</sup> Joanne H. Wright, 'Darkness, Death, and Precarious Life in Cavendish's *Sociable Letters and Orations*', in *God and Nature in the Thought of Margaret Cavendish*, ed. by Brandie R. Siegfried and Lisa T. Sarasohn (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), pp. 43-57 (p. 51).

<sup>34</sup> Margaret Cavendish, 'AN EPISTLE TO MISTRIS TOPPE', in Cavendish, *Poems and Fancies*, A4.

<sup>35</sup> Cavendish, *Poems and Fancies*, p. 213.

<sup>36</sup> Wright, p. 51.

<sup>37</sup> Bath, 'Introduction', in Wither, *A Collection of Emblemes*, p. 5.

<sup>38</sup> Norman Bryson, 'Abundance', in Norman Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting* (London: Reaktion Books, 1990), p. 105. Many *vanitas* paintings by Collier feature a Latin motto, 'VITA BREVIS ARS LONGA' ('Life is short, art is long'), which illuminates this philosophy.

## Appendix

*Of the Shortnesse of Mans Life, and his foolish Ambition.\**

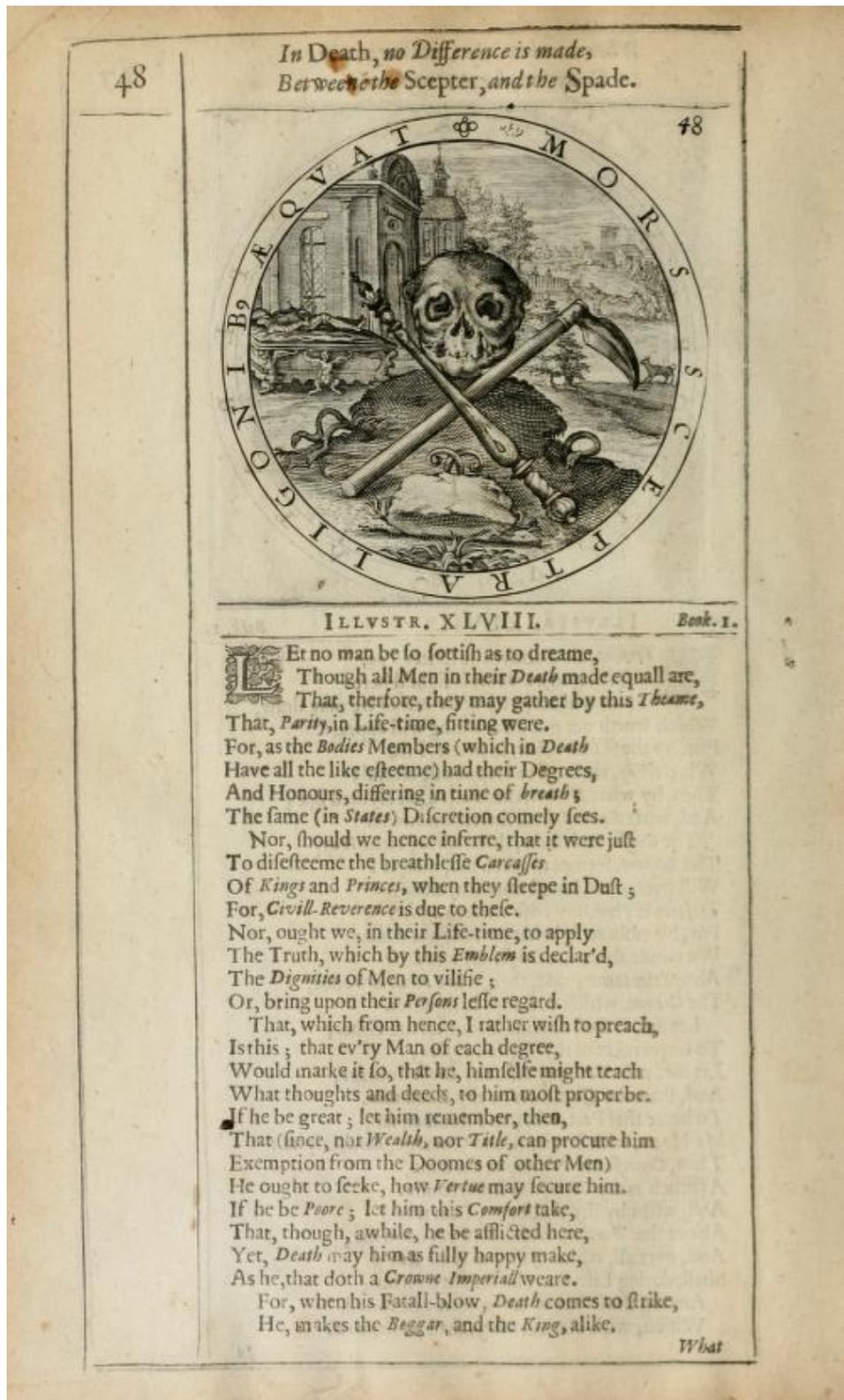
by Margaret Cavendish

In *Gardens* sweet, each *Flower* mark did I,  
How they did *spring, bud, blow, wither, and dye.*  
With that, contemplating of *Mans* short stay,  
Saw *Man* like to those *Flowers* passe away.  
Yet build they *Houses*, thick, and strong, and high,  
As if they should live to *Eternity.*  
Hoard up a *Masse* of *Wealth*, yet cannot fill  
His *Empty Mind*, but covet *he* will still.  
To gaine, or keep such *Falshood Men* do use,  
Wrong *Right*, and *Truth*, no base waies will refuse.  
*I* would not blame them, could they *Death* out keep,  
Or ease their *Paines*, or cause a quiet *Sleep.*  
Or buy *Heavens Mansions*, so like *Gods* become,  
And by *it*, rule the *Stars*, the *Moon*, and *Sun.*  
Command the *Windes* to blow, *Seas* to obey,  
To levell all their *Waves*, to cause the *Windes* to stay.  
But they no power have, unlesse to dye,  
And *Care* in *Life* is a great *Misery.*  
This *Care* is for a *word*, an *empty sound*,  
Which neither *Soule* nor *Substance* in is found.  
Yet as their *Heire*, they make it to *inherit*,  
And all they have, they leave unto this *Spirit.*  
To get this *Child* of *Fame*, and this *Bare word*,  
They feare no *Dangers*, neither *Fire*, nor *Sword.*  
All horrid *Paines*, and *Death* they will indure,  
Or any thing that can but *Fame* procure.  
O *Man*, O *Man*, what high *Ambition* growes,  
Within your *Braine*, and yet how low he goes!  
To be contented onely in a *Sound*,  
Where neither *Life*, nor *Body* can be found.

\*From *Poems and Fancies* (1653)



**Figure 1. Edward Collier. *Still Life with a Volume of Wither's 'Emblemes'* (1696)**  
Oil on canvas, 838 × 1079 mm. © Tate Britain, London.



**Figure 2. Gabriel Rollenhagen and George Wither. Emblem 48.** Engraving (by Crispin van de Passe) and motto, 99 × 111 mm, with epigram and verse by George Wither. *A Collection of Emblemes, Ancient and Moderne: The First Booke* (1635).

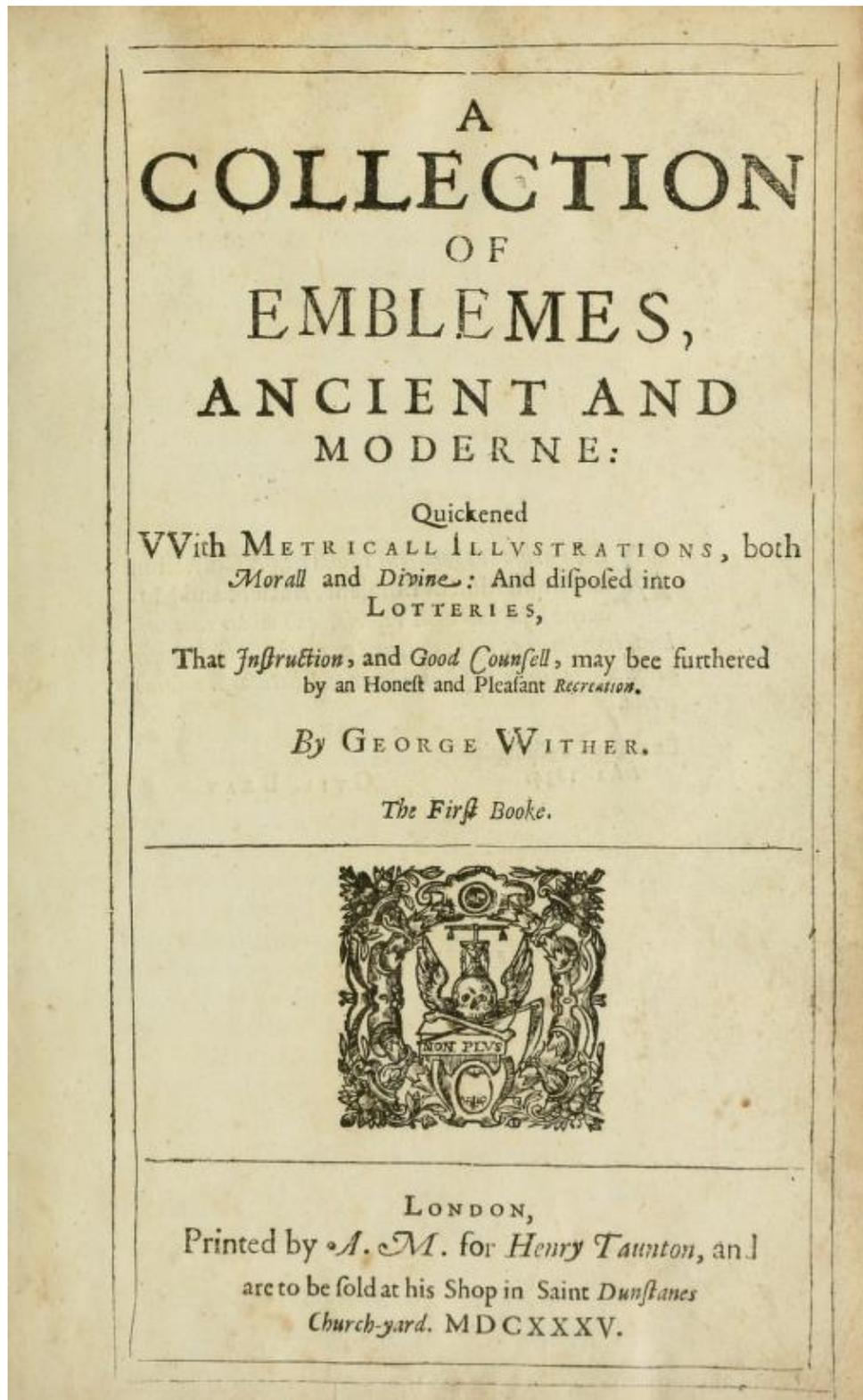


Figure 3. George Wither. Title page, *A Collection of Emblemes, Ancient and Moderne* (1635).



Figure 4. George Wither. 'The Authors Meditation upon sight of his Picture', with portrait by John Payne. Line engraving, 206 × 157 mm (1635).

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Figure 1. Edward Collier, *Still Life with a Volume of Wither's 'Emblemes'* (1696) © Tate Britain, London:

<<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/collier-still-life-with-a-volume-of-withers-emblemes-n05916>> [accessed 31 December 2014]

Figure 2. Gabriel Rollenhagen and George Wither, *Emblem 48*:

<<http://publicdomainreview.org/collections/george-withers-emblem-book-1635/>> [accessed 5 January 2015]

Figure 3. George Wither, title page:

<<http://publicdomainreview.org/collections/george-withers-emblem-book-1635/>> [accessed 2 January 2015]

Figure 4. John Payne and George Wither, portrait and poem extract:

<<http://publicdomainreview.org/collections/george-withers-emblem-book-1635/>> [accessed 2 January 2015]