

I24 I knew thee but by fame and thy brave deeds

Notes. The appearance of a comet—Halley’s comet, in fact—in English skies during November 1618 was widely interpreted by contemporaries as a providential sign forecasting the coming of war or the death of kings. So great and so politicized was the speculation, that James I composed a poem downplaying the comet’s significance (“You men of Britaine, wherefore gaze yee so”).

“On Sir Walter Raleigh who was beheaded a little before the appearance of the Commett”¹

I knew thee but by fame and thy brave deedes,

Those spoke thee loude; For wheare trew worth exceedes,

It can not sleepe in Lethe.² Who could but know

Thee for the Muses Freind, and Spaines Arch Foe?

Mee thinks the old Heroes weighed with thee,

Homer³ was out or they of meane degree;

Of witt and, Valour, Hee to patternes sett;

In thee both weare, and both more strongly mett:

Thou shamd’st his art, and spite of Rule or Fashion

Mad’st practise out goe speculation.

5

10

And yett thou hadst so much Mortalletye

To dy; though not with out a prodegy.⁴

For thou (our Sunn) being sett, and darke Night come

An upstart starr would needes supply thy roome,

And lende that light wee mist; yet ’twould not bee,

It shone bright, but not halfe so bright as thee:

It shone, but being outvied, itt streight was done,

As though a Meteor could out shine the Sunne.

Oh that I could tune out so full a straine,

As might become thy Ellegy. In vaine

15

20

I wishe itt. Englandes Muse Raleigh is deade

And blow spilt the balme of that rare heade.

Source. Folger MS V.a.103, fol. 6v

Other known sources. Raleigh, *Poems* 200; Nottingham MS Portland PW V 37, p. 14

I24

¹ *Commett*: Halley's comet was visible in English skies in November 1618, indeed not long after Raleigh's execution.

² *Lethe*: the river of hell whose waters induce forgetfulness.

³ *Homer*: the ancient Greek epic poet. The libel is comparing Raleigh favourably to the heroes depicted in Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.

⁴ *prodegy*: prodigy; i.e. the comet.
