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# **‘Nature’s fragile vessel’: Rethinking approaches to material culture in literature**

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## **Abstract**

The notion of fragility is a pervasive one in Western culture. Considering its appearance in early modern texts can help us to understand the history of fragility, as an idea, metaphor and feeling. The relationship between humans and breakable things is used as a metaphor that recognizes human limitations in body or mind. This essay begins with one peculiar instance of fragility from Shakespeare’s *Timon of Athens* before analysing other examples in early modern culture. It ends by making a few tentative propositions regarding the relationships between literature, material culture and the representations of human fragility.

## **Keywords**

Human fragility, fortune, resilience, material culture, Shakespeare, *Timon of Athens*

## **Résumé**

La notion de fragilité imprègne la culture occidentale. Une étude de sa présence dans les textes de la première modernité peut nous aider à comprendre l’histoire de la fragilité comme notion, métaphore et émotion. La relation entre les êtres humains et les objets cassables est utilisée comme une métaphore permettant de reconnaître les limitations humaines corporelles ou mentales. Cet article prend comme point de départ une situation particulière de fragilité dans le *Timon d’Athènes* de Shakespeare, avant d’analyser d’autres exemples dans la culture de la première modernité. Il propose en conclusion quelques hypothèses concernant les rapports entre littérature, culture matérielle et représentations de la fragilité humaine.

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## Mots clés

Fragilité humaine, fortune, résilience, culture matérielle, Shakespeare, *Timon d'Athènes*

Antiquities or Remnants of History are, as was said, 'tanquam tabulae naufragii' [like the planks of a shipwreck], when industrious persons by an exact and scrupulous diligence and observation, out of monuments, names, words, proverbs, traditions, private records and evidences, fragments of stories, passages of books that concern not story, and the like, do save and recover somewhat from the deluge of time.

Francis Bacon (1605)<sup>1</sup>

The notion of fragility is a pervasive one in Western culture. Considering its appearance in early modern texts can help us to understand the history of fragility, as an idea, metaphor and feeling. Early modern conceptions of fragility bring together associations from classical precedents, medieval moral philosophy and early modern scientific discourse on matter; traces of these nuances still inform our conceptions of fragility today, so it seems especially pertinent to explore these early modern examples in their similarities and differences. This essay represents my initial investigations into fragility in literature in English and beyond. It is made up of seven fragments: together they form an organized trajectory, although each section has discrete material and concerns, which I aim to unpack in a larger study.

## Fragment I

Fragility has blossomed as a concept in a range of modern discourses but it has a long history. In addition to classical precedents, the trope of man as a vessel can be found in several books of the Bible, often situating man as a clay vessel and God-the-maker as a potter.<sup>2</sup> The earliest citation in the *Oxford English Dictionary* for 'fragile' or 'fragility' is in fact to 'humayne fragilyte' (c. 1398); there, the term suggested a capacity for moral weakness.<sup>3</sup> Fragility, as a concept suggesting breakability or weakness, is used today in research into genetics, palliative care, the economy, ecosystems, psychology and philosophical absolutes. Humans are embodied as, and often equated to, things and, as things, they are liable to disintegration and breakability, both near neighbours to the idea of fragility. Human beings may attempt to fortify themselves and their creations against fragilities of various kinds (emotional, physical, moral, cognitive), but fragility stubbornly persists as a marker of what it is to be human. Its appearance or reappearance in the areas of enquiry cited above demonstrates that an awareness of fragility is once again making its presence felt as a necessary antidote to human overinvestment in the perfectibility of human systems and modes of knowledge. At its root, the notion of fragility in relation to the human is a metaphor that recognizes human limitations in body or mind. This attention to human fragility has a lively history across various art forms and genres of writing.

This essay begins with one peculiar instance of fragility from Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens* before analysing other examples in early modern culture. It ends by making a few tentative propositions regarding the relationships between literature, material culture and the representations of human fragility.

## Fragment II

The notion of fragility is ancient, so it is perhaps not surprising that Timon uses the word when addressing the Athenians in the Jacobean play, *Timon of Athens* (c. 1605–07).<sup>4</sup> What is more unexpected is the fact that this is the only instance of the word 'fragile' (or its close cognates, such as 'fragility') in the Shakespeare canon; the more common synonym 'frailty' is discussed below.<sup>5</sup> In Act 5, two visiting senators call for Timon to return to Athens, which is threatened with attack by the military commander, Alcibiades. Timon responds:

Commend me to them,  
And tell them that to ease them of their griefs,  
Their fears of hostile strokes, their aches, losses,  
Their pangs of love, with other incident throes  
That nature's fragile vessel doth sustain  
In life's uncertain voyage, I will some kindness do them;  
I'll teach them to prevent wild Alcibiades' wrath.  
(*Timon of Athens*, 5.2.82–8)

Taken on its own, this might be read as the response of a highly sensitive man with care for the senators, one who holds a fellow feeling of what it means to be human. In the complex metaphor used by Timon, the human body is described as a fragile vessel; that is, a frail ship on a 'voyage' at sea. At the same time, the word 'vessel' may also bring to mind the other kinds of vessel associated with fragility, such as the 'weak vessel', tapping into the (biblical) metaphor of a human as an earthen pot.<sup>6</sup>

G. Wilson Knight contemplates the metaphor of the storm-tossed human vessel in an early essay entitled 'Myth and Miracle' (1929).<sup>7</sup> He writes that in *Pericles* and *The Winter's Tale*

The emphasis on tempests is insistent, and the suggestion is clearly that of the pitifulness and helplessness of humanity born into a world of tragic conflict. That the tempest is percurrent in Shakespeare as a symbol of tragedy need not be demonstrated here at length. Its symbolic significance is patent from the earliest to the latest of the plays—in metaphor, in simile, in long or short descriptions, in stage directions. The individual soul is the 'bark' putting out to sea in a 'tempest'.<sup>8</sup>

Wilson Knight goes on to cite the quotation from *Timon of Athens* as an example of the 'emphasis on tempests'. In the essay, the 'uncertain voyage' of travel through a storm is a symbol of tragedy, but, more specifically, it is a symbol of the tragedy of human life: its fragility. It is not simply that the possibility of an accident at sea is tragic; in Wilson Knight's formulation, it is that in Shakespeare, 'nature's fragile vessel' marks the

tragedy of the human condition. The list of grievances that Timon is represented as imagining certainly add up to a tragic view of the human: the Athenians have 'griefs', 'fears of hostile strokes', 'aches', 'losses', 'pangs of love' and 'with other incident throes'. It's not immediately clear, however, whether nature's fragile vessel sustains the list of griefs and fears too or whether only the body suffers 'other incident throes', that is, comparable plights. The use of the term 'vessel' seems to work both for the human body and by analogy for the human person. And, even if they are separate, the person's griefs seem to be associated with that of the body with the phrase 'other incident throes'; they are at least comparable. This understanding of human life as fragile, as well as the human body being fragile, helps to make sense of the complex vision that Timon's language conjures.

Of course, by this stage in the play, Timon is deeply disillusioned with humanity. The recent Arden edition of the play contains this note for the metaphor: 'nature's fragile vessel i.e. the human body; the language here and in the following image of the *voyage* is ironically inflated and clichéd'.<sup>9</sup> Taken on its own, this passage from the play is not obviously inflated or ironic, but when we consider Timon's change in character and what follows these lines, Timon's misanthropic response can be read as seeming to belittle the human, for the afflictions it suffers and for its fragile body. In an apparent volte-face, Timon goes on in the next few lines to tell the senators to go hang, literally. His 'kindness' is to suggest that they can prevent Alcibiades' wild wrath by hanging themselves on a nearby tree. By killing themselves, they will save themselves from witnessing Alcibiades' wrath, as well as saving their bodies from *his* wrath, at least. There are echoes here of Hamlet's famous soliloquy on being, which refers to 'outrageous fortune' (3.1.58) and 'a sea of troubles' (3.1.59), as well as 'The heartache and the thousand natural shocks / That the flesh is heir to' (3.1.62–3).<sup>10</sup> This vision is generically appropriate in the tragedy of *Hamlet*. Critics have often been unsure about the genre of *Timon of Athens*.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, it is in keeping with the satiric elements of *Timon of Athens* that the tragic vision, which Wilson Knight notes in the metaphor of the storm-tossed vessel, is mockingly undercut by Timon's larger purpose.

The use of 'nature's fragile vessel' in this play, then, presents a figure of fragility that can incorporate an understanding of human weakness in terms of both mind and body, even if the protagonist is seen ultimately to distance himself from the possibility of any tragic grandeur for this vision. There is an added complication, however. Given the fragility of the human and what it suffers in Timon's list, one might wonder that the fragile vessel metaphor is so positive in this instance. That is, Timon imagines the person as a ship, but in the metaphor, it is a ship that seems to endure – it continues to sustain hits, even if life's voyage is uncertain. What perhaps this metaphor conveys in the absolute is a sense of sustaining hits against the odds; of persevering to the end; of an inner resilience which might endure. This power to face adversity is something that Timon does and does not display himself by the end of the play, depending on your view of his self-imposed exile and eventual suicide. But in the representation of fragility in Timon's vision, there seems to be a sense of enduring against the odds: by some miracle. It's a wonder.

## Fragment III

Fragility is not only represented in early modern texts. Fragility is often symbolic, but texts can also convey experiences of fragility, often through language and immersive experiences for a viewer or auditor. In so doing, they can invite readers or audiences to consider their own understanding of vulnerability, their own feelings of fragility.

One reason for the importance of paintings in the history of fragility is that the metaphor of the human as a fragile vessel lends itself to visual culture, whether in illustration or on stage, and to a visual understanding. The work room or office in Hans Holbein's *Portrait of the Merchant of Georg Gisze* (1532) is full of objects: books, a signet ring, letters, writing equipment, weighing scales and money.<sup>12</sup> Rather than simply being a meticulous inventory however, the choice of objects is highly suggestive. Art historians note how the painting shows the 'humanist milieu in which the merchant wished to be seen'.<sup>13</sup> And yet, there are more puzzling elements. In the foreground of the painting rests a delicate Venetian glass vase:

Near the table's edge, precisely placed in the centre foreground, stands a small table-clock which, together with the fragile glass vase and the perishable flowers, is a reminder of the passage of time, as was the hour-glass in earlier pictures.<sup>14</sup>

This painting featured in a recent BBC Culture Show special on Hans Holbein where Waldemar Januszczak commented: 'Whenever you see something on the edge of a table in art, it always means the same thing: "isn't life precarious?"'<sup>15</sup> Implicit to Januszczak's interpretation is the conviction that the arts are able to invite us to ponder how a key feature of human life is its fragility: life is fragile, like a glass on the edge of a table.

At the National Gallery in London, there is a painting by Valentin de Boulogne of *The Four Ages of Man* (1629), which offers another example of fragility.<sup>16</sup> In the painting, four subjects sit around a table, in a way 'reminiscent of a wheel of fortune'.<sup>17</sup> The child holds an empty bird trap, a young man plays a lute, while another, in a suite of armour, holds a military book. In the centre of the painting behind the table, the fourth and eldest man sits pouring himself a drink; the curator's National Gallery online note points out that 'The glass he holds may be symbolic of the fragility of life'.<sup>18</sup> For art historians, such glassware is a symbolic reminder in the *memento mori* or *vanitas* tradition, which finds its most famous biblical precedent in the book of *Ecclesiastes*:

The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem. 'Vanity of vanities', says the Preacher;

'Vanity of vanities, all *is* vanity'.

What profit has a man from all his labor

In which he toils under the sun?

One generation passes away, and *another* generation comes;

But the earth abides forever.

(*Ecclesiastes*, 1:1–4)

Human mortality is contrasted here with the ground's immortality, 'the earth abides forever'. In de Boulogne's *The Four Ages of Man*, the contrast between the four sitters

in terms of their expressions is not as distinct as one might expect; here, *everyone* seems caught up in the *vanitas* sense of futility and looks pretty despondent. But what is apparent in terms of contrast is the seeming solidity, one might say ‘grounded’ quality, of the man in the foreground who sits protected in armour, on the one hand, and, on the other, the slightly stooped older man with his long wispy grey beard and empty fragile glass.

On one level, the subjects and their objects are allegorical, but the contrast between the humans and objects also potentially plays on viewers’ understandings of vulnerability and their own experiences of being fragile or witnessing the fragility of others. That is, the painting is not merely symbolic in the *vanitas* tradition but allows room for reflection on that sense of *feeling* fragile. The understanding of the potential space for reflection on this affection is clearly contentious in our current empirical-research paradigm because this inevitably subjective experience is probably impossible to measure. Nevertheless, it is worth bearing in mind that fragility in art is not simply theoretical: art does elicit emotional responses, and literature can offer immersive experiences.<sup>19</sup> In early modern drama, for example, references to fragile vessels and similar objects may not simply offer allusions to the *memento mori* or *vanitas* traditions: the notion of fragility enables poets, playwrights, actors, characters-as-represented, audiences and readers to explore what it means to be human, or rather to feel human, and especially, in this case, to feel fragile.<sup>20</sup>

## Fragment IV

My insistence on the use of the term ‘human’ so far in this essay is historical at heart; as already noted, ‘fragility’ was apparently associated with the human from the very start in the English language. And it is worth noting too, although there is not room to explore it fully here, that the term ‘fragility’ is frequently associated with the human, or at least ‘man’, when the word appears in writing in English in the medieval and early modern periods. The return to considerations of the human in literary theory – just as scholars are working on the animal and the post-human – has been cautiously piloted by Andy Mousley, who provocatively asks ‘Can Shakespeare help us with the question of how to live?’ at the start of *Re-Humanising Shakespeare*.<sup>21</sup> He also writes in *Literature and the Human* that he wants to ‘rescue for the academic study of literature, literature’s human significance, interest and appeal’.<sup>22</sup> Mousley suggests a ‘new literary humanism’.<sup>23</sup> This attention is not about Shakespeare as the ‘inventor of the human’ in a celebratory sense, but it considers how literature has a human meaningfulness.<sup>24</sup>

Despite the turn to the passions or the emotions in literary studies, Mousley’s focus on the human is bucking a trend to an extent. Recent studies on the emotions tend to read literature historically with an increasingly ‘materialist’ bent. As Jonathan Gil Harris comments,

This new preoccupation has been showcased in several anthologies that offer readers wonder cabinets of material goods from the time of Shakespeare [. . .]. For a growing number of Renaissance and Shakespeare scholars, the play is no longer the thing: the *thing* is the thing.

The new millennium, then, is arguably the time of material culture.<sup>25</sup>

If Mousley's recent work can be said to be exploring ideas in literature, and our relationship with it, my aim in this essay is to try to respond to this call for a more philosophically-minded human-sensitive approach to literature, a 'new literary humanism', by rethinking the way we approach material culture in literature.

In his chapter on 'Universals and Particulars', Mousley uses fragility as a concept in a way that is particularly pertinent for my attention to fragility in literature:

I will return to the theme of particulars later. For now, it is enough to re-emphasize two things: first, human flesh is vulnerable and this is a universal truth that literature has helped to disseminate and democratize; second, it is a universal truth that has routinely been denied to individuals, and groups of individuals. This is why the universal can be termed 'fragile'. It is additionally fragile because it is a truth that individuals may themselves deny about themselves. Witness Lear who thinks for a fair proportion of the play that he is invincible. Witness, also, the bravura of some of the healthily young.<sup>26</sup>

What Mousley notices here is that human fragility is a concern that literature 'disseminate[s]', and I would add that literature, including drama, offers a space for reflection on this understanding. Sometimes this can be an uncomfortable space, as when an audience is forced to watch Gloucester have his eyes removed in *King Lear*.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, Mousley sees the universality of human fragility in some senses as a fragile one, either because it is not recognized or because it is denied in some way. Perhaps much of tragedy, as in *King Lear*, is taken up with scrutinising the repercussions of denying human fragility.

The idea of human fragility is one that ebbs and flows across different cultural contexts and time periods. Perhaps because of fragility's very nature and the realms of thinking and artwork on what it is to be human, I feel the need to offer a hesitant – inevitably fragile – reading of its occurrence in early modern texts.

## Fragment V

Today, people occasionally say they 'feel fragile' or that they are 'on edge'; they feel 'delicate', 'heartbroken' or even 'smashed'. They could 'break down'. When things as seemingly solid as the Twin Towers can come falling down and car crashes are reported daily, some people feel, for themselves, a sense of precarious vulnerability or fragility in either body or mind. Often despite an outward show, people are susceptible to feeling frail, broken or nearly so. Or they represent others' feelings in this way. A recent news article reported how Brian Blessed was forced to pull out of a production of *King Lear*; unintentionally punning on the actor's heart condition, the producers of the play at Holy Trinity Church in Guildford stated that 'On the advice of his specialist, and with a *broken heart*, Brian has therefore been compelled to withdraw from the production of which he is so proud'.<sup>28</sup> A sense of feeling fragile clearly existed in the early modern period too, and yet, as noted above, the term 'fragile' appears only once in Shakespeare, for example.



While the word 'fragile' is hardly in evidence in Shakespeare, 'frail' and its variants appear some 37 times.<sup>29</sup> Nowadays, the term 'frail' is associated particularly with older people, but in the early modern period it clearly had wider associations and uses. Both terms share an etymological root:

fragile, adj.

Etymology: < French fragile (14th cent.), < Latin fragilis, < frag- root of frangere to break

frail, adj.

Etymology: < Old French fraile, frele (French frêle) = Italian fraile, < Latin fragilis<sup>30</sup>

'Fragility' in the early modern period is practically synonymous with 'frailty', although the latter term is often more closely associated with moral weakness, whereas the former term seems to be more strongly associated with material breakage. In a wonderful metaphor which parallels that in *Timon of Athens*, Francis Bacon writes of 'Christian resolution, that saileth in the frail bark of the flesh thorough [sic] the waves of the world'.<sup>31</sup> And yet, when writing scientifically about the properties of metals, he uses the term 'fragile'.<sup>32</sup> Fragility was in fact included in Robert Cawdry's book, *A table alphabetically conteyning and teaching the true writing, and vnderstanding of hard vsuall English wordes, borrowed from the Hebrew, Greeke, Latine, or French, &c.* (1604): it glosses 'fragilitie' as 'brittlenes; weakenes'.<sup>33</sup> The terms brittleness and weakness are both in keeping with fragility's associations with matter, especially in the first case. At their etymological root, both frailty and fragility suggest breakability. Renaissance paintings visualize this potential with *vanitas* symbols such as bubbles, flowers or glass vases. The metaphoric simile in paintings such as *The Four Ages of Man* is that the frailty of the oldest man, at least, is like the fragile glass vase. Of course, all the objects that the four sitters hold could be associated with the fragility of their possessions in one way or another: an empty bird cage, a lute and a paper book. In the painting, the objects, and especially the glass vase, symbolize the fragility of this material world. This representation of fragility offers room for reflection on human fragility because the viewer is invited to identify with the fragile subjects of the painting, and perhaps their objects too.

The use of glass as a specific metaphor to express life's fragility, or frailty, is evident in a number of early modern contexts. In fact, the greater distribution of glassware during the early modern period apparently led to its use as an especially potent symbol of fragility.<sup>34</sup> It even produced a psychic state, known as 'glass delusion'; Descartes mentioned this in the opening of his *Meditations* (1641), where he refers to those people with 'damaged' brains who think they are made of glass:

Again, how could it be denied that these hands or this whole body are mine? Unless perhaps I were to liken myself to madmen, whose brains are so damaged by the persistent vapours of melancholia that they firmly maintain they are kings when they are paupers, or say they are dressed in purple when they are naked, or that their heads are made of earthenware, or that they are pumpkins, or made of glass.<sup>35</sup>

Gill Speak writes that ‘Classical and Medieval accounts of Earthenware Men abound, and whilst they persist into the Early Modern period, it is an obsession with glass bodies which comes to the fore’.<sup>36</sup> King Charles VI of France (1368–1422) was a well-known sufferer, while Cervantes wrote a novella on the topic.<sup>37</sup> Speak suggests that the ‘[r]easons for this fear of breaking are complex. Folk culture and biblical tradition supplied several interpretations, chiefly connected with chastity, purity, or fortune’.<sup>38</sup> This concern with fortune is also typical of the *de casibus* tradition of medieval tragedy, which often stages princes who realize their fragility too late.<sup>39</sup> Fortune is in fact a recurrent concern in Shakespeare’s plays, particularly the tragedies. It is certainly implicit in the construction of fragility in Timon’s reply to the Athenian senators, with references to life’s uncertain voyage: sailing vessels frequently figured in emblems of Fortune.<sup>40</sup> This first concern of those with glass delusion certainly maps on to the construction of fragility in Shakespeare: one only has to think of Richard II as he considers himself and his fate in Shakespeare’s play and then spectacularly smashes a mirror to the floor.<sup>41</sup>

The concern with chastity and purity in relation to fragility is not a central focus in the Timon passage, but it is elsewhere, such as in Hamlet’s misogynistic exclamation: ‘Frailty, thy name is Woman’ (1.2.144). Speak concludes that ‘throughout this study of melancholic glass delusions [...] there emerges a constant preoccupation with the nature of body and soul, doubtless influenced by a recent schism in the Christian world over the question of salvation and the after-life’.<sup>42</sup> This religious context is often apparent where the conception of fragility in the medieval and early modern periods seems to differ from many modern notions. For example, in medieval and early modern writing, fragility is often associated with sinfulness, or at least error, as in the example of Hamlet’s line on women. This means that fragility, and the metaphor of the brittle but often beautiful vessel, is frequently multifaceted in early modern writing, often laden with moral undertones.

## Fragment VI

The theme of fortune, and the related concerns of chastity and purity, can be found frequently in early modern representations of fragility. These ideas are caught up with the matter of the body. For example, the Chorus laments in William Alexander’s verse tragedy *Julius Caesar* (1607), using the expression ‘life’s frail glass’:

Since destinies did *Caesars* soule enlarge,  
 What course can we for his recouerie take?  
 Ah, th’vnrelenting *Charons* restlesse barge  
 Stands to transport all ouer, but brings none backe.  
 Of lifes fraile glasse when broken, with vaine grones  
 What earthly powre the ruines can repaire?  
 Or who can gather vp when scatterd once,  
 Ones blood from th’earth, or yet his breath from th’aire?<sup>43</sup>

This humpty dumpty figuration of life seems to involve both the soul and the body, with its ‘blood’ and ‘breath’ that cannot be put back together again. Similarly in *Croesus* (1607), Alexander also has Solon exclaim to Croesus:

For why? our liues are fraile, do what we can,  
 And like the brittle glasse, are but a glance,  
 And oft the heauens t'abate the height of man,  
 Do entersour our sweets with some sad chance.<sup>44</sup>

In this example, the frail body is likened to a brittle glass with the addition of fortune's role, with 'the heavens' and 'sad chance' cutting man down to size, as it were. In Thomas Randolph's university comedy *The Jealous Lovers* (1632), the enamoured Tyndarus exclaims in Act 2, Scene 2:

I know the rest of women may be frail,  
 Brittle as glasses: but my Evadne stands  
 A rock of Parian marble, firm and pure.<sup>45</sup>

Besides the association of frailty with women, these instances clearly demonstrate an association between the frailty, or fragility, of human life and brittle glass. This link is perhaps surprising given that human flesh is generally soft and yielding; however, although there is a connection between the brittle life and weak flesh, there seems to be a larger tradition at work than this simple analogy of someone being like a brittle glass might at first suggest. This last example, with its association of strength with purity, implicitly offers a moral judgement of fragility (and 'the rest of women').

This moral judgement haunts other early modern representations of fragility, such as fragile beauty. For example, at the very start of the play *The Roaring Girl* (written c. 1607–10), Sir Alexander's serving man, Neatfoot, is being condescending towards Mary Fitzallard when he refers to her as an 'emblem of fragility'; as the audience comes to realize, he suspects that she is actually a prostitute:

Enter Mary Fitzallard disguised like a sempster with a case for bands, and Neatfoot a servingman with her, with a napkin on his shoulder, and a trencher in his hand as from table.  
*Neatfoot.* The young gentleman, our young master, Sir Alexander's son – is it into his ears, sweet damsel, emblem of fragility, you desire to have a message transported, or to be transcendent?<sup>46</sup>

In this case, his address to Fitzallard as an 'emblem of fragility' is overdetermined. It could be a compliment, if his salutation is taken to mean that she is an emblem of fragile beauty, or the beautiful paragon of 'the weaker vessel'. But it transpires that the moral judgement associated with fragility is what is at stake here; this reading is hinted at by the use of the trope of the emblem, something that was inherently didactic and so suggestive of the moral warnings associated with fragility, or moral frailty specifically.

Early modern sermons offer good examples of this association of fragility with moral weakness, and, as they make up a large percentage of printed publications, they offer an instance of a prevalent, although clearly partial, understanding of human fragility in early modern culture. In the case of women's supposed frailty, this is caught up with the historic suspicion of beauty and the *contemptus mundi* tradition.<sup>47</sup> The understanding of beauty as fragile goes right back to classical times and can be found in Ovid's *Ars Amatoria* (*The Art of Love*), for example:

Beauty's a frail possession; with the years  
 It fades, and as it grows it disappears.  
 Nor violet nor cupped lily always blows,  
 The shiny thorn survives its vanished rose  
 You too, fair boy, your locks will soon be grey,  
 Soon o'er your flesh will wrinkles plough their way.  
 Let Beauty rest on Mind's foundation sure,  
 Unto the grave will Mind alone endure.<sup>48</sup>

Thomas Heywood translated it this way:

All outward beautie fades as yeares increase,  
 Euen so it weares away and waxeth lesse.  
 Beautie in her owne course is ouertaken,  
 The Violet now fresh is, strait forsaken.  
 Nor alwayes do the Lillies of the field,  
 The glorious beauties of their object yeeld:  
 The fragrant rose once pluckt the briery thorne  
 Shewes rough & naked, on which the rose was born.  
 Oh thou most faire, white haire come on apace,  
 And wrinkled furrowes which will plough thy face:  
 Instruct thy soule, thy thoughts haue perfect made,  
 These beauties last till death, all others fade.<sup>49</sup>

'*forma bonum fragile est*': the Latin commonplace about beauty being a fragile good is rendered with different nuances in translation and has also been used as a title for a number of early modern poems. George Abbot, the Archbishop of Canterbury says in his sermon, published in 1600: 'Heathen men have thought upon the fading of this flower, *Forma bonum fragile est*. Beautie is but a brittle good thing'.<sup>50</sup> Here, 'brittle' is Abbot's synonym for 'frailty' in the modern translation or 'fragile' in the Latin. In addition, fragile beauty is also associated with the mortality of the flower, as in Ovid. The lines preceding the Archbishop's reference to Ovid are: 'But it falleth out oftentimes, that in steed of thankfulness and humilitie, there groweth such an ouer-liking of this fraile and brittle shew, that God is displeased there with'.<sup>51</sup> The Archbishop is warning of the fragilities of this world. Here again, the *contemptus mundi* understanding, available in *The Four Ages of Man* painting, is prevalent in the representation of fragile things; the sermon's representation of fragility is caught up with the language of valuation and understandings of selfhood.

At times, trusting in the fragile world is represented as a fragile confidence itself. This representation is more complex. The Scottish minor poet Alexander Garden repeatedly employs the concept of human fragility in his published poetry collection, *A garden of graue and godlie flovvres* (1609).<sup>52</sup> This collection is similar to many miscellanies of the time that gathered flower poems or posies.<sup>53</sup> Garden's poem 'The opinion of the worldlie estate' includes the following verse:

Why do we then in fragill flesh confide,

And boldlie buildes our aspirance and trust;  
 Since nothing breaths that here is borne to bide.  
*Of* Nothing all, all *vnto* Nothing *must*:  
 Revert and turne, *Death* will in end devore,  
 And flesh transchange to filth, as a before.<sup>54</sup>

Here, the metaphor is partly about the transience of this world. An analogous verse from a broadside ballad offers:

This life is fickle, fraile, and vaine,  
 Seeke everlasting life to gaine.  
 All worldly treasures soone decay,  
 And mortall man returns to clay.<sup>55</sup>

However, the ballad verse and Garden's lines are not just about the fragile world; they are also about the 'fragill flesh' that we trust in. We may boldly put our hopes and trust in flesh, but this is a fragile confidence, because it is based on 'fragill flesh', fragile matter. There are resonances here with the Ash Wednesday warning: 'remember that thou art dust, and to dust thou shalt return' (Cf. *Genesis*, 3.19) and with the ominous aspect of the younger subjects in *The Four Ages of Man*. In these didactic examples, the fragility of flesh becomes almost synonymous with the fragile confidence in one's own life on this earth.

Alexander Garden explores themes of fragility in a number of his macabre poems. The poem 'Vpon the death of the honorable Ladie D. H. B. L. Essel. The defunct La. to her living friends' by Garden also considers fragile flesh, this time likening it to a fading flower. The poem begins:

You yet that brukes [i.e., enjoys] this breath,  
 By birth who euer you bee;  
 Discend duwn deeplie in your selfe,  
 Consider, search, and see  
 From whence thou came, when, how,  
 And whither thou must go,  
 What strength thou hes, what stuf thou art,  
 Learne carelesse man and kno.  
 Thou art but momentare,  
 And not immortal made,  
 Your flesh thogh fair, it fragill is,  
 Aud like a flowre shall fade.  
 What is thy Idol wealth?  
 What is estate or strength?<sup>56</sup>

'Thou art but momentare': Alexander Garden's poems are clearly working in the *memento mori* tradition; they are a poetic version of what was explored in dance-of-death woodcuts and still-life *vanitas* paintings.<sup>57</sup> And like the illustrations, the broadside ballad and the Archbishop's sermon on fragility, these poems have a didactic thrust, warning of

the fragility of the flesh. These poems, however, also articulate the idea that poetry can help to ‘descend down deeply in yourself’, whatever your ‘birth’ or status.

These poems offer space for reflection on the fragility of the human, which is sometimes compared with the ephemeral nature of the texts themselves. In the case of Garden’s work, the poetry itself is likened to flowers and, implicitly, their fragility. The full title of his poetry collection is *A garden of graue and godlie flowvres[:] sonets, elegies, and epitaphs. Planted, polished, and perfected by Mr. Alexander Gardyne*. This complex association between the ‘fragil frame’ of the human body, that of the flower and that of the poem is suggested in the final verse of ‘Vpon the Right honourable A. I. of Drum. Fame’. It ends:

Receiue then *Earth*, and in thy bosome lay,  
This fragill frame, in substance like thy sel[f]  
A Man of mold, conuerted into clay,  
Whose Truth and whose, jntegritie to tell,  
Leaue vnto Me, the restles ringing Bell,  
*Time Death*, nor *Age*, shal in Obliuion bring,  
Nor from my *Troumpe*, his passing praise, expell,  
Altho that death, or’threw the earthly *Thing*,  
The heauenly *half* is hence to heauen againe,  
Which both by *me*, remembred shall remaine.<sup>58</sup>

Here, the relation between the earth and the body seems to be a more positive one than the example from *Ecclesiastes*. And both the dead person’s body and spirit are remembered by ‘me’, the poetic voice (here constructed as the tolling bell), and of course to an extent, by the poem itself. This complex verse is reminiscent of Shakespeare’s sonnets on fame and posterity, for example in Sonnet 107, which ends:

My love looks fresh, and Death to me subscribes,  
Since spite of him, I’ll live in this poor rhyme,  
While he insults o’er dull and speechless tribes.  
And thou in this shalt find thy monument,  
When tyrants’ crests and tombs of brass are spent.<sup>59</sup>

In some ways, the promise in this sonnet is incongruous because the poem seems even more insubstantial than a monument or tomb of brass. On the other hand, in the absolute fragility is a relative notion: the supposedly fragile spider’s web actually has a very high tensile strength, for example, and would be considered strong by an insect stuck in one, hypothetically speaking. What all this means for the literary representations of human fragility is that the frame, or body, whether seen as ‘graue and godlie flowers’ or ‘poor rhyme’, maintains a resilience through the telling, through the remembrance or interaction. Writing and painting, inscribed on bodies of varying fragility, whether paper, cloth or wood, offer an additional metaphor for human fragility, but they can also suggest a certain fragile resilience, or a potential for endurance, against the odds. The protection of this fragile thing also suggests something precious.

In a poem entitled 'An Epistle Answering to One That Asked to Be Sealed of the Tribe of Ben' (1640), Ben Jonson uses the metaphor of the clay vessel to explore his own authorship after he was snubbed from being considered for a planned court entertainment. He likens himself to a 'frail pitcher' (l. 56) and others to various kinds of vessels, including 'Christmas clay / And the animated porcelain of the court' (ll. 52–53), as well as 'the coarser sort / Of earthen jars' (ll. 54–55).<sup>60</sup> Jonson goes on to say:

Well, with mine own frail pitcher, what to do  
I have decreed: keep it from waves, and press;  
Lest it be jostled, cracked, made nought or less:  
Live to that point I will, for which I am man,  
And dwell as in my centre, as I can,  
Still looking to, and ever loving, heaven;  
With reverence using all the gifts thence given.  
(ll. 56–62)

Jonson's fragile vessel here is not ostensibly a ship, but he still imagines waves, perhaps playing on the double metaphor of vessel. Jonson's modest description of his 'own frail pitcher' suggests something precious, despite appearances or others' valuations. In contrast, other courtiers are like 'Christmas clay', piggy banks that necessarily need to be broken. As Peterson points out, however, Jonson is alluding to a much larger tradition concerning vessels in his poem:

[Jonson] plays on several interrelated traditions, mainly classical, about containers and their contents: the body as frail *vas*, or vessel; the oracle or poet as vessel of Apollo; the wise floating earthen pot of Aesop's fable, which refuses the jostling company of the rich brazen pot in the common journey through life's waters; the sealed alchemical vessel in which transformations take place; and finally the tun or pottle as container of inspiring wine and truth.<sup>61</sup>

Jonson's use of the motif of the vessel suggests an even more layered tradition concerning vessels in relation to art, the poet and the human in their fragility, precarious durability and preciousness. These rich traditions are mixed in Jonson's poem into a heady brew. Nevertheless, in other passages, such as 'nature's fragile vessel' in *Timon of Athens*, these associations may have been in the minds of poets, readers and theatre audiences, even if they are not always obviously alluded to.

## Fragment VII

Literature may help us to come to terms with human fragility but it may also, as in the case of some of the examples above, rub salt into the wound. In the representation of human fragility, objects are often key, as symbols, similes or metaphors. This may not simply be a poetic strategy, however. Hannah Arendt argues for the deeply rooted relation between humans and things: 'Men are conditioned beings because everything they come into contact with turns immediately into a condition of their existence . . . ; the things that owe their existence exclusively to men nevertheless constantly

condition their human makers'.<sup>62</sup> More recently, Ian Hodder has explored this entanglement between humans and things, recognizing how 'human existence and social life depend on material things and are entangled with them; humans and things are relationally produced', and, furthermore, 'Humans get caught in a double bind, depending on things that depend on humans'.<sup>63</sup>

It is the onset of modernity, with technological advances, which leaves Walter Benjamin to imagine how

A generation that had gone to school in horse-drawn streetcars now stood in the open air, amid a landscape in which nothing was the same except the clouds and, at its centre, in a force field of destructive torrents and explosions, the tiny, fragile human body.<sup>64</sup>

This language is not dissimilar to the tragic vision of the tempest-tossed human in Shakespeare, and it is perhaps no accident that Wilson Knight, writing around the same time as Benjamin, should focus on the storm metaphor in relation to a tragic vision of man because he was writing his essay after the Great War. But with Benjamin, it is technology and material production, rather than fortune, which renders the human fragile. Technological weapons are the 'the things that owe their existence exclusively to men [but] nevertheless constantly condition their human makers', to quote Arendt. The fragility of the human in modernity is beyond the scope of this essay.<sup>65</sup> However, there are fragile threads stretching from the early modern period through to modernity, and they are made up of literature.

Derrida has championed a specific notion of an institution called literature. He says in *Acts of Literature*:

But given the paradoxical structure of this thing called literature, its beginning *is* its end. It began with a certain relation to its own institutionality, i.e. its fragility, its absence of specificity, its absence of object. The question of its origin was immediately the question of its end. Its history *is constructed* like the ruin of a monument which basically never existed.<sup>66</sup>

Derrida's conception of literature is as something which established itself from the end of the seventeenth century; be that as it may, there is a clear sense in the poetry of Alexander Garden and Ben Jonson of a growing literature on human fragility which is entangled with the fragility of literature in some way, especially when these authors liken the human and their own work to flowers or fragile vessels. Derrida's suggestion that the formation of literature came about through the exploration of its own fragilities perhaps offers a model for what we might contentiously call an institution called 'the human'. An investigation of this contention would have to think through the relation between our understanding of 'the human' and the human body, as well as the materiality of literature and what constitutes an institution called literature. The notion of fragility clearly offers itself for such an exploration.

Richard Klein draws out Derrida's thinking more explicitly in relation to fragility and 'this thing called literature':

The fragility of literature, its susceptibility to being lost, is linked to its having no real referent. The representations of literature are inherently unreliable; they are not even



always fictional, sometimes factual but unreliable. Literature conforms to no referent from which it could be reconstituted if its canons were lost, the way chemistry might in a postnuclear age be rediscovered. It depends for its existence exclusively on the preservation of the archive.<sup>67</sup>

What all this means in terms of my exploration is that not only the materials (e.g. paper or the electronic databases) on which literature is based but its very institution is fragile. This fragility of literature does not necessarily correspond to that of the human, but this shared property goes some way to accounting for the complex relationship between humans and literature.

Literature is, in a sense, not dissimilar to ‘the things that owe their existence exclusively to men’ and yet ‘nevertheless constantly condition their human makers’. That is, reflecting on the nature of a vase, or ship at sea, may help us to contemplate our own fragility, but it is literature and art more generally which offer a depth to this understanding and relationship and hold the potential to condition our own existence in myriad ways. Understandings of human fragility in literature continually help to shape questions concerning such immense subjects as the meaning of life, and our fears and aspirations, but they can also potentially reveal something about the history of our relationships with literature, art, material objects and each other:

...

Nothing beside remains. Round the decay  
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare  
The lone and level sands stretch far away.<sup>68</sup>

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## Notes

1. Francis Bacon, *The Advancement of Learning*, in Brian Vickers (ed.), *The Major Works* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1996), Bk II, 179. Incidentally, fragility is contained etymologically in the Latin for a shipwreck, *naufragium*.
2. See, for example, Isa. 68:8 and Rom. 9:20–23; women are described as ‘the weaker vessel’ in 1 Peter 3:7.
3. *Oxford English Dictionary*. Fragility n., sense 2: ‘Moral weakness, frailty. *Obs*’. Available at: [www.oed.com](http://www.oed.com) (accessed 30 June 2017). The *OED* marks this sense as now obsolete.

4. On fragility in classical culture, especially in relation to 'the good life', see Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy*, updated ed (1986; Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001); Michael O'Sullivan, *Weakness: A Literary and Philosophical History* (London, Continuum, 2012), 9–22; and Richard S. Peterson, *Imitation and Praise in the Poems of Ben Jonson* (2nd ed.) (Aldershot, Ashgate, 2011), 91–128.
5. Critics are now (mostly) agreed that the printed play presents some kind of collaboration between Shakespeare and Thomas Middleton, although Shakespeare is thought to be responsible for the scene under consideration; see Anthony B. Dawson and Gretchen E. Minton (eds), *Timon of Athens: The Arden Shakespeare* (London, Bloomsbury 2008), 1–10 and 401–7. All references to this play are to this edition and appear in the text parenthetically. David and Ben Crystal's online resource *Shakespeare's Words* provides a searchable database of Shakespeare's works. Available at: [www.shakespeareswords.com](http://www.shakespeareswords.com) (accessed 30 June 2017). A search for 'fragile' and its variants on *Early English Books Online* produced 165 hits in 104 records for the date range 1473–1650, while 'frailty' and its variants produced 7637 hits in 2767 records. Available at: <https://eebo.chadwyck.com> (accessed 30 June 2017).
6. For the double metaphor of the 'vessel' in classical philosophy and early modern poetry, see Peterson, *Imitation and Praise* . . . , 101. For the sea 'as a space of bewildering instability', see Laurence Publicover, 'Shakespeare at Sea', *Essays in Criticism*, 64 (2014), 145.
7. G. Wilson Knight, 'Myth and Miracle (1929)', in G. Wilson Knight, *The Crown of Life: Essays in Interpretation of Shakespeare's Final Plays* (1947; London, Methuen, 1965), 9–31.
8. Wilson Knight, 'Myth and Miracle . . .', 18.
9. Dawson and Minton (eds), *Timon of Athens* . . . , 326; emphasis in the original.
10. William Shakespeare, *Hamlet: The Texts of 1603 and 1623: The Arden Shakespeare*, ed. Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor (London, Thomson Learning, 2006); all references to this play are to the 1623 text in this edition.
11. On the play's genre, see Dawson and Minton (eds), *Timon of Athens*, 27–38.
12. Hans Holbein, 'Portrait of the Merchant Georg Gisze' (1532), Staatliche Museen, Berlin. *The Web Gallery of Art*. Available at: [http://www.wga.hu/html\\_m/h/holbein/hans\\_y/1535/2gisze.html](http://www.wga.hu/html_m/h/holbein/hans_y/1535/2gisze.html) (accessed 30 June 2017).
13. 'Portrait of the Merchant Georg Gisze' at *The Web Gallery of Art*. Available at: [http://www.wga.hu/html\\_m/h/holbein/hans\\_y/1535/2gisze.html](http://www.wga.hu/html_m/h/holbein/hans_y/1535/2gisze.html) (accessed 30 June 2017)
14. See *The Web Gallery of Art*. Available at: [http://www.wga.hu/html\\_m/h/holbein/hans\\_y/1535/2gisze.html](http://www.wga.hu/html_m/h/holbein/hans_y/1535/2gisze.html) (accessed 30 June 2017).
15. 'Holbein: Eye of the Tudors – A Culture Show Special', dir. and presented by Waldemar Januszczak, *BBC2*, 24 January 2015.
16. Valentin de Boulogne, *The Four Ages of Man* (1629), The National Gallery, London. *The Web Gallery of Art*. Available at: [http://www.wga.hu/html\\_m/v/valentin/fourages.html](http://www.wga.hu/html_m/v/valentin/fourages.html) (accessed 30 June 2017).
17. For 'reminiscent of a wheel of fortune': see *The Web Gallery of Art*. Available at: [http://www.wga.hu/html\\_m/v/valentin/fourages.html](http://www.wga.hu/html_m/v/valentin/fourages.html) (accessed 30 June 2017).
18. See *The National Gallery Website*. Available at: <http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/valentin-de-boulogne-the-four-ages-of-man> (accessed 30 June 2017).
19. On literature as 'immersive', see Andy Mousley, 'The New Literary Humanism: Towards a Critical Vocabulary', *Textual Practice*, 24 (2010), 819–39.
20. There is already a large corpus of literary criticism on the emotions: for recent examples concerning Shakespeare, see Bridget Escolme, *Emotional Excess on the Shakespearean Stage: Passion's Slaves*, ed. The Arden Shakespeare (London, Bloomsbury, 2014); Richard Meek and Erin Sullivan (eds), *The Renaissance of Emotion: Understanding Affect in Shakespeare*

- and *His Contemporaries* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2015); and R. S. White, Mark Houlahan and Katrina O'Loughlin (eds), *Shakespeare and Emotions: Inheritances, Enactments, Legacies* (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015). See also Katharine A. Craik and Tanya Pollard (eds), *Shakespearean Sensations: Experiencing Literature in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2013).
21. Andy Mousley, *Re-Humanising Shakespeare: Literary Humanism, Wisdom and Modernity* (2nd edn.) (2007; Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 1. For studies of the animal and the posthuman in relation to Shakespeare, see, for example, Laurie Shannon, *The Accommodated Animal: Cosmopolity in Shakespearean Locales* (Chicago, Chicago University Press, 2013), and Stefan Herbrachter and Ivan Callus (eds), *Posthumanist Shakespeares* (Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2012).
  22. Andy Mousley, *Literature and the Human: Criticism, Theory, Practice* (London, Routledge, 2013), 2.
  23. See Mousley, 'The New Literary Humanism' . . . .
  24. For Shakespeare as the inventor of the human, see Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (New York, Riverhead Books, 1998).
  25. Jonathan Gil Harris, *Untimely Matter in the Time of Shakespeare* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 1.
  26. Mousley, *Literature and the Human* . . . ., 76.
  27. Rita Felski comments that 'as long as we flinch away from reminders of our material and mortal existence as fragile composites of blood, bone, and tissue, shock will continue to find a place in art', in Rita Felski, *Uses of Literature* (Malden, MA and Oxford, Blackwell, 2008), 130.
  28. 'Brian Blessed pulls out of King Lear on doctor's orders', *BBC NEWS*, 30 January 2015. Available at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-31066689> (accessed 30 June 2017); emphasis added.
  29. *Shakespeare's Words*. Available at: <http://www.shakespeareswords.com/Search.aspx> (accessed 30 June 2017).
  30. *Oxford English Dictionary*.
  31. Bacon, 'Of Adversity', in *Essays or Counsels, Civil and Moral* (1625), in Brian Vickars (ed.), *The Major Works* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1996), 349.
  32. Bacon writes of 'the natures of Weight, of Colour, of Pliant and Fragile in respect of the hammer' in *The Advancement of Learning*, 202.
  33. Robert Cawdry, *A Table Alphabeticall Conteyning and Teaching the True Writing, and understanding of Hard usuall English Wordes, Borrowed from the Hebrew, Greeke, Latine, or French, &c. With the Interpretation Thereof by Plaine English Words, Gathered for the Benefit & Helpe of Ladies, Gentlewomen, or Any Other skilfull Persons. Whereby They May the More Easilie and Better Understand Many Hard English Wordes, which they shall Heare or Read in Scriptures, Sermons, or Elsewhere, and also be made able to vse the same aptly themselves*. (London, printed by I. R[oberts] for Edmund Weauer, 1604).
  34. The *BBC News Magazine* ran a story on 'The people who think they are made of glass', *BBC News Magazine*, 8 May 2015. Available at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-32625632> (accessed 30 June 2017).
  35. Rene Descartes, 'First Meditation', in John Cottingham (ed.), *Meditations on First Philosophy: With Selections from the Objections and Replies* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2013), 25.
  36. Gill Speak, 'An Odd Kind of Melancholy: Reflections on the Glass Delusion in Europe (1440–1680)', *History of Psychiatry*, 1 (1990), 191–206.
  37. See Speak, 'An Odd Kind of Melancholy . . .', 193.

38. Speak, 'An Odd Kind of Melancholy . . .', 195–6.
39. Jenni Nuttall explains that 'In its most simple classification, the *de casibus* genre was comprised of a collection of short narratives (or simply a list of names) describing different historical figures, compiled to demonstrate the irresistible power of Fortune as illustrated by their sudden falls from prosperity to adversity' in Jenni Nuttall, "'Vostre, Humble, Matatyas': Culture, Politics and the Percys", in Linda Clark (ed.), *Of Mice and Men: Image, Belief and Regulation in Late Medieval England* (Woodbridge, Boydell Press, 2005), 74; for *Timon of Athens* as a *de casibus* play, see Dawson and Minton (eds), *Timon of Athens*, 31.
40. The introduction to the play in the *Norton Shakespeare* includes an emblem of Fortune (featuring three sailing vessels). See William Shakespeare, *The Norton Shakespeare*, 3rd ed., ed. Stephen Greenblatt et al. (New York, Norton, 2016), 2575. Many emblems associated sea vessels with fortune or fate; see for example, 'Emblema XVII' in Théodore de Bèze, *Icones* (1580). Available at: <http://www.emblems.arts.gla.ac.uk/french/emblem.php?id=A91a121> (accessed 30 June 2017) and 'Emblema CXXI' in *Emblemata* (Leiden, Franciscus I Raphelengius, 1591). Available at: <http://www.emblems.arts.gla.ac.uk/alciato/emblem.php?id=A91a121> (accessed 30 June 2017).
41. For a helpful discussion of this scene and its props, see Ema Vyroubalová and James Robert Wood, 'Propping up the King's Two Bodies in *Richard II*', *Early Modern Studies Journal*, 4 (2011), n.p. Available at: <http://www.uta.edu/english/ees/> (accessed 30 June 2017).
42. Speak, 'An Odd Kind of Melancholy . . .', 203.
43. William Alexander, *Julius Caesar*, in *The Monarchicke Tragedies, Cræsus, Darius, The Alexandrean, Iulius Cæsar* (London, printed by Valentine Simmes for Ed[ward] Blount, 1607), Bb4r (Act 5, Scene 1).
44. William Alexander, *Croesus* in *The Monarchicke Tragedies*, C2v (Act 2, Scene 1).
45. Thomas Randolph, *The Jealous Lovers* (Cambridge, printed by [Thomas and John Buck] the printers to the University of Cambridge, 1632), C1v (Act 2, Scene 2).
46. Thomas Middleton and Thomas Dekker, *The Roaring Girl; or Moll Cutpurse*, ed. Coppélia Kahn, in Gary Taylor and John Lavagnino et al. (eds), *Thomas Middleton: The Complete Works* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 2007), 721–78 (Scene 1, ll. 1–4).
47. For a summary of this tradition of contempt for the world, see Douglas Burton-Christie, 'Contemptus Mundi', in *The Encyclopaedia of Religion and Nature*, 2 vols (2005; London, Bloomsbury, 2008), vol. 1, 324.
48. Ovid, *Ars Amatoria*, trans. B. P. Moore and E. A. D. Melville, in E. J. Kenney (ed.), *The Love Poems: Oxford World Classics*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1990), 111.
49. Stapleton (ed.), *Thomas Heywood's 'Art of Love': The First Complete English Translation of Ovid's 'Ars Amatoria'* (Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 2000), p. 81, Bk 2, ll. 151–62. See also Thomas Heywood, *Loves schoole Publii Ovidii Nasonis de arte amandi, or, The art of loue* (Amsterdam, Nicolas Iansz Visscher, 1625), C3r-v.
50. George Abbot, 'The XXVIII Lecture', in *An Exposition upon the Prophet Jonah* (London, printed by Richard Field, 1600), 591.
51. Abbot, 'The XXVIII Lecture' . . . , 591.
52. Alexander Garden, *A Garden of Graue and Godlie Flowvres Sonets, Elegies, and Epitaphs. Planted, Polished, and Perfected by Mr. Alexander Gardyne* (Edinburgh, printed by Thomas Finlason, 1609). All references to Garden's work are to this edition.
53. For this trend, see Leah Knight, *Reading Green in Early Modern England* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014).
54. Alexander Garden, 'The Opinion of the Worldlie Estate of the Honorable and Learned Mr Walter Steward Principall of the Kings Colledge of Aberdon at his Death', in *A Garden of Grave and Godlie Flowvres . . .*, B3r (ll. 31–6).

55. Richard Crimsal, *A Comparison of the Life of Man, Concerning How Fickle his Estate Doth Stand, Flourishing Like a Tree, or Vine, or Dainty Flower, Or Like a Ship, or Raine, thats Turnd each Houre. To the Tune of Sir Andrew Barton* (London, printed for Francis Coules, [1624–1680?]). The *English Broadside Ballad Archive*. Available at: <http://ebba.english.ucs.b.edu/ballad/30035/xml> (accessed 30 June 2017).
56. Alexander Garden, 'Vpon the Death of the Honorable Ladie D. H. B. L. Essel. The Defunct La. to her Living Friends', in *A Garden of Graue and Godlie Flovvres . . .*, E2v (ll. 1–14).
57. On the dance of death, see James Midgley Clark, *The Dance of Death in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance* (Glasgow, Jackson, 1950) and, more recently, Sophie Oosterwijk, 'Of Corpses, Constables, and Kings: The Danse Macabre in Late-Medieval and Renaissance Culture', *Journal of the British Archaeological Association*, 157 (2004), 169–90.
58. Alexander Garden, 'Vpon the Right Honourable A. I. of Drum. Fame', in *A Garden of Graue and Godlie Flovvres . . .*, F3v (ll. 30–40).
59. William Shakespeare, 'Sonnet 107', in John Kerrigan (ed.), *The Sonnets and A Lovers Complaint: Penguin Classics* (London, Penguin, 1986), 130 (ll. 10–14).
60. Ben Jonson, 'An Epistle Answering to One That Asked to Be Sealed of the Tribe of Ben', in *The Underwood*, ed. Colin Burrow, in David Bevington, Martin Butler and Ian Donaldson (eds), *The Cambridge Works of Ben Jonson*, 7 vols (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2012), VII, 188–91 (ll. 52–53). Burrow suggests that 'Jonson with mock modesty presents his own entertainments as fragile things' (190); however, it is unclear here whether Jonson is referring to his own work or the courtiers themselves in the first two instances; and, given the third example, I think it more likely that he is using the vessels to classify the courtiers.
61. Peterson, *Imitation and Praise . . .*, 91.
62. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2nd ed (1958; Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1998), 9.
63. Ian Hodder, 'The Entanglements of Humans and Things: A Long-Term View', *New Literary History*, 45 (2014), 19–36, 19 and 20.
64. Walter Benjamin, 'Experience and Poverty', trans. Rodney Livingstone, in *Selected Writings: Vol. 2 (Part 1, 1927–1934)*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (Cambridge, MA., Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 723.
65. For poignant examples of human fragility in modern drama, however, see Tennessee Williams, especially *The Glass Menagerie*. For a recent novel, see Ali Shaw, *The Girl with Glass Feet* (London, Atlantic Books, 2009).
66. Jacques Derrida and Derek Attridge, "'This Strange Institution Called Literature": An Interview with Jacques Derrida', in Jacques Derrida and Derek Attridge (eds) *Acts of Literature* (London, Routledge, 1992), 42; emphasis in the original.
67. Richard Klein, 'The Future of Literary Criticism', *PMLA (Publications of the Modern Language Association of America)*, 125 (2010), 920.
68. Percy Bysshe Shelley, 'Ozymandias (1818)', in Margaret Ferguson, Mary Jo Salter and Jon Stallworthy (eds), *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, 4th ed (New York, Norton, 1996), 799 (ll. 12–14).

## Author biography

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