

Correspondence in the Burley Manuscript: A Conjecture

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The Burley Manuscript¹ is a miscellany of verse, essays, ambassadorial correspondence, “collectibles” of the kind one finds in commonplace books, and copies of about eighty private letters. Much of the material is associated with Sir Henry Wotton, and this manuscript was among the sources for Logan Pearsall Smith’s great work on that fascinating writer and polymath.² It contains also some material closely connected with John Donne: his *Epigrams*, his *Paradoxes*, a few of the poems and a number of private letters, and has accordingly been used as a source for work on all these by—among others—H. J. C. Grierson,³ Evelyn Simpson,⁴ Helen Peters,⁵ and the *Donne Variorum* editors.⁶

¹The familiar title, used in many citations, derived from its being discovered first in Burley-on-the-Hill, Rutland. Strictly, DG7, Lit.2, in the Record Office for Leicestershire, Leicester and Rutland, Wigston Magna, Leics, UK.

²*The Life and Letters of Sir Henry Wotton*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1907, repr. 1966).

³*The Poems of John Donne*, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1912).

⁴*A Study of the Prose Works of John Donne* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1924), 2nd ed. 1948.

⁵*John Donne: Paradoxes and Problems* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980)

⁶*The Variorum Edition of the Poetry of John Donne*, ed. by Gary A Stringer and others, 8 vols (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press,

Here I consider the private letters, not just those which have been identified by Simpson, by Claude Summers and Ted-Larry Pebworth,⁷ and most recently by Dennis Flynn,⁸ as belonging to an exchange between Wotton and Donne, but also those apparently from one or other to someone else, and as well those—more than half of the eighty or so—that are at present anonymous as to both author and recipient.

Some of these letters I am at the moment unable to date; of those for which a date can be presumed with some confidence, many come from before 1604, when Wotton was first made Ambassador; most of the Wotton-Donne correspondence, on which I wish to focus attention, seems to come from 1598-1601, when both were employed as secretaries. What seems most curious about these letters is that none is in the hand of the originator: most are in that of the scribe known as “D1,”⁹ and the rest in William Parkhurst’s. Parkhurst was one of Wotton’s secretaries in Venice, but—save for these letters—I know of no connection between them in this earlier period.

It does not seem likely that, at this period of their careers, either Wotton or Donne had or could afford a secretary of his own. Nor can one think of a reason for either to keep copies of brief communications on what seem to be quotidian matters, even if there are—as Flynn argues—political and emotional currents flowing beneath their inoffensive surfaces. If either wanted copies, it would be natural for him to make such copies in his own hand;

1995-): vol. 8 “The Epigrams, Epithalamions, Epitaphs, Inscriptions and Miscellaneous Poems” (1995).

⁷“Donne’s correspondence with Wotton,” *John Donne Journal* 10 (1991): 1-36.

⁸Unpublished article, “On the Friendship and Correspondence of John Donne and Henry Wotton” (2005). I am grateful to the author for sharing a draft of this article.

⁹See Simpson, p. 302, who ascribes this designation to Pearsall Smith. It does not appear in his printed work, but he may have so endorsed the copy, taken for the Clarendon Press, and now lost.

indeed either may have done so, but that is not what has survived. What we have are copies by D1 and Parkhurst and, given the implausibility of Donne or Wotton asking for them to be made, we must suppose that the scribes made them for their own purposes, or at another's behest.

A further difficulty arises from our inability to date, not the letters, but the copies themselves. Parkhurst's association with the manuscript collection certainly continued until 1641 (the year of the death of Strafford; an epitaph to him in Parkhurst's hand is the final item [f.360]), but we do not know when it began. Similarly, D1's connection continued until at least 1604, for a copy in his hand of "To Sir *H.W.* at his going Ambassador to *Venice*" appears at f.285v, but again the commencement of his involvement is undatable. Parkhurst cannot with certainty be connected to either Wotton or Donne before 1604, when he accompanied Wotton to Venice.

It is possible, therefore, that the scribal copies are much later than the originals but, in that case (and supposing that the originals survived long enough for that to happen), one would need to find a reason why someone—the scribes or their employer(s)—should be so interested in having copies. More plausible, surely, is that the copies were taken at some point between their writing and their receipt, and that this was done as a consequence of some policy or instruction that correspondence originating from, or destined for, those appearing on some list of names, was to be intercepted and copied.

If we admit this conjecture, we have an explanation that accounts for the several peculiarities of the letters' inclusion in the Burley MS: their existence at all, their being in the hands of people other than their originators, the lack of any established connection between Parkhurst and Wotton at the time of the letters, and the archiving of them, apparently by Parkhurst. D1 and Parkhurst were engaged in the systematic interception of correspondence presumably on behalf of the authorities who—then as now—were interested in discovering all they could of the traffic between

sources of potential disaffection. Wotton and Donne fit this description, the one an adherent of the volatile and dangerous Earl of Essex and the other a known Catholic sympathizer. Judging from what appears in the Burley MS, however, the conspirators seem to have gained little of use or interest from the operation. This was often the case: Pearsall Smith records that, a few years later, Wotton himself had a large number of agents in different European cities intercepting and copying letters of the Jesuits but that, among the large number of such letters archived in the Venetian papers of the Record Office, "it cannot be said that the information contained in them is of much importance; but there was always a chance that [Wotton] might come on the traces of some plot that was being hatched...."¹⁰ There was a risk, too, that the interceptors might misinterpret even innocent correspondence as treasonable. Donne himself was aware of this hazard, as he showed in the preface to *Pseudo-Martyr*:

So that I hope either mine Innocence, or their own fellowes guiltinesse, shall defend me, from the curious malice of those men, who in this sickly decay, and declining of their cause, can spy out falsifyings in every citation: as in a jealous, and obnoxious state, a Decipherer can pick out Plots, and Treason, in any familiar letter which is intercepted.¹¹

In this case, there are no clues to the identity of the man behind the surveillance, but obvious candidates are Lord Burghley, suspicious of Essex and Catholic plotters alike, or his son and successor in the office of Secretary of State, Robert Cecil.

Among the Burley letters is one from Donne to Wotton, datable to before 1601, beginning "Sir. Only in obedience....," enclosing a copy of his *Paradoxes* (Simpson, *Prose Works*, pp. 316-

¹⁰Pearsall Smith, 1.65.

¹¹*Pseudo-Martyr* (London, 1610), "An Advertisement to the Reader," sig. ¶2.

17). The copies, both of the letter and of the *Paradoxes*, are all in D1's hand. The letter asks Wotton for an assurance "on the religion of your friendship that no copy shall be taken"—and yet there is a copy in Burley. It has been assumed hitherto that Wotton was forsworn but, if the interception theory is correct, the copy was made without Wotton's knowledge or consent, something consorting better with the honesty that Donne so prized in a friend. How highly he valued this quality is declared expressively in his letter "In this sickly dotage of the world":

...methinks I have taken a ritch prize & made a rare discoverie when I have found an honest man: & therefore whatsoever you have more then honesty is the wast & unthriftynes of nature: I know it a fault to commend a thing so much out of fashion as honesty yet since I desire infinitely to contract a frendship with you (bycause I know how far you overstripp me in all other virtues) I stand most upon honesty with which I have had most aquayntance & society. I am best able to keepe wing with you in it though you sore high.

(Burley, f. 298)¹²

Despite Simpson's earlier conclusion that this letter is not addressed to Wotton, later researches demonstrate convincingly that it is.¹³

The strength of the theory that the Burley correspondence results from surreptitious interception is that it accounts for features in the collection that are otherwise puzzling. Its weakness, of course, is that we lack anything in the way of corroboration, for D1 is a wholly unknown quantity, and no certain facts implicate Parkhurst in any other undercover work. One or two wisps of mystery, however, attend Parkhurst (see Addendum) and encourage the speculation that covert activity was among his

¹²Simpson, p. 317.

¹³Summers and Pebworth, also Flynn, op. cit.

accomplishments. There the conjecture rests, for the moment. Research continues, and may imbue it with more substance. Even if no more facts emerge, I hope it may lead to insights not only into the Donne-Wotton correspondence, but also into the other letters, if their authors or addressees can be traced.

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Addendum

Of the early life of William Parkhurst, virtually nothing is known. He seems, like Wotton, to have been a man of Kent: "Mr. Parkhurst [is retired] into Kent," wrote John Chamberlain to Sir Dudley Carleton in 1611, when Wotton reduced his staff because he was without a present appointment.¹⁴ There was a Parkhurst family in Kent; indeed, a Robert Parkhurst is recorded as living in Wotton's home parish of Boughton Malherb,¹⁵ but I have found no trace of William. Although I have always supposed him to have been selected by Wotton, who liked to surround himself with men of Kent,¹⁶ for the Venice embassy, it now seems possible that he was planted by whoever organized the surveillance of the letters, perhaps Robert Cecil. Cecil, although he knew of it in advance, had no evident hand in the Venetian appointment, which seems to have been a gift from the king as a reward for Wotton's bringing him warning of an assassination plot in 1601,¹⁷ and it would have

¹⁴Letter of 13 November 1611; see Pearsall Smith, 1.118n.

¹⁵PRO C3/228/17.

¹⁶A "man of Kent" is one born east of the River Medway, one born west of it is a "Kentish man." Wotton was proud of being a man of Kent, and described himself on his official arms-plate as "*Anglo-Cantianus*" (Pearsall Smith, 1.193).

¹⁷Pearsall Smith, 1.45.

been characteristic of the Secretary of State to plant an adherent in the new Ambassador's entourage.

In 1601 appears one of the small mysteries to which I have alluded, on f.40 of the Burley Manuscript:

MDCI
Germani
Peregrinatores
Qui vostru~ proximus inviserit Westphalos
Dicat queso vinco meo superstiti fratri
Franciscu~ ABurg XXVI Jan Venetis extinctum
Postridie hic fuisse humo redditum
Verse sunt vices rerum
Ille me expectat in Patria, ego illum in Cælo.
Haec P. Magni Juicenis Memo
ram Guglielmus Parkhurstus Anglus
confluentibus e longinque la=
crimis ad decorandu~ eius funus.

[1601
Fellow
Travellers
You who visit the neighbourhood of Westphalia
It was said to me, his friend, by one of his surviving
brothers
that Francis ABurg died in Venice on the 26 Jan
and the next day was laid to rest
Thus do fortunes change
He looks for me at home while I look for him in
Heaven.
This to Publius Magnus Juicenus
I, William Parkhurst, Englishman, write
with flowing and lasting tears,
in honour of his death.]

This may be no more than an elegant epitaph, but something about the names makes one wonder: "Franciscu~ ABurg" is somewhat odd, although it may be a Latinization of some such name as "Francis Borough,"¹⁸ but I have so far identified no such person. "Publius Magnus Juicenus" looks even odder, and again I have no identification to offer. Perhaps both are pseudonyms, and perhaps therefore the whole message has some covert meaning.

Between his being sent on behalf of the Duke of Savoy to the States in 1615, and his appointment as Master of the Mint in 1628, Parkhurst's career is a blank, with one exception, which constitutes a further indication that he was engaged in something covert. Around 1616, his name appears at the head of a list connected with an official cipher, suggesting perhaps that he was its originator, since he is by no means the most important member. Others included Secretary of State Sir Ralph Winwood, the "Arche Bishop" (presumably George Abbot, Archbishop of Canterbury), and Dr. Donne.¹⁹

¹⁸The A is not itself unusual: Richard Eden, in the preface to his translation of *The Arte of Navigation*, refers to the explorer Stephen Borough as "Steven a Burrugh."

¹⁹The cipher appears in R. C. Bald, *John Donne: A Life* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), pp. 569-70.