

Pi22 Pale death, with Iron hand, hath struck a blowe

Notes. Densely crammed with biblical and classical allusions, this poem is particularly concerned with Buckingham's thoroughly corrupt exercise of political power and patronage.

"A Satyre on the D. of B."¹

Pale death, with Iron hand, hath struck a blowe,

And in Earths duskie Cabbin sunke belowe

A little world, that deem'd to sore more high

Then his horizon, or the fleeting skie.

His Courting Lady-hand,² with mickle³ ease

Disastrouslie could spann our Albion⁴ Seas:

Our brasen Wall⁵ daunc'd on the brinish Wave,

Thinking, through him, Europa to outbrave.

He usd the meanes: For with his darting Eyes

(More then the Basilisks⁶ or Babells Spies)⁷

Whatso'er intended, or wheresoever meant,

Chamelion like,⁸ hee slilie would prevent.

The Brittain Crownetts⁹ and the Clergies bookes

Were vaild¹⁰ or burnt at's Ganimedian¹¹ looks.

A Kingdomes Councell fix'd, entirely one,

Were with a smile impugn'd by him alone

Our bright sunne-sett, and orient morning sunne

This Syren¹² hath eclipsed and o're-runne:

Parents made childlesse, children lost their Syres,

Worthies their honour, just their good desires:

The poore were polled,¹³ the rich were neatly shav'd

The dastard¹⁴ mounted, and the stout¹⁵ outbrav'd;

Blockheads made Bishops, when the reverend Gowne

Like Homer waited for his smile or frowne,¹⁶

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Barons Bankrupts, and Shop-men Barons made, 25
 Knaves Knights, the course of auntient Knighthood stay'd.
 The yealding nature of a pious King,
 Whose worthie praises through the world doe ringe,
 This Mans excessive power too much abus'd,
 And by abortive means before not us'd, 30
 That hee might mount Favorites honey tasted,
 Whilst others vitall powers by poison wasted.¹⁷
 Oh heavens! What doe I? Alas, hee's dead,
 And's burd'nd soule untimely from him fledd.
 Burie his Faults. Ile say no more then: Why? 35
 Soe much in zeale to warne Posteritie
 That all Icarian flights are vaine,¹⁸
 And thunder-shaken from his waine
 Shall Phaeton slide,¹⁹ The hoast not rest
 Till Achan die,²⁰ and Gibbions beast 40
 Shall prove a Goad and thornie sting,
 And happilie repentance bring;²¹
 And know Promotion at his best
 Findes death in earnest, not in jest.

Source. BL MS Sloane 826, fols. 180r-181r

Other known sources. Bodleian MS Malone 23, p. 200

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¹ *D. of B.:* Duke of Buckingham.

² *Courting Lady-hand:* although a number of specific readings of this phrase are possible, the general intent is to effeminize Buckingham and thus implicitly to explain why his military adventures, alluded to in the following lines, were so disastrous.

³ *mickle:* great.

⁴ *Albion*: English.

⁵ *Our brasen Wall*: this phrase literally means “our brass (or strong) wall”, and refers to the English navy which Buckingham had commanded as Lord Admiral.

⁶ *Basilisks*: the eyes of the basilisk, a mythical serpent-like creature, killed all who looked into them.

⁷ *Babels Spies*: the story of the building of the tower of Babel is told in Genesis 11. In this context, Babel is probably a synonym for the Catholic threat, and thus Babel’s spies are Catholic spies.

⁸ *Chamelion like*: the ability to shift appearances like the chameleon lizard.

⁹ *The Brittain Crownets*: the coronets worn by the English and Scottish nobility, who had to submit to Buckingham’s power.

¹⁰ *vaild*: removed.

¹¹ *Ganimedian*: the adjective derives from the name of the mythical Trojan boy Ganymede, kidnapped by a besotted Zeus and taken to serve as his cupbearer on Olympus. Ganymede was commonly used as a term for a homosexual sodomite, and had been applied to Buckingham by libels attacking his relationship with King James I (see Section L).

¹² *Syren*: the sirens were sea nymphs whose songs could charm any who heard them.

¹³ *polled*: plundered.

¹⁴ *dastard*: base coward.

¹⁵ *stout*: brave, manly.

¹⁶ *Blockheads made Bishops...smile or frowne*: the political meaning of these two lines is clear enough; the poet is lamenting Buckingham’s corrupt control of patronage and promotion within the English Church. Incompetents were made bishops, and clerical hopes for promotion depended solely on Buckingham’s personal favour or disdain. The allusion to Homer is obscure, though it is probably drawn from the rich tradition of speculation about the epic poet’s life and times.

¹⁷ *And by abortive means...poison wasted*: allusion to the allegations that Buckingham had secured his position at court by poisoning several courtiers and King James I. The allegations were first made explicitly in George Eglisham’s 1626 pamphlet, *The Forerunner of Revenge*, but quickly became a routine part of libellous attacks on the favourite.

¹⁸ *all Icarian flights are vaine*: Buckingham’s phenomenal ascent is compared here to the classical story of the flight of Icarus, who flew too close to the sun with wings sealed with wax. Icarus’s fall,

when the sun melted the wax, is used here as a parable of the inevitable downfall of the aspiring court favourite who rose too high.

¹⁹ *And thunder-shaken...Shall Phaeton slide*: the myth of Phaeton, commonly used by contemporaries to describe the perils of surrendering royal authority to ill-qualified favourites, describes how Phaeton persuaded his father Phoebus, god of the sun, to allow him to drive the chariot (“waine”) of the sun for a day. Phaeton was unable to drive the sun safely and was struck dead by Jove’s thunderbolt to prevent the sun crashing into the earth.

²⁰ *The hoast not rest / Till Achan die*: the story of Achan is told in Joshua 7. After Joshua’s conquest of Jericho, his follower Achan stole an “accursed thing” from the ruined city. God punished Achan’s sin by allowing the armies of the City of Ai to defeat Joshua’s troops (“The hoast”). Only after Joshua discovered Achan’s offence and killed him was God’s wrath assuaged. The implication here is that only after Buckingham’s justly merited death would England—and English military might—flourish again.

²¹ *Gibbions beast...repentance bring*: the allusion, in this context, is a little obscure. It may refer to the biblical account of the punishment (hence the reference to the “Goad”—a whip or scourge—and “thornie sting”) given to the city of Gibeon. In Joshua 9, the Gibeonites trick Joshua into guaranteeing them protection from his campaign of military conquest. Joshua, obliged to spare their lives, opts in retribution to reduce the Gibeonites to the status of “hewers of wood and drawers of water”: “Now therefore ye are cursed, and there shall none of you be freed from being bondmen” (Joshua 9.23). Alternatively, it is possible that the phrase might refer to “Gideon’s best”, which could stand for the select force of 300 Israelite troops who, under the command of the Judge Gideon, defeated the overwhelming force of the Midianites (Judges 7-8).
