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"To please and profit vulgar iudjements": George Wither's Didactic Project in *A Collection of Emblemes* (1635)

Pierre Le Duff♦

> But, sure I am, the Vulgar Capacities, may from [these emblems], be many waies both Instructed, and Remembred; yea, they that have most need to be Instructed, and Remembred, (and they who are most backward to listen to Instructions, and Remembrances, by the common Course of Teaching, and Admonishing) shall be, hereby, informed of their Dangers, or Duties, by the way of an honest Recreation before they be aware. (Wither, 1635: I)

It is surprising, given the recently renewed interest in Wither's emblems (Daly, 1993, 1999, 2005; Farnsworth, 1999; Browning, 2002; Ripollés, 2008; Tung, 2010) as well as the author's frequent insisting, throughout the paratext, on his primarily didactic purpose, that the question of his views on instruction has not yet been addressed as a standalone subject of enquiry. Part of the reason may

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The pages that constitute the paratext in Wither's *A Collection of Emblemes* are not numbered. I have therefore assigned a capital letter to each, in alphabetical order, starting with the "Preposition to this Frontispiece". This also includes Wither's index, the "Supersedeas," the "Direction" concerning the lottery game, and the engraving of the two lottery dials. Since this amounts to a total of 28 pages, the last two will be referred to as "AA" and "AB".

All images have been scanned from the following facsimile edition of the work: *A Collection of Emblemes, Ancient and Moderne… Printed by A[ugustine] M[athewes] for Robert Milbourne, and are to be sold at the Grayhound in Pauls Church-yard, MDCXXXV),* The British Library; STC 1161:13, with the kind authorisation of The British Library and of ProQuest.

be the resilient claim that Wither was a Puritan (Browning, 2002: 55; Tung, 2010: 57), and that his didactic intentions were merely an expression of the self-righteous attitude that has been commonly attributed to members of this group by their opponents.[1] However, even a hasty skimming through Wither's emblem book reveals views on the author's part that are clearly at odds with such a conclusion: several emblems express unequivocally anti-Calvinistic views, and a lottery game is included—a feature rather incompatible with the early modern Puritan mindset, as acknowledged even by scholars otherwise satisfied with seeing Wither as belonging to that denomination (Freeman, 1948: 143).

In this article, I shall attempt to look at Wither's didactic remarks and strategies in his emblem book from a different perspective. Indeed, I suggest that, beyond Wither's overt and patronizing intent to teach commonplace moral lessons to his readers, *A Collection of Emblemes* implements notable didactic strategies to guide them towards a better understanding of emblematic signs and of Wither's stoic views on the concept of Fortune. Furthermore, to build on my conclusions in a previous article on the role that his emblematic lottery game plays in his broader rhetorical project (Le Duff, 2020), I shall argue that Wither had a thorough understanding of the pedagogical potential of play and playfulness, a factor that perhaps contributed to the book's popularity, which, it seems, greatly exceeded that of its author.

"Children and childish-gazers": The Question of Wither's Intended Readership

Although Jane Farnsworth has demonstrated quite convincingly that Wither intended—or, at least, hoped—for his emblem book to be read and granted patronage by prominent members of the Caroline court,[2] and that having had close connections with the royal family in the past, Wither had excellent command over the language and the topics that "the courtly reader would find familiar and pleasing" (Farnsworth, 1999: 85), the paratext—with the obvious exception of his dedications—focuses far more on an altogether different

1 Interestingly, Wither himself, in an earlier work titled *Abuses Stript and Whipt,* points to the polysemy of the word, and distinguishes between "such as are / Fore-named heere; and haue the greatest care / To know and please their maker: then 'tis true, I loue them well; for loue to such is due," and "the busie headed sect, / The hollow crew, the counterfeit Elect: Our Dogmatists, and euer-wrangling spirits, / That doe as well contemne good workes, as merits" and "those, how euer they appeare, / This I say of them (would they all might heare) / Though in a zealous habit they doe wander, / Yet they are Gods foes and the Churches slander; / And though they humble be in show to many, / They are as haughty euery way as any." (1611: II.4.). Notably, Wither identifies with neither group.

2 See the dedications to the royal family and notable members of the court that introduce each of the four books of *A Collection of Emblemes*.

readership. In the first lines of his epistle "To the Reader," Wither's persona refers to "meane capacities," people who could hardly be taught anything through the "most admired Compositions" of "learned Authors," who "would not descend unto" (Wither, 1635: G) making them accessible to such an audience. In a tone that, seemingly, makes no attempt at hiding a good deal of condescension, the persona repudiates the use of "Verball Conceites, which by some, are accounted most Elegant," and which "are not onely (for the greater part) Emptie Sounds, and Impertinent Clinches, in themselves," mainly because they "do sometime, also, obscure the Sense, to common Readers; and, serve to little other purpose, but for Wittie men to shew Tricks one to another." In fact, as Wither rather bluntly concludes, "the Ignorant understand them not; and the Wise need them not." Even more patronisingly, after having admitted to employing such "*Verball Conceites"* itself "to stirre up the Affections, winne Attention, or help the Memory," the persona states: "I know that the meanest of such conceites are as pertinent to some, as Rattles, and Hobby-horses to Children; or as the A.B.C. and Spelling, were at first to those Readers, who are now past them" (H). But whom does Wither mean here, exactly? For all his insisting that such readers would have been "allured […] to looke on the Pictures" through "levitie, or a childish delight in trifling Objects," he still adds that, once their attention has thus been grasped, "Curiositie may urge them to peepe further, that they might seeke out also their Meanings, in our annexed Illustrations,"[3] which obviously restricts his audience to the literate.[4] Based on a thorough re-examination of archival evidence, Cressy estimates "an illiteracy rate of around 70 percent among men in the rural England of 1642-44, with the home counties and metropolitan areas somewhat better" (1977: 144).[5] Subsequent research by various scholars, including Cressy himself

3 Wither refers to his own textual additions to the engravings as "Illustrations".

4 John Manning (2002: 141-165) has shown that many emblem books were written either directly for children, or to accommodate child-like aversion for conventional learning through the use of pictures. Indeed, Wither dedicates book II of *A Collection of Emblemes* to the future James II and Charles II, who, at the time, would have been about two and five years old, respectively. In fact, Wither addressed the dedication meant for James to his governess, the Countess of Dorset, and expresses the hope that she may read the book with the young prince and clarify for him the meanings of the pictures. However, the general tone of the *subscriptiones* and of the lottery verses, as well as that of the epistle "To the Reader," suggest that he primarily had an adult audience in mind. It is, of course, possible that the book might have been purchased by or for someone illiterate, and then read out loud to them by someone else, but I have found no evidence of such a use of the book. Furthermore, as I have shown elsewhere (Le Duff, 2020), the principle of the lottery game requires a player capable of reading the emblem to which he or she was directed him-/herself.

5 Notably, Cressy readily admits that "signing one's name is by no means proof of literacy, just as making a mark did not necessarily exclude one from literate affairs. Many people who are counted as illiterate because they could not write their names may in fact have had some ability to read. The exact proportion in this midway zone or literacy penumbra cannot yet be calculated" (142). He states that it is, however, the only measurable evidence that is available (141).

(1994), has emphasised the methodological problems that arise when attempting to estimate the proportion of a population that was able to perform a skill which, by its very nature, leaves no trace. However, there seems to be a broad consensus about the correlation between one's position in the social order and one's ability to read and write:

> The gentle, clerical and professional classes, of course, had full possession of literacy, except for a few who were decrepit or dyslexic. Members of this dominant class, who comprised no more than 5 per cent of the population, were the primary audience for most of the output of the press. Literacy was an attribute of their status and an active element in their lives. Here, and here only, was the seventeenth-century cultivated elite.
>
> Approaching the level of the gentry were city merchants and tradesmen. Country merchants and superior shopkeepers, including drapers and haberdashers, grocers and apothecaries, ranged from 5-15 per cent illiterate. […]
>
> Next came a variety of skilled craftsmen and tradesmen of the second rank, men like goldsmiths and clothiers, dyers and leather sellers, who lived by providing specialist services or expensively wrought products. Their literacy reflected their wealth and their social standing. (Cressy, 1994: 315-316)

Literacy extended to most other groups as well, although, naturally, the proportion of literate people was much higher on the upper rungs of the social ladder than on the lower ones, and much more developed in urban than in rural areas (316-317). Furthermore, as Wither states himself, the expenses involved in printing the book would have driven up its price,[6] further restricting access to it, although its being listed in the *Catalogue of most vendible books in England* (1658) suggests that it still became a commercial success during the Civil War and the interregnum.

The question remains, however: who, in Wither's eyes, would have been literate, but nonetheless ignorant, "Childish-gazers" (Wither, 1635: H), to whom

6 In the section titled "The Occasion, Intention, and use of the Foure Lotteries adjoyned to these foure Books of Emblems," Wither refers to the work as "being so chargeable as the many costly Sculptures have made this Booke" (1635: O), and, in the section "A Supersedeas to all them, whose custome it is, without any deserving, to importune Authors to give unto them their Bookes," Wither repudiates those who would profess to be his friends to obtain a free copy of the work, especially because "they who know me, know, that, Bookes thus large, / And, fraught with Emblems, do augment the Charge / Too much above my Fortunes, to afford / A Gift so costly, for an Aierie-word" (Y).

the moral teachings contained in *A Collection of Emblemes* would have been profitable? Keith Wrightson provides valuable insights into this question, as he mentions several authors who were Wither's contemporaries, and in whose works the terms "rude Readers," "the simple ignorant," or even "the common and vulgar sorte of people" appear as well (Wrightson 1994: 34-35). He argues, firstly, that the use of the categorisation by "sorts" of people was:

> a terminology of social simplification, cutting across the fine-grained (and sometimes contested) distinctions of the formal hierarchy of estates and degrees and regrouping the English into two broad camps, which were evidently taken to encapsulate the basic realities of the social and economic structure. (Wrightson, 1994: 37)

However, he continues by stating that the introduction of "markedly pejorative elements" such as the adjectives "ruder," "vulgar," "baser," "meaner" or "inferior," carried "profound implications concerning the quality of social relations," and was "pregnant with actual or potential conflict" (38). Finally, Wrightson adds that "the language of 'sorts' was very much a terminology of those who identified themselves with authority, sound religion, civility—with the 'better sort of people'" (39), and that "the 'better sort' were, in effect, a composite local ruling group, distinct from both the greater gentry and the mass of the common people" (40), and therefore mirrored not merely social distinctions, but also local power structures. Those who were at the helm of these structures viewed everyone else with overt condescension, which sometimes bordered on disgust, and saw no shortage of vices and moral shortcomings in the behaviour of the "meaner sorte" of people. And indeed, in *Abuses Stript and Whipt* (1613), Wither's first work of some success, the poet's persona complains as follows:

> With many such like humors base and naught,
> I do perceiue the common people fraught,
> Then by th'opinion of some it seemes,
> How much the Vulgar sort of men esteems
> Of Art or learning: Certaine neighbouring swaines,
> (That think none wise-men but whose wisdome games;
> Where knowledge be it morall or diuine
> Is valued as an Orient-pearle with swine). (Wither, 1613: P_V)

Given the points made by Wrightson about the use of such language, it would appear that Wither did not have a well-circumscribed sociological group in mind, but, rather, that he understood "vulgar" to be synonymous with "lacking morals or decorum," an interpretation that another passage from the same work confirms:

> I doe not meane these meaner sort alone,
> Tradesmen or Labourers; but euery one,
> Be he Esquire, Knight, Baron, Earle or more,
> Yet if he haue not learn'd of Vertues lore,
> But followes Vulgar Passions; then e'ne he,
> Amongst the Vulgar shall for one man be.
> And the poore Groome, that he thinks should adore him,
> Shall for his Vertue be preferd before him.
> (Lib II. Satyr 2. Unnumbered page)

Therefore, I would like to argue that the question of Wither's anticipated—or imagined—readers can be apprehended in a more nuanced fashion through the prism of the content of his didactic project.

The condescending dedication to "common readers" is consistent with the unambiguous intent, on Wither's part, to impart conventional moral lessons, which any literate adult in Britain at the time would have been aware of already, whether they were put into practice or not. Exhortations to constancy in labour and faith, to timeliness, to virtue in general, and to sobriety abound in the volume, as they did in numerous treatises, sermons, and commonplace books at the time. In fact, even though Wither's persona cheekily suggests that anyone capable of making sense of the frontispiece—an intricate, detailed, and heavily allegorical engraving by William Marshall (see Figure 1)[7]—should "stiled be, the second Oedipvs" (Wither, 1635: A), the overall message conveyed by the two roads, one arduous and inhospitable but culminating in salvation, and the other broad and inviting but leading straight to Hell, would probably have been obvious, even to readers with a comparatively modest educational background (Ripollés, 2008: 120).



Fig. 1: William Marshall, Frontipiece to George Herbert's, *A Collection of Emblemes*, 1635.

Furthermore, in the epistle "To the Reader," the persona anticipates that, even for "Childish-gazers," the emblems may perhaps only play the part of "Remembrancers of profitable things" (Wither, 1635: N). As some critics, including Ripollés (2008) and Browning (2002), have argued, however, Wither's didactic purpose extends beyond the reiteration of moral commonplaces, and, upon examination of its deeper and less overt aspects, a different view of Wither's relationship to his prospective readers tends to emerge.

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Fortune in Theory and Practice: Playful Didactics

As Ripollés rightly points out, Wither's disclaimers regarding his lottery game, in which he claims that it is merely an incidental addition to the emblems to make them less "over-serious" (Wither, 1635: J) appear to be quite disingenuous. Indeed, if one examines the frontispiece more closely, one notices a remarkable scene in its very centre (Figure 2): the people who have emerged from the dark cave at the bottom and who are preparing to ascend one of the twin peaks at the top are invited, before choosing one of the paths before them, to lower their hand into a ewer, from which they appear to draw a piece of paper. The process is supervised by two female figures: the one on the left is holding a sphere and pointing at the rugged path towards salvation, and the one on the right is holding a sail or a scarf floating in the wind and softly pressing her hand on the back of the individual who is drawing his lot, as if to encourage him to do so.



Fig. 2: Detail of the frontipiece to George Herbert's, *A Collection of Emblemes.*

Ripollés identifies the figures as Virtue and Fortune respectively (120), and, having pointed out the meta-emblematical connection between the frontispiece and the lottery game, states:

> By directing the reader to specific emblems, the lottery situates the reader in a position similar to that of the pilgrim in the frontispiece. Although in this case Fortune promotes the observation of the emblems' morals, the reader can still ignore them. Thus, in *A Collection of Emblemes* Fortune achieves an important rhetorical role, since, under the auspices of Wither's inventiveness, she becomes an effective tool to test the reader's moral integrity.
>
> (Ripollés, 2008: 125)

It is true that Fortune, through the readers' participation in the lottery—which is, of course, a game of chance—playfully directs them towards the "profitable morals couched in these emblems" (Wither, 1635: H), thus allowing for a pleasant, yet profitable experience according to the famous Horatian principle of *miscuit utile dulci*. As Ripollés also rightly points out, however, the concept of

Fortune itself was the object of a great deal of debate throughout the Renaissance (Ripollés, 2009: 109-113), not merely in terms of its allegorical depiction,[8] but also regarding its relationship to the theological conundrum that opposed predestination and free will, which, especially in the years leading up to the English Civil Wars and the rising influence of Calvinist denominations, was a very contentious issue indeed. It may therefore be argued that Wither deemed it worthwhile, not only to impart moral lessons through the use of a device mimicking the mechanism of chance, but also to use it as a practical means to teach his readers *about* his perspective on the idea of Fortune.

In the dedication of his *Remedies for Fortune Fair and Foul* (ca. 1345) to his patron Azzo da Correggio, Petrarch addresses his student as follows:

> And let not the name of Fortune grieue thee, which is repeated not onely in the superscriptions and tytles, but also in the woork: For truly thou hast often heard mine opinion, concerning fortune. But when I foresawe that this Doctrine was most necessarie, specially for such as were not furnished with learning, I haue vsed in their behalfe the common and knowne woord, not being ignorant, what other men generally, & most briefly S. Hierome thinketh of this matter, where he sayth, that there is neither Fortune nor destinie, so that the common sort shall acknowledge and perceiue here their manner of speaking: as for the learned, which are but scarce, they will vnderstand what I meane, and shall not bee troubled with the vsuall woord.[9]

The distinction between the idea of Fortune in the minds of "those not furnished with learning"—or so Petrarch supposes—and the presumably more nuanced and complex view that he holds, along with Azzo, Saint Jerome, and the minority of learned individuals, would remain a topic throughout the early modern period. Under the influence of Neostoicism and Reformed theology, the concept of Fortune was weighed against such principles as Calvinist predestination, which denies the possibility of uncertainty or contingency, and was deemed to be powerless against the Christian and Stoic virtues of patience, resilience, and faith:

> [The] Stoic dismissal of fortune constitutes a "transcendent" view of fortune, reframing the discussion by asking whether the goods of fortune were even worthwhile, and instead advocated pursuing things like virtue and salvation that are unassailable by fortune.

8 On the subject of the developments and transformations of the allegorical representations of Fortune, see Buttay-Jutier (2008), as well as Brendecke and Vogt (2017).
9 Quoted from Thomas Twyne's translation, titled *Phisicke against fortune, aswell prosperous, as aduerse conteyned in two bookes* (1579: 163).

> According to this tradition, fortune was but a trick of individual perception, and not a valid topic for serious, philosophical study. That is, such philosophies tended to locate fortune's uncertainty in the fallible mind of man, rather than in the world itself.
>
> (Kelly 2015: 19)

Given Wither's evident interest in Stoic philosophy,[10] his inclusion of a game of chance in his volume may seem very odd indeed, until one realises that, much like the character in the frontispiece who, regardless of the lot he draws from the ewer, still faces the exact same choice between the two paths ahead, the reader, regardless of the emblem to which he or she has been directed by the lottery wheel, retains every bit of agency with regards to the moral advice that is offered. The reader could choose to heed the advice, to discard it, or to draw another lot—a possibility that Wither explicitly grants to "King, Queene, Prince, or any one that springs / From Persons, knowne to be deriv'd from Kings" (Wither, 1635: AA), but which is obviously available to anyone playing the game. It is also quite possible to read the emblems in the order in which they appear, without playing the game at all. In fact, quite tellingly, the only emblem in which Fortune is mentioned without being immediately overthrown or rendered powerless through virtue—emblem III-40 (174, see Figure 3)—is notably different in tone from the others.



Fig. 3: Embleme III-40, Fortuna ut luna, George Herbert's, *A Collection of Emblemes*, 1635.

After having described the engraving in detail, and having provided an interpretation of each of the attributes carried by Fortune personified, Wither's persona concludes:

> Moreover (to her credit) I confesse,
> This Motto falsly saith, her Ficklenesse
> Is like the Moones: For, she hath frown'd on mee
> Twelve Moones, at least; and, yet, no Change I see.
>
> (Wither, 1635: 174)

Wither humorously suggests that the commonplace idea of *Fortuna*'s fickleness as expressed in the motto is, in essence, a joke. One might, perhaps,

10 He completed his English translation of the treatise *De natura hominis*, which is thoroughly Stoic in outlook, the same year as *A Collection of Emblemes*.

even discern an instance of wordplay in the persona's conclusion: "By this Description, you may now descry / Her true conditions, full as well as I." "To descry" is to be understood, firstly, as "to describe" here, as is attested in the *OED*, but the verb was also used to mean "to denounce, censure; to rebuke, criticize."[11] What would Wither's persona mean if it were rebuking or criticising *Fortuna*'s "true conditions"? Perhaps that *Fortuna*, contrary to popular belief, is, in fact, but a fancy, a rhetorical conceit, and that she has no bearing on reality? Even the accompanying lottery stanza, in the habitual tongue-in-cheek tone,[12] addresses the player who would have been directed to it via the game as follows:

> Dame Fortunes favour seemes to bee
> Much lov'd, and longed for, of thee;
> As if, in what, her hand bestowes,
> Thou mightst thy confidence repose.
> But, that, her manners may bee knowne,
> This Chance, upon thee, was bestowne.
> Consider well, what thou hast got,
> And, on her flattrings, dote thou not.
> (Wither, 1635: 193)

The striking irony of being taught not to grant too much credence to the concept of Fortune *through* a game of chance certainly adds to the amusement here. More importantly, however, it appears that Wither, by involving his reader directly in the process, seemingly hopes to highlight that Fortune ought not to be seen as a fickle force of contingency, but rather, much as Bacon puts it in his essay on the matter, "a number of little and scarce discerned virtues, or rather faculties and customs, that make men fortunate," which would allow the reader, by cultivating such virtues, to become "the architect of his own Fortune" (Bacon, 1908: 184).

"They who are so wise, / To finde them out, by their owne *prudencies*": Applied Hermeneutics as Pedagogy

It is worth noting, firstly, that, especially in England, emblems were mostly written for, and dedicated to, a very narrow proportion of the population: they were "the language of the court and aristocracy" (Browning, 2002: 62), though the general population would, occasionally, have access to certain forms of emblematic compositions.:

11 OED, entry "to descry" v. 2 and v. 1, III.7. Attested since ca. 1450.
12 See Le Duff (2020) for more details on the question of the tone of Wither's lottery verses.

> The English at the time would have been familiar with other forms of emblematism, such as were found in the ritualistic Elizabethan progresses, royal entry triumphs, and Lord Mayors' pageants. In these instances, emblems were part of elaborate, very expensive shows directed to the people who stood alongside the road as spectators. (Browning, 2002: 62-63)

As Browning's emphasis on the preposition "to" already suggests, however, the purpose of such displays was not to grant the bulk of the population access to the intricacies of the genre, but to "delight and placate the masses," especially given that, in such a context, emblematic motifs would not usually have been accompanied by any explanatory texts. "The vast majority of spectators who lacked such knowledge [as was necessary to identify the motifs unaided] […] would see that the figures are definitely *supposed* to signify something in particular, but not for the likes of themselves" (Browning, 2002: 63). The best known English emblem books were definitely composed with a similarly hierarchical view of society in mind: Whitney's famous *Choice of Emblemes* (1586) was, first and foremost, designed as a panegyric of the Earl of Leicester, and, as Bath puts it, understanding the messages conveyed by the emblems depended "on a cultural *donné*, something which is not supplied by any of the three elements of the tripartite emblem-structure"[13] (Bath 1994: 73), and which the reader/beholder, therefore, had to know beforehand. This presupposed a familiarity with allegorical semiotics far beyond the reach of the general population (Browning, 2002: 63). Similarly, Peacham's emblems in *Minerva Britanna* (1612), which Bath calls "courtly devices," are merely a rewriting of the *Basilikon Doron*, "James I's book of kingly advice to his eldest son" (Bath 1994: 90, 93), and several of them are dedicated to notable members of the nobility and the court, including the king, the queen, Prince Henry, Prince Charles, Princess Elizabeth, as well as the Earls of Salisbury and of Northampton, William of Pembroke, and several foreign monarchs, including Louis XIII of France and the king of Spain. Thomas Blount, who translated Henri Estienne's *L'art de faire les devises* (1645), even asserts: "by how much this way of expression is less usuall with the common people, by so much is it the more excellent" (Blount, 1646: 13).

As Browning (2002) shows, Wither sought not merely to be an exception by intending his emblems for non-gentile readers; his long-winded *subscriptiones*, which elicited so much frustration with so many of his critics,[14] describe the

13 The most conventional format of the emblem, sometimes called the "emblema triplex," is composed of a short *inscriptio* or motto, a *pictura*, and a *subscriptio*, which elaborates on the motto to an extent that varies from one author to the next.

14 Freeman, for instance, in a chapter dedicated to Wither's emblems in her seminal work *English Emblem Books*, sardonically states that "it was not so much liberty that his muse needed as restraint" (1948: 147), and Manning, in his more recent work *The Emblem,* further elaborates in the same tone: "Wither has to tell us at length what the

motifs in the *pictura* individually and then expound the allegorical signification of each one before providing, often not just one, but several interpretations of the engraving as a whole. Where his predecessors cultivated an elitist form of emblematic hermeticism that excluded the popular classes, Wither made a point of "demystifying" the allegorical images (Browning, 2002: 60), showcasing, in a step-by-step fashion, the hermeneutic method required to make sense of them, and providing his readers with an ample supply of information regarding the conventional meanings of allegorical pictorial signs in the process. Emblem II-26 is just one of many examples of this kind:[15]

> Marke, how the Cornucopias, here, apply
> Their Plenties, to the Rod of Mercury;
> And (if it seeme not needlesse) learne, to know
> This Hieroglyphick's meaning, ere you goe.
> The Sages old, by this Mercurian-wand
> (Caducaeus nam'd) were wont to understand
> Art, Wisedome, Vertue, and what else we finde,
> Reputed for endowments of the Minde.
> The Cornucopias, well-knowne Emblems, are,
> By which, great wealth, and plenties, figur'd were;
> And (if you joyne together, what they spell)
> It will, to ev'ry Vnderstanding, tell,
> That, where Internall-Graces may be found,
> Eternall-blessings, ever, will abound. (Wither, 1635: 88)

The reader is duly informed of the meaning to be inferred from each allegorical motif, and is then invited to combine these individual signs to achieve a full understanding of the general message conveyed by the *pictura*. In fact, the language used in the first phase of the process is calibrated carefully to allow for the second one, at the price of an extension of the allegorical meaning of the pictorial signs: Wither's persona has to identify the caduceus, broadly, as a symbol of "endowments of the Minde," and has to endow the cornucopias, which are usually deemed to symbolise material wealth and success, with a measure of polysemy. Here, they are to be understood as signifying "plenties," a term that is sufficiently vague to allow for the final reference to "Eternall-blessings" in the conclusion, which, one infers, has more to do with spiritual salvation than with pecuniary

point should be. Exhausting the imagery of the plate, he often then needs—an invitation to further disaster—to find material of his own to fill the page: additional images, anecdotes, allusions. By the end of the emblem we have meandered far from our starting-point. If we have not exactly fallen off William Marshall's frontispiece allegorical mountain by this stage, we may well have fallen asleep" (Manning, 2004: 103).

15 In the facsimile edition of *A Collection of Emblemes* from which the illustrations inserted here are taken, the corresponding engraving is, unfortunately, barely distinguishable.

accumulation. Wither is certainly aware that the exact same motif—which was commonly used by emblem composers since Alciato's *Emblematum Liber* (1531), the volume that is generally considered to have been the first emblem book (Bath, 1994: xiii)—was usually interpreted more narrowly. Alciato's short *subscriptio*, for instance, reads: "The caduceus, with entwined snakes and twin wings, stands upright between the horns of Amalthea. It thus indicates how material wealth blesses men of powerful intellect, skilled in speaking."[16] Arguably, however, Wither's broadening of the scope of possible interpretations of the motifs is also rooted in his didactic intent. Indeed, if the goal of his endeavour is to grant readers access, not merely to his own emblems, but to symbolic representations in general, providing a wider range of possible meanings for each motif would arm his readers with a more transferable exegetical skill.



Fig. 4: Embleme I-19, Lente sed attente, George Herbert's, *A Collection of Emblemes*, 1635.

The same is true for emblems in which Wither proposes several interpretations of the *pictura* as a whole. For example, in his *subscriptio* to emblem I-19 (Figure 4), the *pictura* of which represents a snail progressing on a narrow stick in lieu of a bridge over a gap in the ground, Wither's persona furnishes the reader with no fewer than three possible ways of making sense of the motif:

> For, thence we learne, that Perseverance brings
> Large Workes to end, though slowly they creepe on;
> And, that Continuance perfects many things,
> Which seeme, at first, unlikely to be done.
> It warnes, likewise, that some Affaires require
> More Heed then Haste: And that the Course we take,
> Should suite as well our Strength, as our Desire;
> Else (as our Proverbe saith) Haste, Waste may make.
> And, in a Mysticke-sense, it seemes to preach
> Repentance and Amendment, unto those
> Who live, as if they liv'd beyond Gods reach;

16 "Anguibus implicitis geminis caducaeus alis, / Inter Amalthaeae cornua rectus adest. / Pollentes sic mente viros, fandique peritos, / Indicat, ut rerum copia multa beet." The translation appears on the "Alciato at Glasgow" website, which specifies that the caduceus was "the herald's staff, attribute of Mercury, god of eloquence, intellectual pursuits and financial success. The entwined serpents are a symbol of peace."

> Because, he long deferres deserved Blowes:
> For, though Iust-Vengeance moveth like a Snaile,
> And slowly comes; her comming will not faile. (Wither, 1635: 19)

Again, Wither takes great care to highlight the inter-semiotic connection between the motif, on the one hand, and the allegorical commonplace to be gathered from it, on the other. "Large Workes" are said to "creepe on," the abstract idea of the "Course" of one's life parallels the invertebrate's steady progression over the stick, and, finally—and rather comically—the placid snail, rather than a dish best served cold, stands in for deferred, but nonetheless thunderous, divine retribution, whose inevitability—"her comming will not faile"—is further linked to the animal through the rhyming pattern. The result is a turnkey mode of teaching pictorial hermeneutics: the basic tools for exegesis are provided from the onset, and the methodology is then exemplified in unequivocal terms for any literate reader to emulate. I would not go so far as to write that Wither "invites [his readers] into the interpretative fray" (Browning 2002: 60), to the point where he would grant them complete exegetical freedom, even to depart from his own conclusions regarding the meaning of the engravings; indeed, Wither's persona, who addresses the reader frequently throughout, never makes any suggestion to that effect, and it insists that, once the readers have been allured to the book by the pictures and the game, "Curiositie may urge them to peepe further, that they might seeke out also their Meanings, in our annexed Illustrations"—and, crucially, there only. Even so, if they paid close attention to the hermeneutic methodology that is exemplified in Wither's *subscriptiones*, his readers would then certainly have gained the ability to apply their newly acquired skills to the interpretation of other symbolic compositions. I therefore concur with Browning's general conclusion that Wither evidently wished to grant his readers access to a genre that had previously been emblematic of the exclusion of most readers from understanding symbolic discourse (Browning 2002: 60).

Conclusion

In his *Collection of Emblemes*, under the guise of setting forth conventional moral lessons for an undefined readership of "vulgar capacities" and "Childish-gazers," Wither actually uses a practical, playful, and creative didactic approach to acquaint his readers with a Neostoic view on Fortune. Perhaps more radically still, he exemplifies the method through which emblematic compositions can be deciphered, an activity that was previously mainly the well-guarded privilege of a select few. The interactive element of play, as well as the clear and pedagogical exemplifying of emblematic exegesis, stand out in the English emblem tradition, and partake in the democratic repurposing of the genre for the moral, spiritual,

and exegetical instruction of a much broader audience. In more ways than one, therefore, his emblems do, indeed, become "teachers […] of profitable things" (Wither, 1635: I).

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