

THE PAGEANT OF LIFE (1492-1501)¹

Master Thomas More in his youth devised in his father's house in London, a goodly hanging of fine painted cloth, with nine pageants, and verses over every one of those pageants: which verses expressed and declared, what the images in those pageants represented and also in those pageants were painted, the things that the verses over them did (in effect) declare, which verses here follow.

In the first pageant was painted a boy playing at the top and whip. And over this pageant was written as follows.

Childhood.

I am called Childhood, in play is all my mind,
To cast a quoit,² a cock-stick,³ and a ball.⁴
A top⁵ can I set, and drive it in his kind.
But would to god these hateful books all,
Were in a fire burnt to powder small.
Than might I lead my life always in play:
Which life God send me to mine ending day.

In the second pageant was painted a goodly fresh young man, riding upon a goodly horse, having a hawk on his fist, and a brace of greyhounds following him. And under the horse feet, was painted the same boy, that in the first pageant was playing at the top and whip. And over this second pageant the writing was thus.

Manhood.

Manhood I am; therefore I myself delight,⁶
To hunt and hawk,⁷ to nourish up and feed
The greyhound to the course, the hawk to the flight,
And to bestride⁸ a good and lusty steed.
These things become a very man indeed,
Yet thinks this boy his peevish game sweeter,⁹
But after all¹⁰ without force,¹¹ his reason is no better.

¹ Source text for modernization comes from *The English Works of Thomas More*, editors W.E. Campbell, A.W. Reed, R. W. Chambers, and W.A.G. Doyle-Davidson, 2 volumes (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode Limited, 1931). Cited as "Campbell and Reed" hereafter. Editing and annotations are by Travis Curtright.

² "Quoit" used here for "coyte," which was a "heavy flattish ring of iron, slightly convex on the upper side and concave on the under, so as to give it an edge capable of cutting into the ground when falls, if skillfully thrown" (OED). Casting a "coyte," therefore, represents an English Renaissance version of throwing a discus.

³ "Cock-stick" used here for "cokstele," which was a stick used for throwing at cocks on Shrovetide (OED, but see also S. G. Edwards, p.191).

⁴ OED notes that the following definition of the word "ball" was probably its earliest sense in English: "a globular body to play with, which is thrown, kicked, knocked, or batted about in various games . . .".

⁵ A "whipping top" was a toy that was "kept spinning by lashing it with a whip" (OED).

⁶ "Myself" for the original "me."

⁷ To chase or hunt game (OED).

⁸ To mount, to ride (OED).

⁹ The actual line is "Yet thynketh this boy his pevishe game swetter." More meant "pevishe" to mean "silly, senseless, foolish" (OED).

¹⁰ "But after" all replaces "But what" (OED).

In the third pageant, was painted the goodly young man, in the second pageant lying on the ground. And upon him stood lady Venus goddess of love, and by her upon this man stood the little god Cupid. And over this third pageant, this was the writing that follows.

Venus and Cupid.

Whoever knows not the strength, power and might,¹²
Of Venus and me her little son Cupid,
Thou Manhood shall a mirror been a right,¹³
By us subdued for all thy great pride,
My fiery dart pierces thy tender side,¹⁴
Now thou that before despised children small,¹⁵
Shall grow¹⁶ a child again and be my thrall.

In the fourth pageant was painted an old sage father sitting in a chair. And lying under his feet was painted the image of Venus & Cupid, that were in the third pageant. And over this fourth pageant the scripture was thus.

Age.

Old Age am I, with looks, thin and hore,¹⁷
Of our short life, the last and best part.
Wise and discreet: the public weal¹⁸ therefore,
I help to rule to my labor and smart.
Therefore Cupid withdraw thy fiery dart,
Weighty¹⁹ matters shall of love oppress
The childish game and idle business.

In the fifth pageant was painted an image of Death: and under his feet lay the old man in the fourth pageant. And above this fifth pageant, this was the saying.

¹¹ "But what no force" is the actual line, where "force" means "strength" in argument.

¹² The original line reads: "Whoso ne knoweth the strength power and myght."

¹³ This line and the next are exceptionally difficult to render due to anastrophe and use of obsolete word forms.

"Thou" is primarily a personal pronoun, but when it proceeds a noun, it works in a vocative address in which disdain is connoted; second, 'thou' is a personal pronoun used in the nominative, as in an ordinary address; finally, it may be used a verb, as in "thou traitor" (OED). All three are possibilities here. "Been" replaces the original "bene," which means either an archaic form of "bein," or "be." OED glosses "bein" as an adjective, meaning to flourish or fill in. I take "by" in its sense of time, as in "in the course of, at, in, on time" (OED). Accordingly, this line may mean: "You, manhood, shall be reflected rightly when by us subdued" or "Your manhood shall be rightly reflected when by us subdued." The syntax favors the later formulation. Hence: "Whoever knows not the strength, power, and might / Of Venus and me her little son Cupid, / your manhood shall be reflected rightly when by us subdued." In any case, Cupid begins with a threat.

¹⁴ Pierces for "pierceth."

¹⁵ The actual line reads: "Now thou which erst despisedst children small." "Which" for "that" (OED).

¹⁶ Grow for "wax" (OED).

¹⁷ "Hore" is "foulness, defilement, dirt, filth," but also an obsolete form of "hoar," which means "grey-haired with old age; venerable" (OED). Sylvester glosses the latter meaning, although the first also existed in More's day. See *St. Thomas More: The History of Richard III and Selections from the English and Latin Poems*, ed. Richard Sylvester (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976); hereafter cited as "Sylvester."

¹⁸ I.e., the common public good. More's old man is involved in politics.

¹⁹ The actual word is "Chargeable." Weighty is the gloss of Campbell and Reed, and the OED also recommends "grave."

Death.

Though I be foul ugly lean and misshape,²⁰
Yet there is none in all this world wide,
That may my power withstand or escape.
Therefore sage father greatly magnified,
Descend from your chair, set apart your pride,
Deign²¹ to lend (though it be to your pain)
To me a fool,²² some of your wise brain.

In the sixth pageant was painted lady Fame. And under her feet was the picture of Death that was in the fifth pageant. And over this sixth pageant the writing was as follows.

Fame.

Fame I am called, marvel you nothing,
Though with tongues am compassed all round²³
For in voice of people is my chief living.
O cruel death, thy power I confound.
When thou a noble man hast brought to ground
Maugry thy teeth²⁴ to live cause him shall I,
Of people in perpetual memory.

In the seventh pageant was painted the image of Time, and under his feet was lying the picture of Fame that was in the sixth pageant. And this was the scripture over this seventh pageant.

Time.

I whom thou see²⁵ with hourglass²⁶ in hand,
Am named time, the lord of every hour,
I shall in space destroy both sea and land.
O simple fame, how dare²⁷ thou man honor,
Promising of his name, an endless flower,
Who may in the world have a name eternal,
When I shall in process destroy the world and all.

²⁰ I.e., misshapen.

²¹ "Deign" replaces "witsafe," which the OED glosses as "vouchsafe."

²² "Fool" for the original "fole."

²³ The bizarre image of Fame More might have known from Chaucer, who describes her thus: "For as feeble eyen hadde she / As fetheres upon foules be," or *for as many eyes had she as feathers upon birds be*; and, most similar to More, Chaucer writes that Lady Fame "had also fele upstondyng eres / And tonges, as on bestes heres," that is, *she had also many upstanding ears, and as many tongues as there are hairs on animals*. Perhaps the point in both Chaucer and More's imagery is that with many ears and tongues Fame can learn rumors of great deeds and men, and then trumpet those tidings throughout the world, thus preserving their memory for future generations. See Chaucer's *The House of Fame* in *The Riverside Chaucer*, third edition, ed. Larry D. Benson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1987), and for modernizing Chaucer's vocabulary see Larry D. Benson, *A Glossarial Concordance to the Riverside Chaucer*, vol. 1 (New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 1993), and also Norman David, Douglas Gray, Patricia Ingham, and Anne Wallace-Hadrill, *A Chaucer Glossary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979).

²⁴ The fifth entry on "tooth" from the OED explains this line well: "in spite of (despite, maugre, etc) one's teeth: notwithstanding one's opposition or resistance; in spite of one, in defiance of one" (OED). Hence, Fame tells Death: In spite of your destructive powers, I will cause him [the old man of the previous stanza, now dead] to live on."

²⁵ "See" for "seest."

²⁶ The original word is "horyloge," which Sylvester glosses as "hourglass."

²⁷ Dare for "darest."

In the eighth pageant was pictured the image of lady Eternity, sitting in a chair under a sumptuous cloth of estate, crowned with an imperial crown. And under her feet lay the picture of Time, that was in the seventh pageant. And above this eighth pageant, was it written as follows.

Eternity.

Me need²⁸ not to boast, I am Eternity,
The very name signifies²⁹ well,
That mine empire infinite shall be.
Thou mortal Time every man can tell,
Art nothing else but the mobility
Of sun³⁰ and moon changing in every degree,³¹
When they shall leave³² their course thou shalt be brought,
For all thy pride and boasting into nought.³³

In the ninth pageant was painted a Poet sitting in a chair. And over this pageant were there written these verses in Latin following.

The Poet.

Has fictas quemcunque iuvat spectare figuras,³⁴
Sed mira veros quas putat arte homines,
Ille potest veris, animum sic pascere rebus,
Ut pictis oculos pascit imaginibus.
Namque videbit uti fragilis bona lubrica mundi,
Tam cito non veniunt, quam cito pretereunt.
Gaudia laus & honor, celeri pede omnia cedunt,
Qui manet excepto semper amore dei?
Ergo homines, leuibus iamiam diffidite rebus,
Nulla recessuro spes adhibenda bono.
Qui dabit eternam nobis pro munere vitam,
In permansuro ponite vota deo.

²⁸ Need for “needeth.”

²⁹ Signifies for “signifieth.”

³⁰ Sun for “son.”

³¹ Aristotle thought that time was the measure of matter in motion; accordingly, the sun and moon may endure in their motions, but that does not mean they are eternal. Eternity is an atemporal and nonmaterial condition.

³² Leave for “leve.”

³³ Nothing (OED).

³⁴ Joshua Avery’s translation: *Whoever delights himself in gazing at these figures, and even thinks that they accurately depict man with marvelous skill, can also delight his soul with true things in the same way that he gratifies his eyes on the images. For he will see how the uncertain goods of the ephemeral world do not come so quickly as they swiftly fade away. Joys, praise, honor and all things are overturned; what remains forever except God’s love? Therefore, men, henceforth place no trust in trivial matters, and no expectations in a fleeting good. Present your prayers to the eternal God, who will bestow upon us the gift of everlasting life.*