

Oii11 The noblest brave profession

Notes. In the only known source, William Davenport's commonplace book, this poem lamenting the decay of English military virtue in the aftermath of the Ré disaster is attributed to "E.K.", the author of several other unique verses in the Davenport collection.

The noblest brave profession

that ether is or hath bene

was for to bee, A souldeir true

and their to live, and dye in,

when great Elyza¹ raigned

the glorie of all weomen

her souldyers Fame, rounge through the world

their deedes yet matched by noe man.

Ould Souldyers heades, were decked

with bayes² and not with willowes,³

their armes were then their cheefe delighte

their armores, were their pillowes.

5

10

Her Generalls noblye valient

performed the partes of Cæsar,⁴

her Captaynes Acts were lyke to Kinges,

comparde, to most off these are,

From all the partes of Belgyke

that states have in submission,

The Englishe beate the Spaniards away,⁵

to Fight the⁶ had Commission.

Ould Souldyers heades, were decked

with bayes and not with willowes,

their Armes, were then their cheiffe delight

their Armores, were their pillowes.

15

20

When Noblemen, were Leaders, 25
 New uppstartes,⁷ not Commaunders,
 Our English, bare the pryze from Cales,⁸
 and Newport⁹ too, in Flaunders,
 Through all the world then sounded,
 the glorie off this Nation 30
 Our Captaynis victors, came awaye
 they fought not by Commission.¹⁰
 Ould souldyers heades, were decked
 with bayes and not with willowes
 theire Armes, weare then theire cheiffe delighte 35
 theire Armors, weare theire pillowes.

Lett bragginge Frenchmen pratle
 off Rees, late treacherous glorie
 but see, iff Poytyers¹¹ can bee found,
 within theire ancyent storye 40
 Our redd Cross¹² that daye dasseled
 the eyes off theire St. Dennys¹³
 as Englandes henries,¹⁴ men did playe
 with Frenchmens heades at Tennyes
 Ould Souldyers heades were decked 45
 with bayes, and not with willowes,
 theire Armes were all theire cheeff delight
 theire Armors, were theire pillowes.

St. Gorge,¹⁵ had once the name
 to leade, our English collours, 50
 Duke Gorge, doth now usurpe the same
 which causeth all our dolors,
 come now his mynions¹⁶ brave
 that, this proffession enterde

Letts heare the acts, you have nobley donne 55
 with him since first you venterde
 decke not youre heades with bayes
 For feare off after willowes
 First bloude youre armes, trye iff youre heades
 can sleepe on Iron pillowes 60

You traveled once to Cades¹⁷
 some secrett plott to cover,
 More honor, had you gotte at home,
 Dunkerkes, to have kepte from Dover,¹⁸
 Ould honored Essex stepps, 65
 his noble sonne, was treadinge,
 Commission basely, cald him backe,
 and blamed, his Forward leadinge.¹⁹
 See that you decke youre heades
 noe more with bayes, but willowes, 70
 goe change youre Armes, For liverie cloakes²⁰
 and make youre plumes, youre pillowes.

Youre False pretence, For Rochell²¹
 made the Enymie, laughe and wonder,
 Youre Ordinance, would have made you awaye 75
 lyke lighteninge joynde with thunder,
 waste Feare benumbed youre senses,
 or that False Lordes²² Commission?
 whose projects shew he would christians drawe,
 to Anticristes profession²³ 80
 Youre heades in steadd off bayes,
 are deckt, with beades and crosses²⁴
 t'were better, you had noe heades att all,
 then bringe, these shames & losses

Youre Action late att Ree 85
 would it, might bee Forgotten,
 the Shame off it, will still remaine,
 when youre base bonnes, are rotten,
 the Loss off roall Ratsclyffe,²⁵
 whose bloode, lyke Abells, (cryinge, 90
 with Rich and Brett,²⁶ and brave men moe)
 on great Gorge, For revenginge.
 The Bayes, should decke youre heades,
 crowne those true honored graves,
 that, bravelye Fought, and noble dyed, 95
 when you runne, most lyke slaves.

It is not Crates off Feasants,
 off partridge, quailles, and Rayles,
 to batter downe St. Martin's Forte,²⁷
 nought, pastye crust avayles. 100
 was it Ignorance or Feare,
 his grace, that soe distracted,
 naye rather, it was some treacherous plott,
 in blood, that must be acted
 Keepe home, and plaunt younge willowes, 105
 send valyent men for trenches,²⁸
 youre armores, change for reevellinge sutes,
 and dance, amoung youre wenches.

Foole Lambe,²⁹ that lewde Impostar
 his Maister saffe to enable, 110
 sent a devill armed lyke his Lorde,
 that close sate, coyld in cable
 this Generalls, generous action,
 to his glorie be it spoaken,

Deserves, to have Sejanus ende³⁰

115

or in the Geamonies³¹ broaken

In stead off honoring Lawrell

If fortune, happ to Faltere

A hatchett³² I hope will crowne his head

or decke him with a halter³³

120

Source. CCRO MS CR 63/2/19, fols. 62v-63r

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¹ *Elyza*: Elizabeth I.

² *bayes*: the laurel wreath of victory.

³ *willowes*: a sign of mourning.

⁴ *Cæsar*: Julius Caesar, the great Roman general.

⁵ *From all the partes...Spaniards awaye*: allusion to English military assistance to the Netherlandish rebellion against the Spanish during Elizabeth's reign, which had resulted in the creation of the United Provinces (the "states") in the northern part of the Netherlands.

⁶ *the*: i.e. "they".

⁷ *New uppstartes*: socially obscure men promoted to office and position, with Buckingham being the intended contemporary example.

⁸ *Cales*: Cadiz. The allusion is to Robert Devereux, 2nd Earl of Essex's, capture of Cadiz in 1596.

⁹ *Newport*: Nieuwpoort, a town in Flanders. An English contingent fought in the (at best) pyrrhic Dutch victory at Nieuwpoort in 1600.

¹⁰ *they fought not by Commission*: the meaning of this phrase is a little opaque. It may refer here to the disputes in 1627 about who was—and who was not—the recipient of a military commission in Buckingham's expeditionary force.

¹¹ *Poytyers*: Poitiers. An English army under the command of Edward the Black Prince, son of Edward III, inflicted a major defeat on the French at the battle of Poitiers in 1356.

- ¹² *redd Cross*: the red cross of St. George; the English battle flag.
- ¹³ *St. Dennys*: St. Denis, patron saint of France. The French battle flag, the oriflamme, was the flag of St. Denis.
- ¹⁴ *Englandes henries*: the poet seems to have confused his English kings here; Edward, the Black Prince, not Henry V, was the victor at the battle of Poitiers.
- ¹⁵ *St. Gorge*: St. George, patron saint of England, whose flag was the battle standard of the English.
- ¹⁶ *mynions*: minions; favourites.
- ¹⁷ *Cades*: Cadiz. The English had tried but failed to attack Cadiz in a naval expedition in 1625.
- ¹⁸ *Dunkerkes...from Dover*: i.e. the fleet would have won more honour if it had focused on protecting English ports like Dover from the ravages of the Dunkirk pirates.
- ¹⁹ *Ould honored Essex...Forward leadinge*: Robert Devereux, 3rd Earl of Essex, and son of the great Elizabethan hero, was one of the commanders in the 1625 voyage to Cadiz. These lines appear to refer to an incident on the voyage in which Essex was forced to abandon an attempt to seize Spanish ships because of lack of support (*Lockyer 282*).
- ²⁰ *liverie cloakes*: cloaks bearing the badge of a person's lord.
- ²¹ *False pretence, For Rochell*: this may refer to the planned fleet to succour the Huguenots of La Rochelle early in 1626. The mission was aborted, thus perhaps prompting the allegation that the help promised the Huguenots had never been sincerely intended.
- ²² *False Lordes*: presumably a reference to Buckingham. The poem is still addressing the Duke's "minions".
- ²³ *Anticristes profession*: i.e. Catholicism. In transcribing the poem, William Davenport inserts in the margin, as though considering an alternate reading, the word "submission".
- ²⁴ *beades and crosses*: rosary beads and crosses, symbols of Catholicism.
- ²⁵ *Ratclyffe*: Colonel Sir John Radcliffe, killed in the retreat from Ré, 29 October 1627.
- ²⁶ *Rich and Brett*: Sir Charles Rich and Sir Alexander Brett, both killed in the retreat from Ré, 29 October 1627.
- ²⁷ *St. Martin's Forte*: the citadel of St. Martin on Ré. The English laid siege to St. Martin for several months before attempting an assault late in October 1627.

28 *trenches*: trenchers; plates and knives for feasting.

29 *Foole Lambe*: John Lambe, astrologer, magician and convicted witch and rapist, who was believed to be Buckingham's assistant.

30 *Sejanus ende*: Sejanus, the mighty favourite of the corrupt Roman Emperor Tiberius, was executed on the order of the Senate and his body dragged to the Tiber by the Roman mob.

31 *Geamonies*: the scala Gemoniae, "steps on the Aventine Hill [in Rome] leading to the Tiber, to which the bodies of executed criminals were dragged to be thrown into the river" (*OED*).

32 *A hatchett*: allusion to the executioner's axe.

33 *halter*: hangman's noose.
