

Nathaniel Cotton

Sara Corradi, Simon Fraser University

Nathaniel Cotton was born in London in 1705, a poet and physician. Known more for his medical career than his poetic legacy, Cotton began his medical studies in Leiden at the age of twenty-four. Eventually, he succeeded in maintaining and owning a private asylum in St. Albans, called The Collegium Insanorum. He continued his practice until his death in 1788, age eighty-three.

Cotton's asylum had a great reputation. Known "for his humanity and sweetness of temper" (Nolan 1194), Cotton closely monitored patients and sustained a healthy atmosphere for the asylum. His most famous patient was poet William Cowper, who appears in this anthology. Cowper was a patient between December 1763 and June 1765 for treatment of severe mental illness. His experience was positive, as he claimed that his recovery was heavily influenced by the great patience and gentleness of the asylum, its servants, and Cotton.

With his seven children, five of whom survived past infancy, and passion for medicine and sustaining life, Cotton's poetic themes included aging, children, and life. "To a Child of Five Years Old" is one of Cotton's lesser-known poems, even for an obscure poet. This trochaic tetrameter poem explores the journey of aging in an abab rhyme, with the "b" lines catalectic. Cotton's speaker addresses his poem to a young child, which makes the poem's genre an address. Although the recipient is officially unknown, this poem could be addressed to his daughter Mary, as "Polly" was a common nickname for Mary during the eighteenth century. The poem uses the traditional metaphor of floral feminine beauty and youthfulness to express the inevitable depletion of youth through the stages of aging. The wilting of youthfulness is unavoidable, and Cotton advises any female child, such as his daughter, to focus attentively on her mind instead of her beauty, because her good sense will last far longer than her youth.

Further Reading

Faubert, Michelle. *Rhyming Reason: The Poetry of Romantic-Era Psychologists*, Routledge, 2009.
 Seaton, Beverly. "Towards a Historical Semiotics of Literary Flower Personification." *Poetics Today*, vol. 10, no. 4, 1989, pp. 679–701.

References

Nolan, Peter W. "A History of the Training of Asylum Nurses." *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, vol. 18, no. 8, Aug. 1993, pp. 1193–1201.

To a Child of Five Years Old³⁰

FAIREST flow'r, all flow'rs excelling,

Which in Eden's garden grew;

Flow'rs of Eve's imbower'd³¹ dwelling,³²

Are, my Fair-one, types³³ of you.

Mark, my Polly, how the roses 5

Emulate thy damask³⁴ cheek;

How the bud its sweets discloses,

Buds thy opening bloom bespeak.³⁵

Lilies are, by plain direction,

Emblems³⁶ of a double kind; 10

Emblems of thy fair complexion,

Emblems of thy fairer mind.

But, dear girl, both flow'rs and beauty

Blossom, fade, and die away;

Then pursue good sense and duty, 15

Evergreens, that ne'er decay.



[This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/)

© Sara Corradi, 2024

³⁰ *A Collection of Poems in Six Volumes. By Several Hands*, edited by Robert Dodsley, Vol. IV, 1763, p. 256. *Eighteenth-Century Poetry Archive*.

³¹ *Imbower'd*: sheltered or enclosed.

³² [Cotton's note] flow'rs of Eve's imbower'd dwelling: Alluding to Milton's description of Eve's bower.

³³ *Types*: prototypes, examples foreshadowing you

³⁴ *Damask*: a species of rose, commonly referencing a woman's pink cheeks.

³⁵ *Bespeak*: "to tell of or betoken beforehand: to prognosticate, augur" (*OED*).

³⁶ *Emblems*: symbols.