

D17 Heere Robbin rousteth in his last neast

Notes. This libel puns on the common contemporary diminutive of Robert, “Robin”, turning the attack on Cecil into an allusive bird and beast fable. Thus the robin’s red breast becomes the “bloody breast” of the man held responsible for the death of the noble Essex; the robin’s mating habits become Cecil’s alleged sexual transgressions; and the robin’s diet becomes symbolic of Cecil’s exactions and oppressions. The same “robin” pun was later used to attack obliquely the royal favourite Robert Carr, Earl of Somerset (see headnote to “The Sommers sun is sett”).

Heere Robbin rousteth in his last neast,

The Robbin with the bloody breast.

Companion he would be to none,

His wont it was to sitt alone.

Still once a yeare he chang’d his henne,

And some accuse him with the Wrenne.¹

The man,² from whom alive he fledd,

With mosse he strove to cover dead.

When crouching he began to sing,

Wee knew the weather, he would bring.

The cunning Spinner haunted hee,

The warie ant, the working bee;

The harmelesse worme he made his meat,

And now the wormes this Robbin eat.

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Source. Bodleian MS Tanner 299, fol. 13r

D17

¹ *Wrenne*: the extension of the robin’s sexual tastes across the species line may allude to the allegation of Cecil’s sexual relationship with Catherine Howard, Countess of Suffolk. Although James I had tried to heal the rift by brokering marriage alliances, the Howards and the Cecils had been bitter factional

rivals at court.

² *The man*: possibly Robert Devereux, 2nd Earl of Essex.