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Donne's Epigram on the Earl of Nottingham

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Though the original is now at Meisei University in Tokyo, the British Library retains photographs of a document known to Donne scholars as the Crewe/ Monckton Milnes manuscript and identified on the title page as "A Collection of/ Original Poetry,/ written about the time of/ Ben Iohnson./ qui ob. 1637." To this inscription the nineteenth-century bibliophile John Simeon added that the manuscript was "Chiefly in the Autograph of/ Dr. Donne . . . ." As it turns out, Simeon was wrong about the handwriting—none of the several hands is Donne's—but this miscellany is nonetheless of great interest for its contents. Along with thirty-nine other poems by Jonson and contemporaries—including a dozen lines from *Romeo and Juliet*—the manuscript contains thirty-two whole or partial transcriptions of known Donne poems. It also includes a hitherto unnoticed epigram, which on both thematic and bibliographical grounds may be tentatively ascribed to Donne as well:

E. of Nottingham
I Earle of Nothing=am, am iustly soe
for I did nothing all the world doth know
when braue Count Essex landed on the shore
I landed too, but Cales was wonn before./

The historical circumstances reflected in these lines may be quickly pieced together from the *DNB*. On June 1, 1596, a fleet of English ships sailed from Plymouth, and by June 18th was lying westward of Cadiz (then called "Cales"), planning an attack. At his insistence, Queen Elizabeth had commissioned Robert Devereaux, second Earl of Essex, commander of land forces for this expedition (essentially General-in-Chief); and very nearly Essex's equal was Charles Howard, second Baron Howard of Effingham, who as lord admiral exercised primary authority at sea. Essex also enticed his rival Sir Walter Raleigh to command one of the five squadrons comprised in the fleet. Over the objections of Essex—who advocated a land attack—the council of war accepted a plan proffered by Raleigh to attack the Spanish ships in the harbor, and the naval battle began on the morning of the 21st. After a few hours of fighting, the Spanish were utterly defeated, and Essex with a force of 3,000 men rushed ashore, perhaps in his over-eagerness causing the destruction of several richly laden vessels that might have been

salvaged for booty. In any case, Howard, who had been "charged by the queen" to ensure the "favorite's safety," was obliged to land in support of Essex. Driving all before him, Essex reached the marketplace of Cadiz, the town surrendered, and on the following day Essex's flag floated from the citadel.

Essex was the popular hero of the campaign, receiving commendation even from Raleigh for behaving "valiantly and advisedly in the highest degree," but his plans for a land excursion into Andalusia were rejected by the council of war, and an angry feeling arose between the Earl and Lord Howard. This feeling was considerably exacerbated the following year, when Elizabeth created Howard Earl of Nottingham, "the patent referring not only to his services against the Armada in 1588, but to his achievements in conjunction with Essex at Cadiz." Combined with the office of lord high admiral, this new dignity gave Howard precedence over all non-official earls, and Essex was furious. Claiming sole credit for the success at Cadiz, he avowed himself personally dishonored by the queen's action and called for the establishment of a commission to examine the justice of it, even offering to demonstrate the righteousness of his cause in a trial by combat with Nottingham or any of Nottingham's sons. Still under Essex's spell at this point, the queen eventually caved in and appointed Essex "earl marshal," thus "restoring his precedence" over Nottingham.

This, in a nutshell, is the history behind the poem. Though some have recently questioned Donne's attitude toward Essex, the epigram appears to side with Essex in the dispute over Nottingham's title and to concede him full credit for capturing Cadiz, asserting Essex's precedence by styling him "Count" (from Late Latin comes), a title that John Selden (*Titles of Honor*, 1614, pp. 219 ff/) says was applied in Saxon times to the *ealdorman* before being supplanted by the later *eorle* from the Danish. If not necessarily, the author of the epigram was very likely someone who participated in the expedition, and the poem was surely written sometime shortly after the controversy over Nottingham's title arose. John Donne, of course, had been with Essex at Cadiz ("waited upon his lordship," in the words of Izaak Walton) and in an epigram on Sir John Wingfield, who fell in battle at Cadiz, commemorates the action as one in which "our Earle did bestow" Wingfield in that "late Island" as a "fitter pillar" than the nearby Pillars of Hercules. In his attitude toward Essex ("our Earle") and in the general approbatory attitude toward the Cadiz venture, the speaker of "Sir John Wingefield" seems to me capable of sitting down to comfortable conversation with the author of "E. of Nottingham."

Other features of the poem are, at the very least, not inconsistent with Donne's epigrammatical practice and his usual forms of wit. In addition to "Sir John Wingfield," at least four other epigrams take their inspiration from his soldiering experiences in the Cadiz expedition and the Islands' voyage the following year—"Fall of a wall" (actually based on an event of 1589 at Corunna), "Cales and Guyana," "A Lame Beggar" (headed "Zoppo" in some manuscripts), and "A Burnt Ship"—and some of these are also four lines long. The Wingfield epigram,

"Raderus," and perhaps "Antiquary" (entitled "Hammon" in the earliest version) show Donne titling epigrams after contemporary historical figures; and with "Niobe" and "Hero and Leander" he gives us the epigram as dramatic monologue, casting the poem as the utterance of the title character(s). (The nature of the Nottingham/Nothing-am joke, of course, practically determines a first-person form for this poem.) Donne's readiness to play wittily with a name is apparent throughout his life, from the (possibly apocryphal) "John-Donne-Anne-Donne-Un-done" quip of 1602, written when his elopement cost him his job as Thomas Egerton's secretary, to the "When Thou hast done, Thou hast not done" refrain from "A Hymn to God the Father" in 1631.

Whether authentic or not, the "Un-done" mot mentioned above instances a wit of syllabication found elsewhere in Donne's earlier writings. He rhymes "blind-" (from "blindness") with "kind" in "Satire III" (c. 1595), for example, and a particularly suggestive analogue to the Nottingham/ Nothing-am pun appears in what Evelyn Simpson (*A Study of the Prose Works of John Donne*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1948) identifies as Donne's earliest prose letter. Written from Plymouth in August of 1597 while the fleet was being refitted after its disastrous encounter with the storm that inspired Donne's poem "The Storm," the letter milks a quip out of the word "Plymouth" by dividing it into syllables: "wee are now againe at plymouth quasi ply=mouth; for wee do nothing but eate & scarce that ..." (Simpson, p. 303). The wit of this is similar in kind to that of "Nothing=am," and it dates from within two or three months of the creation of Nottingham and the likely composition of the epigram.

Some kinds of bibliographical determinations cannot be made on the basis of photographs, but what can be gleaned from the pictures of the manuscript in the British Library supports the attribution of "E. of Nottingham" to Donne, however tentatively. Among the Donne poems in the document are included ten Ovidian elegies ("The Anagram" appears twice), one epigram, thirteen love lyrics, and eight verse epistles. With the exception of verse letters to Lady Bedford ("Reason is our soul's left hand," 1608), Sir Edward Herbert ("Man is a lump," 1610), and the Lady Carey ("Here where by all," 1611) and the love lyrics "Twicknam Garden" (1608) and "A Valediction, forbidding mourning" (1611), editors have dated all of these prior to 1601—the right context for an epigram probably written in 1597. As the volume is now organized and paginated, all the Donne poems except two love lyrics appear in groups of from four to ten, and in every case all items in a group are entered in the same hand, which suggests that the compilers built up the collection incrementally, from time to time adding such small groups of poems as happened to come their way. Some of these groups are generically uniform (among others, there are groups of five Elegies, of nine Verse Letters, and of four Songs and Sonets), while others are generically mixed: the sequence with which the manuscript opens includes the elegy "The Autumnal," the epigram "A Lame Beggar," the lyrics "The Indifferent" and "The Prohibition," and the elegy

"The Expostulation." The last five poems in the manuscript are "Break of Day," "E. of Nottingham," "The Flea," a doggerel quattrain on the wedding of Dick Starr and Liz Moone (which makes the predictable man-in-the-moon joke), and part of "The Anagram." The placement of "E. of Nottingham" between "Break of Day" and "The Flea," both subscribed "D" and both probably written before 1601, associates the poem physically with early canonical pieces, and it seems likely that the last five poems in the manuscript came into the transcriber's hands as a discrete group circulating as a unit.

Like most of the other poems in the manuscript, "E. of Nottingham" is not subscribed, but that is not unusual in manuscript miscellanies of this period. Among Donne's twenty-one other English epigrams, for instance, eleven—including "Niobe," and "Cales and Guyana," and "Sir John Wingefield"—are not specifically subscribed or assigned in any manuscript, and only "Pyramus and Thisbe" and the popular "A Lame Beggar" (which appears in fifty-two separate manuscript copies) are subscribed as many as five times. Eight of the Donne poems in the Crewe manuscript are attributed—either to "I D" or just to "D"—but there seems to be no pattern in the ascriptions. Of the five opening poems only "The Autumnal" is attributed, and no item in the group of five elegies or the group of nine verse letters is subscribed. It is thus impossible to attach any significance to the fact that "Break of Day" and "The Flea" in the final sequence are both ascribed to "D," while "E. of Nottingham," appearing between them, is not. Indeed, given the nature of the subject matter, one can well imagine the author's reluctance to subscribe it, and we might suspect that any contemporary attribution of such a poem would arise out of malice.

I have not been able to discover any other copy of this epigram. One wishes it had appeared (at least) in the Westmoreland manuscript, which is in the hand of Donne's friend Rowland Woodward and which is one of only two sources for both "Cales and Guyana" and "Sir John Wingfield," two other politically sensitive epigrams deriving from the expeditions against Spain in the mid 1590s. But one can understand why, even if the Westmoreland stands very close to Donne's own papers, this poem would have been excluded (indeed, one could understand why Donne's papers themselves might include no copy): except perhaps for a few moments in private with Essex or with very discreet and like-minded friends, it is hard to imagine any time in Donne's life when he would have been better off as the recognized author of "E. of Nottingham" than not. If he did write the poem, I would guess that even as a young man eager to engratiate himself with a powerful general and parade his wit before his peers, his discretion for once triumphed over his valor and caused him to play this card very close to the vest.

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