

SKELETONS FROM THE JOHNSON CLOSET: COMPARING AN ANTI-VACCINATION HANDBILL WITH EARLIER IMAGES OF DEATH

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Abstract: This article examines interesting correspondences between two items collected by John Johnson: a 19th century handbill protesting compulsory smallpox vaccination in which Death is shown vaccinating a child and an image after Holbein with motto and text in an emblem book of 1789 showing Death leading away a child.

John de Monins Johnson (1882 – 1956), former scholar of Exeter College, Oxford, papyrologist and later Printer to the University, made an extensive collection of printed ephemera now in the Bodleian Library. Johnson was among the earliest general ephemera collectors, describing his collection of some 1.5 million items as ‘everything which would ordinarily go into the waste paper basket after use’. There are also several thousand titles in the Library’s ‘Johnson’ printed book collection.^{1,2}

TWO ITEMS DESCRIBED

Among the Johnson ephemera is an undated British handbill (Fig. 1) protesting against compulsory smallpox vaccination for children.³ It shows a skeleton vaccinating a small boy in his mother’s care while a police constable looks on. The mother has a wedding ring suggesting respectability. There are three elements in the handbill – the picture subtitled ‘Compulsory Vaccination Act.’, two quotations, a title above the picture and a section of explanatory text below.

The handbill originates from the London Society for the Abolition of Compulsory Vaccination. The original measuring 442 mm by 273 mm shows evidence of vertical and horizontal folding (perhaps for postal distribution) and the *verso* is blank. The picture is signed ‘J. Watkins’, questionably John D. Watkins who exhibited from 1876 at the Royal Academy and elsewhere.⁴

Child vaccination was compulsory from 1853. Given the quotation from Joseph Pease’s speech⁵, his Baronetcy of 1882⁶, the formation of the London Society in 1880 and its re-forming in 1896 as The National Anti-Vaccination League, we can date the handbill as post-1882 and probably pre-1896: it was re-printed in 1899 (giving a *terminus ad quem*) with the loss of some nuance.⁷

¹ Turner, M. L., *The John Johnson Collection: Catalogue of an Exhibition*, (Oxford: Bodleian Library, 1971), 5 – 13.

² John Johnson Collection of Printed Ephemera website <http://www.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/johnson/about>.

³ Bodleian Library, John Johnson Collection, Public Services folder 4.

⁴ Bury, S., (Ed.), *Benedit Dictionary of British Graphic Artists and Illustrators*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

⁵ Pease, J., *Hansard*, HC Deb 03 April 1878, Vol. 239, Col. 487: speech on 2nd Reading, Vaccination Law (Penalties) Bill.

⁶ Fell-Smith, C., Kirby, M.W. (revised by). ‘Pease, Sir Joseph Whitwell’ in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. Oxford: OUP, 2004 – 13.

⁷ Anon., *Los Angeles Herald*, Number 148, 25 February 1899. The picture is after the handbill but differs in some details (note the constable’s cuff) showing its having been re-worked.



Fig. 1 Anti-vaccination handbill, c. 1882
(By permission of the Bodleian Library)

The picture differs from a similar one on an envelope rightly described by Durbach as a ‘caricature’ in which a policeman clearly grips the mother’s arm⁸; a similar envelope postmarked 1878 is depicted on a website about the Quaker anti-vaccinationist, J. A. Petvin.^{9, 10}

Also in the Bodleian Library is an emblem book of 1789 stamped ‘John Johnson Bibl. Bodl.’ entitled ‘*Emblems of Mortality...*’ and containing an emblem (Fig. 2) with a skeleton taking a child.¹¹ The emblem features John Bewick’s woodcut after Holbein, a title with a motto taken from Job 14.1 and Correzet’s verse translated from Middle French.

Emblem books used a tripartite structure in which a motto and a picture (frequently enigmatic) were explained in an accompanying verse, each emblem thus having three elements. They were often elaborated with quotations and commentaries.¹²

This emblem book is one of many after an original of 1538 containing woodcuts attributed to Hans Holbein.¹³ This article does not rehearse the history of subsequent versions and attributions¹⁴ nor the prior history of Holbein’s prints ‘*The Great Dance of Death*’ which were doubtless prompted by medieval wall paintings, in turn probably inspired by plague. Smallpox too was well established in Europe. Shuttleworth notes that in 1772 the preacher Edmund

⁸ Durbach, N., *Bodily Matters: the Anti-Vaccination Movement in England, 1853-1907*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005), 52, fig. 3.

⁹ KJN Genealogy website; see URL <http://www.kjngenealogy.com/joseph-alfred-petvin-quaker-anti-vaccinator-part-2/>.

¹⁰ I am grateful to Stephen Marks for his philatelic advice.

¹¹ Hawkins, J.S. (preface), Bewick, J., (woodcuts). *Emblems of Mortality...* (London: printed for T. Hodgson, 1789).

¹² Bath, M. *Speaking Pictures: English Emblem Books and Renaissance Culture*, (London and New York: Longman, 1994), 69 – 70.

¹³ Holbein, H., Vauzelles, J. de, Corrozet, G., Trechsel, M., *Les simulachres & histories faces de la mort, autant elegamme[n]t pourtraictes, que artificiellement imagines*, (Lyon, France: J. and F. Frellon. Printed by Trechsel, G., 1538).

¹⁴ Hagström, M. The Dance of Death website. URL: <http://www.dodedans.com/Eindex.htm>.

Massey identified the ‘boils’ inflicted on Job as smallpox.^{15,16} Death taking the child consequent on smallpox in 1538 cannot be ruled out.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

This paper considers each item in the light of the other by exploring correspondences between them along with other pertinent sources.

Both have a tripartite structure. The emblem has a motto of Biblical authority, the picture and the verse. On the handbill the authoritative motto comprises quotations from the President of the Royal College of Physicians¹⁷ and the Recorder of the City of London.¹⁸ In place of the explanatory verse is a text which begins by describing the picture rhetorically (‘What have we here?’) and proceeds to tell the reader what to think (‘Be not deceived’) and what to do (‘avoid vaccination’). An explanatory commentary following the verse was not unusual in emblem books.

The late-nineteenth century audience for the handbill was being exposed to a motto, image and text in emblematic form. Both are moral narratives of everyday life. Both were intended to stimulate response.

The constable dutifully displays the Act of Parliament to the mother who regretfully accepts his authority though perhaps in silent reproach. The skeleton uses a lancet-like instrument to make a third incision to the child’s arm. The constable seems to be looking at the incisions with concern or perhaps horror. His right hand does not restrain the mother but may be hesitantly reaching as if with a desire to intervene. Durbach found not all policemen were unsympathetic: significant numbers claimed exemption certificates.¹⁹

The much earlier dance of death (or of the dead rather than of Death²⁰) materials relate to death as an incident at the end of life – they show individuals joining the dead or being led to the grave by a skeleton iconic of Death.

¹⁵ Shuttleworth, D. E., *Smallpox and the Literary Imagination*. (Cambridge: CUP, 2007. Paperback 2012), 10 – 11 and Fig 1.

¹⁶ *The Authorised Version of the Bible* (King James Version), the Book of Job, 2.7 ‘So went Satan forth from the presence of the LORD, and smote Job with sore boils from the sole of his foot unto his crown.’

¹⁷ Watson, (Sir) T., Smallpox and Compulsory Vaccination. *The Nineteenth century: a monthly review*, Mar. 1877-Dec. 1900; Jun 1878, 1001 – 1009. See 1006. Watson was strongly for vaccination and was misrepresented by the selective use of the quotation.

¹⁸ Probably quoted from Chambers, Sir T., *Hansard*, HC Deb 03 April 1878, Vol. 239, cc. 477-508: ‘He had received most touching letters from all quarters, complaining of the grievous sorrow and suffering inflicted on families...’; Chambers was, in 1878, against vaccination as explained in his summary (p. 28 onwards) in *Vaccination, is it worthy of national support? : verbatim report ...*, (London : E.W. Allen, 1878).

¹⁹ Durbach, N., *ibid*, 2005, 216, note 55.

²⁰ Huizinga, J., *The Waning of the Middle Ages*, (London: The Folio Society, 1998), 132.

[39]

The C H I L D.

Man that is born of a Woman, is of few Days, and full of Trouble. He cometh forth like a Flower, and is cut down: He fleeth also as a Shadow, and continueth not.

JOB xiv. 1.



**Man, who conceiv'd in the dark Womb,
Into the World is brought,
Is born to Times with Misery,
And various Evil fraught.**

**And as the Flow'r soon fades and dies,
However fair it be,
So sinks he also to the Grave,
And like a Shade does flee.**

E 2

Fig. 2 *Emblems of Mortality*, 1789, page 39.
(Creative Commons Licence)

In the dance of death paintings all individuals are in the same picture regardless of social status in life,²¹ whereas in the emblem books they appear one by one and always with the high-status individuals first – pope, emperor, cardinal, king, abbot, knight – and those of lower status later – ploughman, peasant and child. The sequential images suggest personal failings or sins for which death is the outcome: for example, a nun being serenaded by her lover when Death calls.

Westin, discussing the *memento mori* tradition, suggests that Death may be passive or active in reminding us of life's transitory nature²² and this is reflected in varying degrees in the dance of death paintings, the emblem book and the handbill.

In earlier images Death is often seen taking the individual lightly by the hand, dragging those who resist, indicating the way, providing musical accompaniment or helping complete a task – but less frequently in direct action to end life: the most obvious exception is Death killing a knight with a lance in the emblem books of 1538 and 1789. Oosterwijk has noted other

²¹ Gelfand, L. H., 'Social Status and Sin: Reading Bosch's Prado Seven Deadly Sins and Four Last Things painting' in Newhauser, R., (Ed.), *The Seven Deadly Sins from Communities to Individuals*, (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2007), 232.

²² Westin, R. H., 'Ars Moriendi tradition and visualization of death in roman baroque sculpture: Death education in the seventeenth century' in *Death Education*, vol. 4:2, 111-123, 1980. See 115 – 116.

emblems in which Death uses the spear, for example, in Rowlandson's print of *Death and the Antiquaries* of 1816²³ and Death about to spear an infant in the cradle from a book of hours, c. 1512.²⁴ Another example is Death holding a 'dart' in an illustration accompanying the ballad *Death and the lady; or the Great messenger of mortality* in a version c. 1800 in which he asserts 'my dart is sure, And far beyond the doctors' skill to cure.'²⁵ In many such emblems (slightly more than 50% in Bewick) the hourglass appears, and sometimes Death raises the glass to show us the inexorable nature of death, but it is time which is usually of the essence, not Death's actions in the scene except for the use of the lance. Of the 50 emblems in Bewick, Death gives the quietus directly in only two (the Knight and the Soldier) and is arguably violent in three more.

The handbill skeleton is actively intervening to hasten the death of the child as indicated in the title. In this case Death wields the lancet – a diminutive of the lance – of which many varieties were in use.²⁶ From the medieval dances of death we have moved from death occurring at the right time by the hourglass without Death's intervention other than as guide or helper (with exceptions as noted above) to a later view in which Death is a more obvious instigator.

This shift in Death's instrumentality occurs elsewhere. Combe's *English Dance of Death* (1815) has an image by Rowlandson of Death rendering alcoholic drinks lethal in a drink shop accompanied by the satirical verse 'Some find their death by Swords and Bullets; And some by fluids down the Gullet.'²⁷ A similar work by (or after) Rowlandson shows Death making up poisoned medicine for an apothecary.²⁸

Another comparison is of interest: in the emblem books every kind of person is liable to death and, excepting the satirical or moral suggestion of sin, equally so. However, the anti-vaccination literature always shows a respectable working class or lower middle-class mother with her child put at risk from vaccination: it never shows a prince's, lord's or clergyman's child in this situation.

Although nineteenth-century compulsory smallpox vaccination applied to all, the upper classes could afford child vaccination by physicians whereas the lower classes used the free public vaccinators. Anti-vaccination propagandists focussed on the risks of inter-patient infection from the free service and of death from vaccination. Gilray had already in 1802 caricatured Jenner's early vaccinations with the subtitle 'The cow-pock - or - the wonderful effects of the new inoculation! - Vide, the publications of ye anti-vaccine society': the 'wonderful effects' pictured were the various cow-like excrescences on the patients.²⁹

²³ Oosterwijk, S., 'Of Corpses, Constables and Kings: The Danse Macabre in Late Medieval and Renaissance Culture' in *The Journal of the British Archaeological Association*, vol. 157, 61 – 90, 2004; see 83.

²⁴ Oosterwijk, S., '“Muoz ich tanzen und kan nit gân?”: death and the infant in the medieval danse macabre' in *Word & Image: A Journal of Verbal/ Visual Enquiry*, vol. 22:2, 146-164, 2006, see 154, Fig 9.

²⁵ Broadside Ballads Online from the Bodleian Libraries: Bod5934. (Dated between 1797 and 1846, Printed by J. Turner, High Street, Coventry).

²⁶ Baxby, D., 'Smallpox vaccination techniques; from knives and forks to needles and pins' in *Vaccine*, vol. 20, 2140 – 2149, 2002.

²⁷ Combe, W., 'The English Dance of Death' 1815, Rowlandson, T. Private Collection / The Bridgeman Art Library.

²⁸ Wellcome Library. Death as an apothecary's assistant making up medicines with a mortar and pestle for the apothecary attending a female patient who sits by the fireside. Watercolour by T. Rowlandson or one of his followers. Library no. 20131i. On the same theme see Bridgeman Art Library website: 'Death and the Apothecary' or 'The Quack Doctor', illustration from 'The English Dance of Death', published by R. Ackermann, London 1815-17 (colour etching), Rowlandson, T. (after) / Private Collection / The Bridgeman Art Library

²⁹ Wellcome Library. Edward Jenner vaccinating patients in the Smallpox and Inoculation Hospital at St. Pancras: the patients develop features of cows. Coloured etching after J. Gillray, 1802. Library No. 11755i

Deuchar's emblem book,³⁰ claimed by him to be after Holbein has a page 'The Child' – dated to 1810 from the watermark and thought to be after Hollar³¹ – which shows (Fig. 3) Death exultant holding the hourglass in triumph while leading away the child.

Through the use of the raised hourglass it shows Death as cruel. By contrast Holbein's 1538 image repeated by John Bewick in 1789 shows Death leaving with the child but the hourglass is left on the ground, a reminder of time running out but not of triumph.

Ambiguity is present in both items. For the emblem there have been comments in the secondary literature that Death sometimes appears kindly and humane, particularly when leading a child but agreement on this is not general.³² The interpretation of Job is not fully determined. In the handbill the sub-title 'The Vaccination Act.' is ambiguous: it may refer to the legislation, to the action of the skeleton or to the entire action portrayed. Even the word 'Act.' with terminating full stop may imply vaccination is merely theatrical, an act, a trick – albeit lethally final. The phrase 'Jenner-ation of disease' implies that Jenner's method generated disease, not health. The constable's stance suggests an ambivalent attitude. One motto-like quotation misrepresented the views held.



Fig. 3 David Deuchar 1810 Etching 'The Child'
(By permission of Edinburgh Libraries)³³

While there are dissimilarities between the two items there are a number of positive correspondences – the overall form of each is tripartite with motto, picture and text; Death is present as a participant; inevitability and compulsion are features; the people are respectable and of modest status.

³⁰ Deuchar, D., [and others] *The dance of death, through the various stages of human life*, (London: Printed for B. Crosby and Co. 4, Stationer's Court, by John Jackson, Louth, 1811).

³¹ Capital Collections website URL:

<http://www.capitalcollections.org.uk/index.php?a=ViewItem&i=28469&WINID=1386695146502>

³² Oosterwijk, S., 2006, *ibid*, 161.

³³ Deuchar, D., etching dated 1810, Fine Art Library, Edinburgh and Capital Collections. URL: see Bibliography.

A virtual exhibition of the Gemmell Collection in Glasgow draws attention to the late-eighteenth- and nineteenth-century contemporary and largely satirical relevance of the dance of death.³⁴ Such images as those noted above were widely and variously available in print.

By contrast interest in emblem books had fallen though they continued to be produced: some twenty editions of Francis Quarles' popular book³⁵ were printed in the 19th century. Quarles' allegorised the soul 'imprisoned within a skeleton with the lament "Who shall deliver me from the body of death?"'³⁶ This continued activity would have maintained awareness for readers as context for viewing the handbill.

Moreover, for the Victorians religion and death were matters of everyday life: given the high rate of infant mortality, nationally 150 per 1,000 until it declined from c. 1890 to present-day levels of 5 per 1,000,³⁷ most Victorian parents would have attended funerals.

The Book of Common Prayer which the Church of England used since 1559 at funeral services drew almost verbatim on Job 14 in the King James Version: 'Man that is born of woman hath but a short time to live, and is full of misery. He cometh up, and is cut down, like a flower; he fleeth as it were a shadow, and never continueth in one stay'^{38, 39} - just as in the child emblem.

In the handbill an underlying message about the role of the mother allowing her child to be vaccinated can be discerned: her compliance sets her in the tradition of biblical commentaries on Job 14.1 prevalent from the 16th to the 19th centuries (including those by Mathew Henry and John Wesley) which described woman as the weaker vessel, as the source of sin and corruption, and of calamity and a short life, echoing the earlier emblems.⁴⁰ We might conclude that the handbill seeks the intervention of fathers – absent in the fields, the office or the workshop – to offset the weakness of mothers whose protests were sometimes disregarded by officials.⁴¹

CONCLUSION

The discussion above suggests that the two items – handbill and emblem – have a number of compositional elements in common, notably the tripartite construction and the interrelationship of these three elements – motto, picture and text – to establish and reinforce the meaning. Making due allowance for differences in content they possess the same overall form, suggesting

³⁴ University of Glasgow Library Special Collections website. Dancing with Death. The origins and development of the Dance of Death motif and its representation in graphic art. URL: <http://special.lib.gla.ac.uk/exhibns/death/modernsatire.html>.

³⁵ Quarles, F., *Emblemes*. (London: Printed by G[eorge] M[iller], 1635). Acquired by Johnson in an 1818 edition; Bodleian call number: Johnson f.2183.

³⁶ Freeman, R., *English Emblem Books*. (London: Chatto and Windus, 1970), 119

³⁷ Gregory, I. N., 'Different Places, Different Stories: Infant Mortality Decline in England and Wales, 1851–1911' in *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, vol. 98:4, 2008, 773 – 794; see 773, Fig. 1 and 785, Fig. 9.

³⁸ *The Book of Common Prayer*, Order for the Burial of the Dead, The Church of England website.

³⁹ *The Authorised Version of the Bible* (King James Version), the Book of Job, 14.1.

⁴⁰ Matthew Henry states of Job 14.1 'This may refer to the first woman, who was called Eve, because she was the mother of all living. Of her, who being deceived by the tempter was first in the transgression, we are all born, and consequently derive from her that sin and corruption which both shorten our days and sadden them. Or it may refer to every man's immediate mother. The woman is the weaker vessel, and we know that *partus sequitur ventrem* — the child takes after the mother' quoted at <http://st-takla.org/bible/commentary/en/ot/matthew-henry/job/ch14.html> John Wesley states 'Man - A weak creature, and withal corrupt and sinful, and of that sex by which sin and all other calamity was brought into the world' quoted at <http://www.biblestudytools.com/commentaries/wesleys-explanatory-notes/job/job-14.html>

⁴¹ Durbach, N., *ibid*, 2005, 191 – 192 and Fig. 12.

that the emblem book format not only survived into the 19th century in its original form but reappeared in this anti-vaccination handbill.

Moreover, intervention by Death may take on a more active value in the later work. There is a progression to be observed in this: in the early paintings the dead invite the living to join them; in the ensuing emblem books skeletons mostly announce death by their presence or draw the individual to death though in some examples they are much more active⁴²; by the nineteenth century skeletons take a leading role in advancing death through poisoning medicines and drink and through, it was alleged, vaccination. In the latter case the use of the lancet, a diminutive of the lance and by extension the sword, arrow and 'dart' of former times, reprises the earlier images.

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⁴² Diehl, H., *An Index of Icons in English Emblem Books 1500 – 1700*, (Norman, USA, and London: University of California Press, 1986), see 73 for list.

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