

SUMMARY: In this excerpt Francis Osborne, a distant relation of the Cecils, recounts an incident at a horse-race at Croydon in 1607 in which a Scot named Ramsay struck Philip Herbert, later Earl of Pembroke and Montgomery, in the face with a switch. Because of Herbert's failure to retaliate, Osborne says that Herbert had 'left nothing to testify his manhood but a beard and children by that daughter of the last great Earl of Oxford, whose lady was brought to bed under the notion of his mistress, and from such a virtuous deceit she is said to proceed'. Osborne thus alludes to a story which was likely put about after Oxford and Anne Cecil reconciled in December 1581 in order to erase any doubts about their daughter Elizabeth de Vere's legitimacy, which had been openly brought into question by Anne Cecil's reaction to her pregnancy (see BL Lansdowne 19/83, ff. 181-2) and by Oxford's refusal to cohabit with Anne on his return from his continental tour in April 1576.

The account is found in *Historical Memoires on the Reigns of Queen Elizabeth and King James*, published in 1658 and attributed to Francis Osborne. See:

<https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A53490.0001.001?view=toc>

The excerpt below is taken from Sir Walter Scott's reprint in *The Secret History of the Court of James the First*, 1811, Vol. I, pp. 504-9.

22. IN THE MEANTIME this nation was rooted up by those Caledonian boars, as these homely verses do attest, which were everywhere posted and do contain as many stories as lines, which I shall explain, though they may possibly fall out of order, it not suiting with the liberty of a spirit that walks rather for its own exercise than the instruction of an ignorant and ingrateful state to be punctual.

They beg our lands, our goods, our lives,  
They switch our nobles, and lie with their wives,  
They pinch our gentry and send for our benchers,  
They stab our sergeants, and pistol our fencers.

That they were gracious with the English ladies none can doubt that hath had but the opportunity to peep into a court, where the love of women is found a consequence of the favour of the prince.

23. Wherefore I shall take my first rise from him that was then Philip Herbert, since Earl of Montgomery, a man caressed by King James for his handsome face, which kept him not long company, leaving little behind it so acceptable as to render him fit society for anybody but himself and such books as posterity may find ordinarily dedicated to him, which might yet have prompted his understanding to a more candid proceeding than he used at Oxford, where he exercised greater passion against learning, that had by teaching books to speak English endeavored to make him wise, than he did towards Ramsey, who by switching him on the face at Croydon rendered him ridiculous. It was at a horse-race

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where many both Scotch and English met, the latter of which did upon this accident draw together with a resolution to make it a national quarrel, so far as Mr. John Pinchbeck, though a maimed man having but the perfect use of two fingers, rode about with his dagger in his hand, crying, Let us break our fast with them here, and dine with the rest at London. But Herbert not offering to strike again, there was nothing spilt but the reputation of a gentleman, in lieu of which, if I am not mistaken, the King made him a knight, a baron, a viscount, and an earl in one day, as he well deserved, having for his sake, or rather out of fear, transgressed against all the gradations of honour, for if he had not torn to rags that coat of arms so often in my hearing bragged of, and so stanch'd the blood then ready to be spilt, not only that day but all after must have proved fatal to the Scots so long as any had stayed in England, the royal family excepted, which in respect of his Majesty, or their own safety, they must have spared, or the kingdom been left to the misery of seeing so much blood laid out as the trial of so many crabbed titles would have required, there being then, according to report, no less than fourteen, of which Parsons the Jesuit, so impudent is this fraternity, makes the Infanta the first. But they could not be these considerations that restrained Herbert, who wanted leisure no less than capacity to use them, though laid in his way by others. And therefore if that effeminacy produced good to the nation (at that time doubted by many), the honour is only due to God, whose miraculous power was no less manifested (upon so high a provocation and great encouragement as the whole field afforded Philip) in raising so much phlegm in a man nobly born as might master so great a fury than when he discovered to Samson a cold fountain in the jaw-bone of an ass. And such of his friends as blame his youth for doing nothing take away all excuse could have been made for him had he done too much, since all commonly arrive at the years of valour before they can attain to those of discretion. This I can attest for the man, that he was intolerable choleric and offensive, and did not refrain, whilst he was Chamberlain, to break many wiser heads than his own, Mr. May that translated Lucan having felt the weight of his staff, which had not his office and the place, being a banqueting house, protected, I question whether he would ever have struck again, so disobliging were the most grateful pleasures of the court, whose masques and other spectacles, though they wholly intended them for show, and would not have been pleased without great store of company, he did not spare to affront such as came to see them, which accuseth the King no less of folly, as being at so vast an expense for that which signified nothing but in relation to pride and lust, than the spectators (I mean such as were not invited) of madness, who did not only give themselves the discomposure of body attending such irregular hours, but to others an opportunity to abuse them. Nor could I, that had none of their share who passed through the most incommodious access, count myself any greater gainer (who did ever find some time before the grand night to view the scene) after I had reckoned my attendance and sleep, there appearing little observable besides the company, and what imagination might conjecture from the placing of the ladies, and the immense charge and universal vanity in clothes, etc.

24. I have been told the mother of Herbert tore her hair at the report of her son's dishonour, who, I am confident, upon a like opportunity would have ransomed her own repute if she had not redeemed her country's. She was that sister to Sir Philip Sidney to whom he addressed his *Arcadia*, and of whom he had no other advantage than what he received from that benevolence of Fortune, in making him [ ] which yet she did in some

judgments, [ ] in beauty, her pen being nothing [ ] of his, as I am ready to attest, as far as [ ] a reason may be taken, having seen incomparable letters of hers. But lest I should seem to trespass upon truth, which few do [ ], as I protest I am, unless by her rhetoric I shall leave the world her epitaph, in [ ] the author doth manifest himself a poet [ ] things but untruth.

Underneath this sable hearse  
Lies the subject of all verse,  
Sidney's sister, Pembroke's mother;  
Death ere thou killest such another,  
Fair and good and learned as she,  
Time shall throw a dart at thee.  
Marble piles let no man raise  
To her name for after-days.  
Some kind woman, born as she,  
Reading this, like Niobe  
Shall turn statue, and become  
Both her mourner and her tomb.

25. In the meantime, the King was much troubled at this accident, not being able to ruminate upon the consequence it might have produced without trembling. Nor could he refrain from letting fall sharp expressions against the insolency of the Scots and folly of the English whose blood he pretended to indulge most [ ] within and without him. But this he [ ], carrying such an awful reverence to his own countrymen who had chastised him in his mother's belly as he durst not displease them out of fear to find himself deserted, it being past peradventure that he never looked upon the English as friends, the cause he rejoiced in nothing more than promoting excess, by which he hoped to ruin nobility and gentry. But however remote his affections were, he durst not banish Ramsey the court, a poor satisfaction for Herbert, that was left nothing to testify his manhood but a beard and children by that daughter of the last great Earl of Oxford, whose lady was brought to bed under the notion of his mistress, and from such a virtuous deceit she is said to proceed.

26. One thing was then remarkable at Croydon field, that none but Sir Edward Sackville of the English went on the Scots' side, and he out of love to the Lord Bruce, whom after he killed in a duel, which was so ill taken by his countrymen as divers protested that if the fray had succeeded, he was the first likely to have fallen.

27. The second matter of worth in the verses concerns Mr. Edward Hawley, an intimate acquaintance of mine, who coming to court on a grand day, Maxwell (more famous for this and wealth than civility or education, not being ever able to read or write), led him out of the room by a black string he wore in his ear, a fashion then much in use. But this had like to have cost warm blood, Hawley appearing of another temper than he at Croydon.