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"Another Version of the Leicester Epitaphium"

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BOTH before and after his death on 4 September 1588, Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, was the object of libels and slanders of many kinds. The infamous tract known as "Leicester's Commonwealth" (1584) is the best known of these, but amongst the rest there is a curious satirical squib usually called simply the "Epitaph". Certainly by no means a great poem, it does however have its own kind of interest, especially as it reveals something of the popular reaction to the Earl's career. In its most familiar version it has long been attributed to Sir Walter Raleigh, from the ascription made in the seventeenth-century copy that was first printed, with inaccuracies, by J. P. Collier, and now resides in the Huntington Library (MS. EL 6183):

> epetaphe
> Here lyes the noble warryor *that* never bludyed sword
> Her lyes the noble Courtier *that* never kept his woord
> Her lyes his excellency *that* governs all the state
> Her lyes the L[ord] of L[eicester] that all *the* World did hate.
> Wa. Ra.

Raleigh's authorship has justly been doubted by E. A. Strathmann, in *M.L.N.*, lx (1945), 111-14, and is presently seldom accepted. Similar but anonymous forms of this version of the poem have also been found elsewhere (see Agnes Latham, ed. *The Poems of Sir Walter Ralegh,* The Muses' Library, Harvard Univ. Press, 1951, p. 172).

In 1592 the Catholic propagandist Richard Verstegan printed a slightly different form of the verse in his *Declaration of the True Causes of the Great Troubles* (Antwerp, *STC* 10005, p.54):

> Heere lies the woorthy warrier,
> That never bloodied swoord:
> Heere lies the loyall courtier,
> That never kept his woord.
> Heere lies his noble excellence,
> That ruled all the states.
> Heere lies the Earle of Leicester,
> Whome earth, and heaven hates.

As Strathmann points out, this version is superior to the first in several minor ways; nonetheless, it is substantially the same poem.

There is still another version, however, which seems to have escaped previous notice. Of the more than sixty manuscript copies of "Leicester's Commonwealth" which survive, one of them, Stowe MS. 156 (fols. 108v-204v) in the British Museum, is a rather more accurate copy than most of the others. Appended to the tract itself and written in the same sixteenth-century hand is the following:

> Epitaphium
> Heere lyes the valiant soldier
> that never drewe his sword.
> Heere lyes *the* Loyall Courtier
> that never kept his woord
> Heere lyes *the* Noble Leacher
> that used Art to *pro*voke
> Heere lyes *the* constant housband
> whose love was firme as smoke.
> Heere lyes *the* Politician
> & Nutt worme of *the* state
> Heere lyes *the* Erie of Leicester
> *that* God, & Man did hate.
> (fol. 204v)

As artistically modest as it may be, this longer version must be considered superior to the other two. At least the logic of the satirical strategy is more consistent here. The word "valiant" contrasts better with its antithesis than do either "noble" or "woorthy" with theirs (though "bloodied" may be thought more graphic than "drewe"). "Loyall" certainly makes a more specific contrast to the "never kept his woord" than does the "noble" of the Ellesmere version. "Politician" is an ambiguous word, which might mean statesman but could as well become "Nutt worme" in the following line, thus providing both the required antithesis and some Machiavellian associations as well. And "Nutt worme of the state" is a good deal more vigorous than its counterparts in the other versions; even the Queen in her favourite panegyric could have been said to have "governed all the state", and the implication of Leicester's having usurped that role is just a bit oblique, since he did in fact "rule all the states" of the Low Countries in 1586, and by invitation. ("Nutt worme", by the way, is a word used nowhere else, according to the *O.E.D.* though its meaning here is obvious enough.) But on the other hand, the faulty antithesis of "lecher" in line 5 may well be counted against the Stowe version, as may the rather jarring rhythm of line 6.

Although the criticisms made of the Earl in all three versions are quite general in nature, the Stowe version seems to refer directly to "Leicester's Commonwealth" in most of its elements. Lines 1 and 2 reflect the following passage: the men whom Leicester is alleged to have poisoned "were such valiaunt knightes the moste parte of them, as he durst as soone have eaten his scabbard, as drawe his sworde in publique against them" ("Leicester's Commonwealth", *The Copie of a Leter Wryten by a Master of Arte,* 1584, *STC* 19399, p. 43). Lines 3 and 4 may reflect the following passage, among others: "namelie if he sweare solemnlie, by his George, or by the eternal God, then be sure it is a false lye . . . and some tymes in his own lodging, in like case his maner is to take up and sweare by the Bible, wherby a Gentleman of good accompt . . . protested

to me of his knowledge, that in a verie short space, he observed him, wittingly & willingly, to be forsworne sixtiene tymes" (p. 197; of his oaths Leicester "maketh as great accompt, as hennes do of cackling"). Lines 5 and 6 suggest the "Commonwealth's" assertion that Leicester was "given to procure love in others by Coniuring, Sorcerie, and other such meanes" (p.39), or, depending upon whom or what is to be "provoked", it may remind us of the bottle of ointment ("of ten Pounds the Pinte") which the Earl kept by his bed, "wherby (as they say) he is able to move his flesh at al tymes, for keeping of his credit" (p. 39); in the addition to the *Discours de La Vie Abhominable,* the 1585 French translation of the "Commonwealth", there is a long and very repulsive tale of the Earl's employment of the sorceress "Mother Davies" to concoct for his unwilling lady-love a vile aphrodisiac potion (in English, Exeter College, Oxford, MS. 166, pp. 120-23). And lines 7 and 8 recall the "Commonwealth's" charge that the Earl made and broke marriage contracts at his will, with his first wife Amy Robsart and then with his putative second wife the Lady Sheffield (pp.35-36). The final four lines, of course, reflect the whole tenor of the "Commonwealth's" attack, which endeavoured in every way possible to demonstrate why Leicester was so "odible both to God and man" (p.196).

There is a great deal of heterogeneous anti-Dudley material surviving, representing the various concerns of the various groups opposed to the Earl. Nevertheless, these parallels between "Leicester's Commonwealth" and the Stowe "Epitaphium" do seem significant and, coupled with the poem's presence in an early and very accurate copy of the "Commonwealth", they may suggest that the poem, in this version, was directly inspired by the tract, in much the same way as was Thomas Rogers's much longer poem "Leicester's Ghost" (see the edition by F. B. Williams, Jr., Chicago Univ. Press, 1972). We cannot assume, to be sure, that the unknown Stowe copyist himself was its author, and should infer no more than that the poem might have come to him as already amongst the "Commonwealth's' progeny. But the Stowe version would seem on this evidence to be, not only a superior, but also a more authoritative text of the "Leicester Epitaphium" than either of its more familiar versions.

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