

**VOX VULGI: A POEM  
IN CENSURE OF THE  
PARLIAMENT OF 1661**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649314133

Vox vulgi: a poem in censure of the parliament of 1661 by George Wither

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**GEORGE WITHER**

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PARLIAMENT OF 1661**



# VOX VULGI:

A POEM IN CENSURE OF THE  
PARLIAMENT OF 1661,

BY

GEORGE WITHER,

NOW FIRST EDITED FROM THE ORIGINAL MS.,

TOGETHER WITH

AN UNPUBLISHED LETTER FROM WITHER TO JOHN THURLOE.

BY

REV. W. DUNN MACRAY, M.A., F.S.A.



Oxford and London:

JAMES PARKER AND CO.

1880.

2799. f. 145



## P R E F A C E.

FOR the writing of this Poem, well-known by name but hitherto altogether unknown in fact, hard measure was dealt out by both Privy Council and Parliament to its unfortunate author. Although it had hardly got beyond the first rude draft, written, as Wither himself says, in such a 'ragged hand' that to many it would be illegible, and was, besides, not intended for publication until it had, with newly-learned caution, been submitted to Clarendon's examination, it was nevertheless regarded as so dangerous and seditious a libel upon the re-actionary Parliament of the Restoration, that at first, in Aug. 1661, the author was committed by warrant of the Privy Council to Newgate, and then on 24 March in the following year was brought to the bar of the House of Commons, and ordered to be committed to the Tower, and to be impeached. The latter order was never carried out, but in the Tower Wither remained until July 1663<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> It is said in the life of Wither in Chalmers' *Biog. Dict.* that the date of his release is not known. It is, however, to be found by reference to the Journals of the House of Commons, where it appears that an order for his release, on giving security to the Lieutenant of the Tower, was made on 27 July, 1663. An order for his wife's admittance to him, that she might bring up a recantation, had been made on 9 April in that year on his petition to the House.

Wither tells the history of the composition of the poem, of the seizure of himself and his papers, and of his subsequent hardships, in his tracts (printed while he lay in Newgate) entitled *Crumbs and Scraps lately found in a Prisoners-Basket*, and *Prisoners Plea for his Vindication*, sufficient extracts from which for purposes of illustration are given in Park's List of the productions of his restless pen<sup>2</sup>.

That it was wise to suppress any publication of the poem will not be questioned by its readers. No doubt there were many hot-headed and intemperate Royalists in the House of Commons, who needed to be kept in check by the calm judgments of more prudent men, but the publication of such a bitter attack as this from a notorious writer of the defeated party would only have kept those animosities inflamed against which it protests. And Wither himself admits that the King's influence was thrown on the healing side, as sufficiently shown by his personal application to Parliament for the speedy passing of the Act of Oblivion; he approves also of the Acts passed by this same Parliament for vesting the Militia in the Crown, and for restoring the Bishops to their seats in the House of Lords; and he could hardly, one would suppose, have objected to the Act for securing the King's Person. But the Act for attainting those who were justly excepted from the Indemnity, and that against

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<sup>2</sup> *British Bibliographer*, 1810, vol. i. pp. 423-4.



Tumultuous Meetings held on pretence of Petitioning, may have excited little sympathy on his part; and it seems most probable that the passage at lines 139-156 in which he alludes to 'Ancient Charters' and the election of Parliaments, refers to the Bill for the well-governing of Corporations, against which the constitutional lawyer Prynne wrote some *Summary Reasons* (although for his writing he had to cry *Peccavi* at the bar of the House), and which did not finally pass until the end of the year, after much opposition and repeated conferences with the House of Lords. Had *Hansard* existed in those days we should no doubt find that Wither's alarm and indignation were more excited by the tone of debates, and the intemperance of individual speakers who appeared to reflect the feelings of the majority, than by any of the measures which were actually enacted. And it must not be forgotten that however much we may admire the fearless out-spokenness and honesty of our author, and the Christian courage with which he denounces the profligacy already becoming flagrant, yet that as one who had served the Usurper, and had, to some small extent at least, profited by that service from the spoils of others, he was but little fitted to urge moderation upon the Cavaliers, and but little likely to gain audience from them.

The poem occupies in manuscript nine small quarto leaves, and is written in a hand which at times is extremely difficult, and here and there altogether impossible, to be deciphered. As existing only in the corrected

original draft, it abounds with erasures, interlineations and additions. It is preserved (together with the letter that precedes it, clearly written on a folio sheet) among Clarendon's State Papers for the year 1661, where it has lain *perdu* since the time when it was produced before the Council, and on the blank outside leaf it has the great Chancellor's endorsement, '*Withers's libell, 1661.*' It exhibits the freely-flowing versification and facility of composition which mark the author's style, and, had it received a final revision, would no doubt have lost the little irregularities which are occasionally to be met with. Alike for its historical, poetical, and personal interest, the Editor believes that its publication will be welcomed by the students of English literature. And as an additional contribution to Wither's personal history he subjoins a copy of a letter preserved in vol. lvi of Thurloe's State Papers [Bodl. MS. Rawlinson A. 56, fol. 333], which shows that the restless spirit which challenged unpleasant notice under the Monarchy had been already sorely fretted by ungrateful neglect under the Commonwealth.

*Appendix to Preface.*

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“ Right Honorable,

“ It is now almost 5 moneths since I last made knowne my sad condition to his Highnes and to yourselfe, and nigh 3 moneths since it pleased him by his referrence to inioine my attendance vpon your honor, who were to speak with him touching the contents of the petition therewith referred, which I have accordingly performed almost every day, both to the increase of my necessities and to the imparinge of my health and credit without any comfortable effect ; yea and with the losse also (by that delay) of a favour which I was then in hope of toward my releef. The iust importunities likewise of some of my Creditors to whome I haue forfeited my bands (and therewith my credit) by that meanes, and through the Commonwealth's breach of her ingagements to me, do make me weary of my life, and almost in doubt whether there be either Justice or Mercy left in the world when I consider how long and by whome I am exposed to so great extremities as I haue declared.

I owe to the husband of the Gentlewoman who favours mee with the conuoyance of this letter vnto your hands £200 by a band forfeited, whose confidence in me I haue so much frustrated that I am ashamed to looke him in the face, and afflicted with no lesse greef than shame in