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Introduction

The Legacy of the Death Arts

> Prepare to die, out of this world of woe;
> Prepare to die, out of this sea of sin;
> Prepare to die, to haughty heaven to go;
> Prepare to die, the heavenly life to win;
> Prepare to die, to live within the sky;
> Prepare to die, I say, prepare to die.[1]

A Cambridge student, otherwise unidentified, exhorts his friend Dick to call to mind his own mortality and to prepare in all ways for his inevitable death. Titled 'Memento Mori', the poem, published in 1579, offers the same, familiar counsel about death that had been repeated since antiquity: 'remember death, and think upon the end'.[2] To 'remember death', the invocation of all *memento mori* traditions, works in two ways, and both are the duties of the living: first, the individual should remember that they too will die someday, and this act of remembrance will help call to mind those further actions that one might take to prepare for that moment; and second, the death of an individual should also be remembered and acted upon by their survivors. Remembrance is, then, individual and communal, operating both in anticipation of and subsequent to expiration. The Cambridge student's particular poem extends this duty as a poetic gesture of friendship, a concern for Dick's spiritual welfare as he nears death.

Contrariwise, Claudio, in *Measure for Measure*, confesses strong doubts about his approaching end:

> Ay, but to die, and go we know not where;
> To lie in cold obstruction, and to rot;
> This sensible warm motion to become

[1] Anonymous, 'Memento Mori' in *A poore knight his pallace of priuate pleasures Gallantly garnished, with goodly galleries of strang inuentio[n]s and prudently polished, with sundry pleasant posies, [et] other fine fancies of dainty deuices, and rare delightes* (London: 1597; STC 4283), I4^{r}.

[2] Ibid., I3^{v}. The poem is addressed to his friend 'Richard Ra. lyinge *in his death bed*' (I3^{r}). For the familiar invocation to 'think upon the end', see Rory Loughnane, 'Studied Speech and *The Duchess of Malfi*: The Lost Arts of Rhetoric, Memory, and Death', *Sillages critiques*, 26 (2019).

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A kneaded clod, and the delighted spirit
To bathe in fiery floods, or to reside
In thrilling region of thick-ribbèd ice;
To be imprisoned in the viewless winds,
And blown with restless violence round about
The pendent world; or to be worse than worst
Of those that lawless and incertain thought
Imagine howling—'tis too horrible!
The weariest and most loathèd worldly life
That age, ache, penury, and imprisonment
Can lay on nature is a paradise
To what we fear of death.[3]

Earthly existence, with all its assorted hardships and challenges, is, as Claudio notes, still better than the horrors a hell-bound afterlife affords.[4] Inverting traditional *contemptus mundi* tropes – those which Shakespeare's characters routinely deliver – Claudio here celebrates life's familiar miseries over death's unknown outcome.[5] His attitude evinces the uncertainties fostered by early modern religious disputes over what the afterlife would bring for the dead and how actions in this life affected the next. In Roman Catholic theology, the natural event of death sent the deceased's soul towards Heaven, Purgatory, or Hell (with an additional sub-state of Hell being 'Limbo of the Fathers' for those patriarchs of the Church who died before Jesus's coming). Mourners for the deceased prayed for their soul's spiritual health, helping the dead to eventually move from the intermediate state of Purgatory to Heaven. The jettisoning of Purgatory from Reformist teaching, owing to its absence from scripture, meant that lines of communication between the living and the dead were now broken, and that there was a new permanency to one's eternal destination.[6] But such permanency did not inspire all

[3] *Measure for Measure*, 3.1.116–131.
[4] For evocations of the *contemptus mundi* philosophical outlook in this period, see entries I.6 (Bradford), I.14 (Taylor), and II.14 (Beaumont).
[5] From Antonio in *Merchant of Venice* describing life as 'wretched' (4.1.263) to Macbeth's 'Life's but a walking shadow' (5.5.23) to Guiderius and Arviragus's plaintive song in *Cymbeline* ('Fear no more the heat o'th' sun / Nor the furious winter's rages'; 4.2.260–261), Shakespeare's works repeatedly invoke the idea that life is more to be endured than enjoyed.
[6] On the rejection of Purgatory in the reformed faith, and how it changed daily life in early modern England, see Gittings, *Burial*; Duffy, *Altars*; Cressy, *Birth*; Bruce Gordon and Peter Marshall (eds.), *The Place of the Dead: Death and Remembrance in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); and Marshall, *Beliefs*.

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Protestants with confidence, since the elect, those predestined to join Christ in the bosom of Heaven, had no conclusive knowledge of whether or not they were saved.

The premeditative thoughts on the afterlife expressed by the Cambridge student and Claudio suggest not only the web of beliefs around spiritual death but also the extraordinary pressures of natural death in premodern England. As an event, death is a physical and existential terminus, the point at which the social and biological agent falls out of historical time, interrupting the everyday progress of civilization. In the period, lower life expectancy rates meant that death was a familiar if foreboding presence in people's lives.[7] Poverty, famine, disease, war, and violence afflicted English society in devastating ways, while living conditions, poor hygiene, few substantial medical advances, and ineffective public health services led to high mortality rates.[8] Urban-based populations across western Europe, which grew exponentially over the early modern period, fared worst in terms of average life expectancy.[9] Outbreaks of plague were especially devastating for these populations, as

[7] Average life expectancy rates in the premodern period would have differed in various environments. For example, Mary J. Dobson's study of early modern death in the south-east of England (Essex, Kent, and Sussex) observes a discrepancy between rates of mortality in lower marsh regions and upland regions:

> a baby born into [the lower-lying marsh region] in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries might expect to live little more than twenty or thirty years. One in every three or four of all babies would die before its first birthday. [… In upland areas] a new-born baby might expect perhaps another forty or even fifty years of life and nine out of ten of all new-borns in the early modern era might survive beyond their first birthday.

Dobson, *Contours of Death and Disease in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 2.

[8] On England's changing population in this period, see E. A. Wrigley and R. S. Schofield, *The Population History of England 1541–1871* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

[9] Research on London's changing population is especially instructive in this light for our study: P. E. Jones and A. V. Judges, 'London Population in the Late Seventeenth Century', *Economic History Review*, 6 (1935–1936), 45–63; Roger Finlay, *Population and Metropolis: The Demography of London, 1580–1650* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Jeremy Boulton, *Neighbourhood and Society: A London Suburb in the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); Vanessa Harding, 'The Population of London, 1550–1700: A Review of the Published Evidence', *London Journal*, 15 (1990), 111–28; and Peter Razzell and Christine Spence, 'The History of Infant, Child and Adult Mortality in London, 1550–1850', *London Journal*, 32 (2007), 271–92.

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evidenced in London.[10] The germinal proto-capitalist economy increased income inequality between the tiers, lending itself to insufficient healthcare in a time of inadequate medical treatment.[11] Cumulatively, the effect was to draw people closer to death; mortality was not something that could be ignored but, paradoxically, lived with. Natural death, the cessation of an individual's time alive on this earth, was a fixture in the early modern mindset, a social preoccupation. Thus, the preacher Stephen Jerome advises the faithful to 'build the Ark before the flood come, prepare thy soul ere death come' for 'this is thy time, thy day, *tempus tuum*' but 'Death is God's day, *tempus suum*, and his time'.[12]

Although the anonymous poem and Shakespeare's dark comedy may be explained by the universality and ineluctability of a natural death, this study wants to shift the perspective on such *memento mori* pronouncements from 'the real' of the final terminus to the cultural production around mortality, what we call the death arts. The two printed texts do more than just echo the truism that we will all die; rather significantly, they contribute to the period's belief system, its zeitgeist, its symbolic order, its cultural imaginary, its historical record. Not to be confused with a terminus, a negation, or a loss, the death arts possess the vigour and energy that built up the early modern world and injected animation into everyday existence. Our chosen phrase, the 'death arts', while encompassing a plurality and heterogeneity of disciplines, activities, and techniques dedicated to mortality, foregrounds their artifice, thereby permitting us to conceive of the distinctive features and constructedness of Renaissance artefacts, whether textual, cognitive, or visual.

[10] Neil Cummins, Morgan Kelly, and Cormac Ó Gráda observe that

> the plagues of 1563, 1603, 1625, and 1665 were all of roughly equal relative magnitude, with burials running at 5.5 to 6 times the average level in the previous five years. Assuming a normal mortality rate of around 3.0–3.5 per cent, this implies that one-fifth of the city's population died each time, within the space of a few months.

See 'Living Standards and Plague in London, 1560–1665', *Economic History Review*, 69.1 (2016), 3–34, 4. See also Paul Slack, *The Impact of Plague in Tudor and Stuart England* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985).

[11] For the relationship between income, life expectancy, and the state's welfare apparatus, see Paul Slack, *Poverty and Policy in Tudor and Stuart England* (London and New York: Longman, 1988). In England, and north-western Europe more broadly, life expectancy rates for the noble class exceeded those of the rest of Europe; see Neil Cummins, 'Lifespans of the European Elite, 800–1800', *The Journal of Economic History*, 77.2 (2017), 406–39.

[12] Stephen Jerome, *Moses his sight of Canaan with Simeon his dying-song. Directing how to liue holily and dye happily* (London: 1614; STC 14512), Dd7[v].

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The Productive Ends of the Death Arts

The 'death arts' includes within its scope the *ars moriendi* while moving well beyond the traditional techniques of dying well. A strong historical reason for this expansion is that after the Reformation the *ars moriendi* became less rigorously ritualized and more loosely individualized with the Protestant turn to personal reading, meditation, and casuistry.[13] Even so, what we want to circumscribe by the death arts are the various and sundry artefacts, practices, images, and texts around dying, death, and the dead, stretching from contemplation and preparation, through expiration to funerals and commemoration – the full death-cycle, if you will. Their pluralization and wide reach during the early modern period must be attributed, at least in part, to the Protestant, Catholic, and humanist recruitment of the burgeoning printing press by which new and old genres overlapped, cross-pollinated, and proliferated: elegiac verse; theological and devotional works; psalters, primers, and prayer books; moral philosophy treatises; commonplace books; conduct manuals; repentance pamphlets; narrative poetry, romance, histories, and ballads, and so on.

The study's purpose is not to promote the ubiquity of a theme by rallying around textual sameness. Similar arguments have been made against – somewhat unfairly – scholars of rhetoric who find eloquence and oratorical patterns everywhere or 'symptomatic readings' that incessantly calculate the ideological valences of statements and texts. Even more pointedly, we do not want to confuse the death arts with just another great Western idea alongside justice, opinion, beauty, emotion, truth, and so forth.[14] They are not

[13] Ralph Houlbrooke affirms, 'The last act nevertheless bulked especially large in accounts of puritan lives. This was largely because the puritan way of dying assigned the individual's inner faith a particularly important role, and all but eliminated the supportive framework of liturgy and sacrament' ('The Puritan Death-bed, c.1560–c.1660', in *The Culture of English Puritanism, 1560–1700*, ed. Christopher Durston and Jacqueline Eales (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996), p.122). On the differences between the Catholic and Protestant arts, see David W. Atkinson, 'The English *Ars Morendi*: Its Protestant Transformation', *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 6.1 (1982), 1–10.

[14] The clearest expression of such a scheme is 'The Synopticon', an index of the 102 great ideas to the sixty-book encyclopaedia set: Mortimer J. Adler, *The Great Books of the Western World*, 2nd ed. (Chicago, IL: Encyclopædia Britannica, 1990).

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reducible to a transcendental signified that totalizes a cultural field of signs;[15] they, instead, testify to a vast array of signifiers diffused throughout that field, regardless of any privileged point of meaning. And so, our entries, far from fixating on the singularity of an arch concept or representation, accumulate lexical, idiomatic, and discursive copiousness, with which various writers spelled out their mortality.

It should be stated, however, that nowhere in the period do we find the literal combination of the two words as we use them in our title, and yet we stand behind the phrase's aptness in capturing succinctly and accurately the heterogeneity of the cultural work in question. Crucial to our thinking and curating is the period's understanding of 'art', which does not occupy the word's current semantic range.[16] Because the category 'ars' could broadly refer to any branch of study, sliding easily across modern disciplinary fissures as in Robert Hill's claim that 'it is the art of all arts, science of all sciences, to learn how to die',[17] the 'death arts' acknowledges the frequent sorties that established academic pursuits – whether they be the *studia humanitatis*, theology, law, natural history, medicine, and so on – make into issues of mortality.

Yet the early modern death arts, cutting an even wider swath, also encompass technical know-how and practical expertise, as William Caxton's translation of the *Tractatus artis bene moriendi*, the earliest of the printed versions in English, attests by its title 'the arte [and] crafte to knowe well to dye' and explains through its introductory sentences:

> When it is so that what a man maketh or doeth, it is made to come to some end. And if the thing be good and well made, it must needs come to good end. Then by better and greater reason every man ought to intend in such wise to live in this world, in keeping the commandments of God, that he may come to a good end. (entry I.1)

[15] Jacques Derrida famously critiques the traditional great idea through the concept of the transcendental signified, which posits a metaphysical foundation to stabilize the signifying system (Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), p. 20).

[16] 'Any of various pursuits or occupations in which creative or imaginative skill is applied according to aesthetic principles; the various branches of creative activity, as painting, sculpture, music, literature, dance, drama, oratory, etc.' (*OED*). Beaty, *Craft*, p. 54, presupposes such an anachronistic notion of art by privileging the literariness of the *ars moriendi* treatises.

[17] Robert Hill, *Path-Way to Prayer and Pietie* (London: 1609; STC 13472.7), P7^{r}.

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Behind the anonymous author's *ars moriendi* is Aristotle's definition of techne,[18] which signifies a 'productive form of knowledge', the skilfulness in doing and making something.[19] The treatise's passage particularly alludes to Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, whose opening posits that 'Every art and every inquiry, and similarly every action and choice, is thought to aim at some good; and for this reason the good has rightly been declared to be that at which all things aim'.[20] The art and craft of knowing how to die well, consistent with any other techne, seeks, after Aristotle, a good end, and, in a Christian era, presumably demands our greatest attention since it deals with the best end of all earthly ends. The death arts, then, operate on the basis of a premodern epistemology that unsettles contemporary expectations around mortality and its knowledge. The death arts did not just spin airy threads of intellectual speculation; they were good doing and good making – not only because they aimed heavenward with worshipful fervour but also because many were conducted under the auspices of the general category of techne, which strives for a practical and fulfilling telos. Our phrase accordingly circumscribes the skills and exercises that create habits, rituals, and artefacts around death, activities as diverse and multifaceted as hortatory sermonizing from the pulpit, performing Roman suicide on the stage, engraving woodcuts for a ballad, commemorating loved ones, drafting wills, mocking defunct enemies, and speechifying on the scaffold. What Maggie Vinter witnesses with active deaths on the early modern stage we register with the semantic alliance between art and artifice, which, allowing readers to move beyond the dead end of mourning, underscores the human agency and interpersonality inscribed within any early modern 'last act'.[21]

Our study's emphasis upon the cultural work occasioned by death invites renewed scholarly examination of a longstanding controversy associated

[18] We do not mean to imply that Aristotle used the term narrowly. For the techne's semantic richness in Aristotle as well as ancient philosophy, see Tom Angier, *Techné in Aristotle's Ethics: Crafting the Moral Life* (London: Bloomsbury, 2010).

[19] See Aristotle *CW*, *Metaphysics* 1046b3; 982a1; 1075a1–2; *Nicomachean Ethics* VI.4; *Topics* 157a10. Richard Whitford also introduces his *memento mori* instruction in terms of a techne. See Whitford, *A Daily Exercise and Experience of Death* (London: 1537; STC 25414), C4[r-v].

[20] Aristotle *CW*, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1094a1–2.

[21] Vinter makes a compelling argument that mourning and dying present two attitudes in the period. Whereas mourning emphasizes loss, dying suggests sociality and agency, and constitutes for her the object of study: the last 'act'. See Vinter, *Acts*, pp. 2–8.

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with the investigations of Philippe Ariès, who contends that the alienated individual of contemporary society has lost touch with traditional communal attitudes toward dying and the dead.[22] Early modern social historians have tested out Ariès's claims specifically on the English historical record and drawn conclusions that complicate and revise, if not challenge, his sweeping generalizations about the historical barrier separating our mindset from that of the pre-modern past.[23] A lesser-known account provides us with a counterbalance to Ariès's received nostalgic narrative: Paul L. Landsberg suggests a progress model in which the dissolution of the feudal order led to a raised consciousness of one's own mortality disencumbered from the baggage of clan thinking.[24] Even though our study does not rally around either of Ariès's and Landsberg's narratives or, for that matter, the narratives of other cultural and intellectual historians examining attitudes toward death,[25] they compel us to acknowledge the importance of methodologically separating the two periods so that the integrity of Renaissance alterity is kept from collapsing into modernity. Indeed, death studies gives scholars valuable leverage with which to distinguish Renaissance

[22] See Philippe Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death: The Classic History of Western Attitudes toward Death over the Last One Thousand Years*, trans. Helen Weaver, 2nd ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 2008).

[23] Gittings, *Burial*, p. 18 n.5, pursues Ariès's correlation between emergent individuality and changing attitudes to death. But both Cressy, *Birth* and Houlbrooke, *Family* are sceptical of an overemphasis upon Ariès's thesis. Cressy's approach eschews 'a simple linear progression from medieval to modern' that looks for 'a growing sense of individualism', preferring to bring out in the evidence 'diversity and dialogue within a continuing contested conversation about religious and secular solemnities' (379). Houlbrooke disputes 'Ariès's belief that a sense of the irreplaceability of loved ones first became widespread in early modern times' because the evidence does not fully bear it out (380).

[24] Paul L. Landsberg, *The Experience of Death: The Moral Problem of Suicide*, trans. Cynthia Rowland (New York: Arno Press, 1977).

[25] For a representative selection of historians who posit a historical change in European attitudes toward death and the dead, see Johan Huizinga, *The Waning of the Middle Ages*, trans. Frederik Jan Hopman ([1924] Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1955); Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Vintage, 1975); Michel Vovelle, *La Mort et l'Occident de 1300 à nos jours* (Paris: Gallimard, 1983); Duffy, *Altars*; Arthur Imhof, *Lost Worlds: How our European Ancestors Coped with Everyday Life and Why Life Is So Hard Today*, trans. Thomas Robisheaux (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1996); Appleford, *Learning*; Marshall, *Beliefs*; and Thomas W. Laqueur, *The Work of the Dead: A Cultural History of Mortal Remains* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016).

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mentalities, subjectivity, and epistemology from later Enlightenment developments, as well as from their medieval precursors.[26]

An attention to the death arts, we believe, combats the post-Enlightenment caricature of mortal reflection as arising from dank religious pessimism and rioting necromania. Modernity tends to overplay the grave as absence and annulment, where all human values come to an end. Perhaps that is why today we often call those preoccupied with the macabre 'morose' and 'morbid': it is a sickly disposition that dwells on value-negating death.[27] Nietzsche's call for a transvaluation of Christianity's life-denying exaltation of suffering, no doubt, launches the clearest, if not the most persuasive, philosophical attack on the culture of the *ars moriendi*.[28] This contemporary attitude, notwithstanding the expression of the painful feelings of losing a loved one, significantly distorts our view of early modern death, which was saturated with competing and complementary cultural values. It is no mystery that during the period death profited the religiously minded, but it also accrued epistemological, juridical, educational, and literary capital, disseminated widely across the social spectrum from the existential through the collective to the commonwealth, and manifested itself most discernibly by the products of the printing press. Its values were tallied, scaled, exchanged, and compounded with one another, circulating in an economy that aligned and misaligned the worldly marketplace with the marts of Heaven, Hell, and Purgatory. Our phrase the 'death arts', the organizational principle of the study, ventures to give the sweeping economy of death its scholarly due.

Our selected entries take stock of death's thriving economy by making visible the extensive symbolic latticework – not just verbal patterns and occupational patter embedded in writing, but speech acts, images, artefacts, and

[26] Exemplary in this regard is Neill, *Issues*, which traces through drama the crisis of identity precipitated by the period's changing attitudes to mortality. Also worth noting is Brian Cummings, *Mortal Thoughts: Religion, Secularity, and Identity in Early Modern Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), which also investigates identity in the period but argues against scholarly accounts that secularize the Renaissance and the Reformation.

[27] Beaty, *Craft*, p. 46, blames medieval necromania and the abnormal insecurities of material existence for inducing churchmen to violently renounce the values of the present life as depicted in the *danse macabre*. Johan Huizinga also criticizes the 'whole vision' of late medieval death as macabre, which partly springs from a 'spasmodic reaction against excessive sensuality' and 'deep psychological strata of fear' (*The Waning of the Middle Ages*, pp. 142, 146).

[28] See *The Anti-Christ* for his critique, in Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols; and, The Anti-Christ*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin, 1990).

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activities – that the death arts built around 'the real' of the corpse.[29] Stretching throughout the civic social sphere, such scaffolding can be seen to have far-reaching implications for the cognition of early modern individuals, when we consider the findings of distributive psychology and extended mind theory: thinking involves the collaboration between the brain and its environment so much so that culture installs into human ecosystems feedback mechanisms in order to offload cognitive functionality and extend people's minds.[30] Active mental externalism may marshal not only technological artefacts (paper and ink, prayer beads, and adding machines), but also, less intuitively speaking, language.[31] The same mental externalism applies widely to the cultural work performed by the death arts – but on a larger scale. The things they produced from material artefacts – for instance, brasses, transi-tombs, monuments, family heirlooms, portraits, and skull rings – to more rhetorical resources – such as prayers, sermons, wills, and elegies – resulted in the expansion of a vast and inescapable web of relations, which continually primed early modern minds to reflect upon their mortality. Gail Kern Paster's implementation of the extended mind theory to grasp images of the Renaissance skull proves illuminating here. Despite disagreeing with her assertion of a binary between distributed cognition and the *memento mori* tradition, we see her four readings of the death's head as actually affirming the dynamic mental activity sparked by artefacts and techniques devoted to meditating on mortality.[32]

[29] As Catherine Belsey asserts by way of Lacan's concept of the real, 'Death doesn't do fiction, but eliminates the body and the speaking subject, with all it thinks it knows. Death puts an end to the cultural game for each of us' (*Culture and the Real* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), p.14).

[30] The extended mind hypothesis, first articulated by Andy Clark and David Chalmers, 'The Extended Mind', *Analysis*, 58.1 (1998), 7–19, postulates that cognition is not confined to flesh and bone but occurs through couplings between the subject's brain and its environment. Consider the cognitive artefact of the calculator, which allows the user to achieve epistemic actions not achievable without the device.

[31] As Clark and Chalmers propose,

> Without language, we might be much more akin to discrete Cartesian "inner" minds, in which high-level cognition relies largely on internal resources. But the advent of language has allowed us to spread this burden into the world. Language, thus construed, is not a mirror of our inner states but a complement to them. It serves as a tool whose role is to extend cognition in ways that on-board devices cannot. Indeed, it may be that the intellectual explosion in recent evolutionary time is due as much to this linguistically-enabled extension of cognition as to any independent development in our inner cognitive resources. (ibid., 18)

[32] Gail Kern Paster, 'Thinking with Skulls in Holbein, *Hamlet*, Vesalius, and Fuller', *The Shakespearean International Yearbook* (London: Routledge, 2011), vol. 11, pp. 43, 58.

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