

## H15 If ever woe possest a stubborn heart

*Notes.* This rare poem, written in the voice of the imprisoned Robert Carr, dwells on two widely discussed themes in contemporary discussion of Carr's spectacular fall from power: his betrayal of his friend, Overbury; and the dangerous consequences of his rapid elevation out of a naturally lowly social status. The collector's attribution of the verse to Carr himself is almost certainly mistaken. Carr would never have referred to his rank at birth as "meane"; and, unlike the repentant voice in this poem, he stuck fast to his claim of innocence in Overbury's murder.

"By Ld Carr: Earle of Somerset: his owne verses:"

If ever woe possest a stubborn heart  
If punishment bee dew to bad deserte  
If ever greife or sorrow man hath croste  
Lay all on mee, I have deserv'd the moste

Let all the world complain upon my name  
Let all the world reporte nought but my shame  
Let all the world beare these my words in mynde  
That to my friend<sup>1</sup> Like Judas proved unkinde

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I that on Earth had all I could desire  
I that like Phaieton<sup>2</sup> did above all aspire  
Have nothinge els to comfort my sad mones  
But thus to tell my greife to wrathlesse stones.<sup>3</sup>

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Lett all my friends beare theis my words in minde  
Bee not like mee to your best friend unkinde  
Beare this same proverbe allwayes in your view  
for to my greife I finde it to be trewe.

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Hee that begins to Clyme & climes but slowe  
Can catch small harme though hee fall nere so lowe  
But hee that when hee clymes a mayne<sup>4</sup>

Hee fales so lowe hee nere can rise againe 20

Thus I advertise all before I dye  
Hee must needs fall to lowe that clymes to hye.  
I that was rich in state though meane in birth  
Ame now the meanest creature one the earth.

The world condemns mee for my monstrous deed 25  
And that which makes my heart with sorrowe bleed  
Is this, that more besides poore wretched I  
for this offence in ths strong hold must lye.<sup>5</sup>

Oh had I lyven poorely as at first  
But twas for honour that my minde did thirst 30  
Honor I aym'd at and I hitt the white<sup>6</sup>  
first from a Page the Kinge made mee a knight

From thence I stept into a Vicounts place  
And beinge Earle I reaped this fowle disgrace<sup>7</sup>  
Then did I thinke my fate coulde never fall 35  
And like a gamster<sup>8</sup> then I threw at all

But then the Lord that doth disclose all crimes  
That ere hath bin committed in these tymes  
Hee did disclose this plott that Hell invented  
The which till now my heart hath nere relented 40

Mercy O Lord I crave for my fowle sinne  
A penitent soule I know much mercy wynnes  
Let not thy angry browe gainst mee be bent  
For with a fervent heart I do repent.

<sup>1</sup> *my friend*: Sir Thomas Overbury.

<sup>2</sup> *Phaieton*: Phaeton, son of the sun-god Phoebus, whose rash request to be allowed to drive the chariot of the sun for a day almost led to disaster. Contemporaries commonly compared James I's reckless young favourites to Phaeton.

<sup>3</sup> *stones*: i.e. the stones of Carr's cell in the Tower of London.

<sup>4</sup> *a mayne*: amain; at full speed, violently.

<sup>5</sup> *more besides...must lye*: presumably a reference to Carr's wife, Frances Howard, imprisoned with him in the Tower of London, but possibly also a reference to the other suspects—Sir Robert Cotton and Sir Thomas and Sir William Monson—still in custody during the spring and early summer of 1616.

<sup>6</sup> *the white*: an archery target.

<sup>7</sup> *first from a Page...disgrace*: these three lines rehearse Carr's *cursus honorum*, familiar from many other libels. He arrived at James I's Court in England as a page to George Home, Earl of Dunbar; was knighted by the king in 1607; made Viscount Rochester in 1611; and elevated as Earl of Somerset in November 1613.

<sup>8</sup> *gamster*: gamester; gambler.

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