

EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



Thomas Nashe and William Cotton: Parallel Letters, Parallel Lives

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I. Nashe's letter

Thomas Nashe was known to his contemporaries as a prolific writer in manuscript as well as in print. As early as 1592 he claimed that 'I have written in all sorts of humours privately, I am persuaded, more than any young man of my age in England'.¹ Four years later, in *Have with you to Saffron-walden* (1596), a fictional critic alleges that Nashe 'hath sat hatching of nothing but toies for private Gentlemen.' According to these and other allusions, Nashe was a versatile composer of literary works submitted directly to patrons, rather than sold to print-publishers. Yet only two items in Nashe's own hand appear to survive: a very neatly written ten-line Latin poem on death (one of eleven) composed in 1585, while Nashe was an undergraduate at St John's, Cambridge; and a rapidly written longish letter addressed to a man called William Cotton.² This is undated, but its many topical allusions indicate that it was written in late August or early September 1596. It is somewhat worn and damaged, especially at the top and bottom of the leaf, and Nashe appears to have written right up to the edges of the paper. A text of the letter was first published by John Payne Collier in 1831, in an unreliable transcript.³ R.B. McKerrow included a greatly superior transcript as Appendix D in Volume V of his edition of the works of Nashe. He also included a fold-out facsimile as frontispiece to this final volume.

During the century and more that elapsed between Collier's transcript and that of McKerrow the letter appears to have undergone further damage. McKerrow had to rely

¹ Cf. R.B. McKerrow (ed.), *The Works of Thomas Nashe*, revised by F.P. Wilson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1958), 5 vols. I, p. 320.

² BL MS Cotton Julius C.III fol. 280. For both texts see *Nashe* ed. cit. III, pp. 298-9; V, pp. 192-6.

³ John Payne Collier, *The History of English Dramatic Poetry* (London, 1831), 3 vols. I pp. 303-6.

on Collier for some alleged details, including the rather crucial one of the top of a capital letter ‘N’, for ‘[N]ashe’, at the bottom of the page. Fortunately, whether or not the letter ‘N’ was fully visible to Collier, there is every reason to believe that Nashe was indeed the writer of the letter. As McKerrow remarks, ‘internal evidence shows without a doubt that the letter must be [by Nashe].’ But Collier’s characteristically high-handed practices – or else sheer carelessness – are reflected in his decision to ignore the letter’s still legible endorsement, also in Nashe’s hand:

To my worshipfull good friende *Master* William Cotton geve these

For this, Collier strangely substituted an endorsement taken from an adjacent letter in the same volume of Cotton manuscripts:

To the Right worshipfull my very loving cosin, *Master* Robert Cotton esquire, at Conington, these

Collier may have chosen this endorsement deliberately, with the intention of identifying Nashe’s correspondent as a very well-known individual – the great antiquary Robert Cotton (1571-1631) – rather than as some unknown ‘Cotton’ whom he couldn’t identify. It is true that the antiquary was known to Nashe, who was for a while given access to his library in Conington.

R.B. McKerrow correctly identified the addressee of Nashe’s letter as a man called ‘William’, not ‘Robert’, Cotton. But he confessed himself baffled as to the man’s identity:

I cannot discover who was this William Cotton to whom the letter is addressed. The fact that it is in the Cottonian collection suggests that he may have been some relation of Sir Robert, but I cannot learn of any member of this family at this date who was called William.⁴

McKerrow went on to mention

a well-known William Cotton... who in 1596 held the prebendal stall of Sneating in St Paul’s Cathedral

and remarked that the addressee ‘was evidently a man of means from whom Nashe looked for pecuniary help’. As will emerge, Nashe’s addressee did indeed have strong

⁴ McKerrow, *Nashe* V, p. 193.

ecclesiastical connexions, but not with the clergyman of that name proposed by McKerrow; and the addressee was not so much ‘a man of means’ as a trusted retainer of one such.

Some years ago, by chance, I encountered a remarkable autograph letter from a ‘William Cotton’ among the Berkeley Castle muniments. It is this man who is the addressee of Nashe’s letter. Like Nashe, this particular William Cotton seems to have left no substantial autograph writings that have survived apart from this single item. William Cotton’s letter, like Nashe’s, is undated – or rather, is dated, infuriatingly, by day and by month (15 May) – but not by year. Unlike Nashe’s letter, it cannot be dated at all precisely on internal evidence. Strikingly, however, it is generically the same *kind* of letter as Nashe’s to William Cotton: an appeal for substantial support composed and penned by a man lately left adrift as a result of the death of a major patron. Both letter-writers engage in extravagant rhetorical flourishes and plays of wit as part of their strategy for capturing the addressee’s favourable attention. The patrons in question also turn out to be closely connected with each other. Nashe penned his letter during the immediate aftermath of the death of Sir Henry Carey, first Baron Hunsdon (23rd July 1596), and addressed it to William Cotton, a trusted steward and retainer to his former patron’s son and heir, George Carey, second Lord Hunsdon. William Cotton, in turn, wrote *his* letter in the aftermath of the death of the second Lord Hunsdon (8th September 1603), addressing his appeal to the courtier’s sole surviving child, Lady Elizabeth Berkeley, nee Carey.⁵ As well as belonging to the same epistolary genre, therefore, these two letters turn out to be closely linked through patronage networks, Nashe’s former patron being the father of Cotton’s.

We should remember that the first and second Barons Hunsdon each in turn held the senior court post of Lord Chamberlain. Their terms of office were divided by the short and apparently unhappy period – the inside of a year – during which the elderly William Brooke, Lord Cobham, was the Queen’s Lord Chamberlain. It was Cobham who caused the change of name of Prince Hal’s witty and bibulous companion in *1* and *2 Henry IV* from ‘Oldcastle’ to ‘Falstaff’ – the historical Oldcastle being a celebrated ancestor of Cobham’s, and not notably bibulous. Rumour had it, rightly or wrongly, that Cobham’s ultimate ambition was to close down all the London playhouses. However, to the great relief of players and playgoers alike, death released Cobham from the Chamberlainship on 6th March 1597.

⁵ Because of her gender, she could not inherit the Barony of Hunsdon, which passed, instead, to her uncle John Carey.

Unlike Cobham, the Barons Hunsdon, father and son, were generous and reliable patrons of the Lord Chamberlain's Men. The Carey family as a whole – including both the first Lady Hunsdon, nee Spencer, and her daughter Lady Berkeley, a Carey of the next generation – were all keenly interested in contemporary literature, including plays and masques. This probably has a bearing on the extravagantly witty and 'literary' character of both of the letters under discussion.

By the time he wrote his letter to William Cotton, in the late summer of 1596, Nashe knew this individual fairly well. Cotton was to be described by John Smyth of Nybley as

...one William Cotton, a *gentleman* depending wholly on the said Lord Hunsdon.⁶

Thanks entirely to Sir George Carey's support, Cotton was a Member of Parliament for Newport, Isle of Wight, in 1593 and 1597, and for Yarmouth, Isle of Wight, in Elizabeth's last Parliament in the autumn of 1601. It could be argued that on at least one occasion, possibly more, the nobleman, with the assistance of his steward Cotton, had saved the witty writer's life. Another document among the Berkeley muniments directly links William Cotton to Nashe. This is a substantial and chatty autograph letter from Sir George Carey – soon to inherit the Barony of Hunsdon – written to his wife Elizabeth, nee Spencer, in November 1593. I included a facsimile and a transcript of this charming letter in an article published in *The Review of English Studies*, so I shall touch on it only briefly here.⁷

After touching on many other matters, including a frank account of a wearisome audience with his close cousin the Queen, Carey reports to his wife on Nashe's dedication to her of *Christs Teares over Jerusalem*. This book had got Nashe into serious trouble with the 'londoners' – that is, the Lord Mayor and Aldermen of London. They believed themselves to be grossly slandered in a passage on the '83 leafe' of *Christs Teares* in which the speaker inveighs against the corruption and cruelty of the City authorities:

London, thou art the seeded Garden of sinne, the Sea that sucks in all the scummy chanel of the Realme. The honestest in thee, (for the most,) are eyther Lawyers or Usurers. Deceite is that which advaunceth the greater sort of thy chiefest; Let

⁶ Sir John Maclean (ed.), *The Berkeley Manuscripts: The Lives of the Berkeleys* (Gloucester 1883), 3 vols. II, p. 317.

⁷ For a full text and discussion of Carey's letter see Katherine Duncan-Jones, 'Christs Teares, Nashe's "Forsaken Extremities"', *RES* N.S. 49 (1998) 166-180.

them looke that theyr ritches shall rust and canker, being wet & dewed with Orphans teares.

For his unsparing onslaught on corruption in high places, and a great deal more in the same vein, Nashe had been imprisoned in Newgate, where he was ‘presently in great missery’. Sir George told his wife that ‘he shall not finde my purse shutt to relieve him out of prison’, and assured her that he has already arranged for Nashe to receive the customary monetary reward due to a writer from a literary dedication: ‘will cotton will disburs *vli*⁸ or xx nobles in your rewarde to him.’ This indicates that William Cotton, as Carey’s chief personal steward, was entrusted with his master’s purse, and administered payments on behalf of his master, or in this case, his mistress. The nobleman’s largesse did not end there. Once the 17th November Accession Day junketings were over, Carey and his retinue travelled back to Carisbrooke Castle, on the Isle of Wight. Officially, he held the office of ‘Captain’ of the Island, but he preferred to style himself its ‘Governor’. On this occasion the brilliant though riskily outspoken Thomas Nashe was included among Carey’s retinue, released from ‘great missery’ in prison to share in the Governor’s splendid Christmas revelries. There he became acquainted both with the Governor’s wife, Elizabeth Carey, nee Spencer – of whom the poet Edmund Spenser appears to have been a distant kinsman – and with the Careys’ sole surviving child, another Elizabeth, a god-daughter of the Queen, born on 24th May 1576.

Nashe had already dedicated at least one other literary work, apparently in manuscript, to the younger lady, which sadly does not survive. This is indicated in the phrase ‘once more’ in the following passage:

give me leave (though contemptible & abject) once more to sacrifice my worthless wit to your glorie.⁹

He later revised *The Terrors of the Night*, a work of which he had drafted a version by the end of June 1593, when it was entered in the Stationers’ Register as ‘The Tyrroure of the night or a discourse of apparitions’. Late on in *Terrors* as printed in the autumn of 1594, in a passage evidently added to the earlier version, Nashe writes about the miseries of the unsuccessful quest for patronage, with which he contrasts the sumptuous benefits he has recently enjoyed as a guest of Elizabeth Carey’s father on the Isle of Wight:

⁸ I.e. £5.

⁹ Nashe ed. cit. I, p. 341.

The next plague... is long depending hope frivolously defeated, than which there is no greater miserie on earth; & so *per consequens* no men on earth more miserable than courtiers... It is like a pore hunger-starved wretch at sea, who still in expectation of a good voyage, endures more miseries than Job. He that writes this can tell, for he hath never had good voyage in his life but one, & that was to a fortunate blessed Iland, nere those pinnacle rocks, called the Needles. O, it is a purified Continent, & a fertile plot fit to seat another paradice, where, or in no place, the image of the ancient hospitalitie is to be found.¹⁰

Much as his friend Edmund Spenser had promised to give thanks for the patronage that he had received from Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester by composing *Stemmata Dudleiana*, a eulogy of his family, the grateful Nashe promised to compose a literary celebration of the Carey family – ‘*Stemmata Careiana*’. However, unless some previously unknown manuscript comes to light, it does not appear that Nashe ever completed this work.

Nashe’s solitary surviving letter, written, as McKerrow observes, *currente calamo*, is a tour de force of epistolary rhetorical invention. Its ultimate aim is clearly petitionary. Nashe has been left high and dry by the death of the old Lord Chamberlain, Henry Carey, Lord Hunsdon, followed by the swift dispersal of his playing company, the Lord Chamberlain’s Men, who

as if they had writt another Christs tears ar piteously persecuted by the Lord Maior & the aldermen...

During the summer of 1596 he had hoped ‘for an after harvest I expected by writing for the stage & for the presse.’ But writing new plays ‘for the stage’ is now ruled out, because the public theatres are closed and the Lord Chamberlain’s Men, the company with which he had been associated, are currently dispersed and patronless. Meanwhile, though the printer’s workshops are still busy, they seem to be catering only to the lowest of tastes: either supplying a demand for works of immediate topicality, concerning Essex’s ‘Cadiz’ raid of June 1596, or original writings that are second-rate, trivial or obscene. In order to remind his patron’s steward of how brilliantly he could write in any vein, with a particular gift for satirical parody, Nashe devotes most of the second half of his letter to a fanciful mock-critique of John Harington’s newly published *Metamorphosis of Ajax*. While pretending to be deeply shocked by its unseemly subject matter, Nashe shows that he,

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 374.

too, can engage in elaborate riffs of cloacal humour at least as witty and shocking as Harington's.

Sir George Carey wrote the letter in which he alludes to Nashe's *Christs Teares* on 17th November 1596, the Queen's Accession Day, a regular occasion for a tournament and other major revelries at court. Because of this year's major outbreak of plague in London the Queen and her court were resident at Windsor. Meanwhile, in the plague-ridden City, only three days after Carey's letter, on 20th November, a man called 'Nashe' was summoned to appear in

the oulde Bailey Readye to make answer to all such matters as shalbe objected against him on her Majesties behalf.

In the light of Sir George Carey's letter¹¹ it appears that it was Carey's steward 'will cotton' who, on behalf of his master, purchased Nashe's pardon and release from Newgate, according to the final sentence of Sir George Carey's letter:

nashe hath dedicated a booke unto yow with promis of a better , will cotton will disburs *vli* or xx nobles to him and he shall not finde my purs shutt to relieve him out of prison there presently in great missery malicied for writinge agaiynst the londoners in the 83 leafe.

Nashe held two trump cards: access to his generous master's well-filled 'purse', and, ultimately, the strong authority and favour of that master, much loved first cousin to the Queen herself.

II. Letter writer; recipient; bearer.

William Cotton, the writer of the letter reproduced here in an Appendix, has penned both the endorsement – 'To the right honourable and my most esteemed *Mistress* the Ladie Elizabeth Barckley at Calydon neere unto Coventrie geue these' – and the letter itself, in an italic hand, apparently in some haste. A second hand, that of its recipient, Elizabeth, Lady Berkeley, appears at the end. Hitherto, this man has been known to literary scholars – if at all – only as the addressee of the single surviving letter by Thomas Nashe, discussed above. Details in his letter enable us to distinguish this 'William Cotton' from several

¹¹ Reproduced both in facsimile and in transcript in the article by Katherine Duncan-Jones cited above in footnote 7.

other individuals of the same name. He was a younger brother of Henry Cotton (c.1545-1615), Bishop of Salisbury, who has a full entry in *ODNB*. As far as I can discover, these men were not closely related to the great antiquary Robert Cotton, if related at all.

P.W. Hasler's three-volume chronicle of *The House of Commons* during the reign of Elizabeth includes an informative entry on William Cotton, author of the letter under discussion.¹² He joined his elder brother Henry at Magdalen College, Oxford, in 1571. From 1573-9 he was a Fellow of Magdalen, though not an exemplary one. He accumulated heavy debts while in Oxford, and was often absent from the college, 'wandering by night in the town'. In 1578 he was granted 'six months leave of absence to travel overseas.' He sat as M.P. for Newport, Isle of Wight, in 1593 and 1597, and as M.P. for Yarmouth, Isle of Wight in 1601, Elizabeth's last Parliament, owing these elections solely to the beneficence of his master and patron George Carey, Second Lord Hunsdon. As Captain of the Isle of Wight Carey had these seats in his gift.

William Cotton's devotion to his patron apparently knew no bounds. In Hilary Term 1597 he was among those who attended a prolonged hearing in the Court of Wards concerning major property disputes between the widowed Countess of Warwick, Anne Dudley nee Russell, and Henry, 7th Baron Berkeley. Berkeley's son and heir Thomas was married to Elizabeth Carey, only surviving child of the second Lord Hunsdon, now Lord Chamberlain and latest patron of the Chamberlain's players. John Smyth of Nibley, who describes the legal hearing, alludes to 'one William Cotton, a *gentleman* depending wholly on the said lord Hunsdon'. So profound was Cotton's loyalty to his master, according to Smyth, that he was willing to perjure himself on his lordship's behalf by falsely affirming the impartiality of one of the jurors.¹³ The second Lord Hunsdon's unstinting support continued to keep William Cotton afloat. By 1602 Cotton had been made an Esquire of the Body. Lord Hunsdon died on 8th September 1604 after about a year of poor health. He left Cotton an annuity of £20. According to Hasler, William Cotton 'is last heard of – evidently in poor circumstances – in 1615, when his brother Henry made his will, leaving him £100, regretting that he could do no more for him'.¹⁴ Yet William was clearly in a position of considerable trust, for 'my brother William' was appointed as one of three overseers of Bishop Henry's will, each of whom was to receive

¹² There is also a short article on him by E.D. Mackerness, 'Thomas Nashe and William Cotton', *RES O.S.* xxv (1949) 342-6. He suggests, on the basis of the survival of Nashe's letter among the Cotton Manuscripts in the BL, that William Cotton may have been 'a "scion" of the Cotton family, admitted into the Carey entourage as a tutor or secretary'.

¹³ Sir John Maclean (ed.), *The Berkeley Manuscripts*, II, pp. 316-7.

¹⁴ P.W. Hasler (ed.), *The History of Parliament: The House of Commons 1558-1603*, 3 vols (London: HMSO, 1981).

either a piece of plate to the value of £5, ‘or else fyve poundes in money.’¹⁵ This suggests to me that his ‘circumstances’ may in truth have been fairly comfortable, and that the phrase quoted above simply reflects strong affection on the part of his elder brother. The full text of the relevant passage in Bishop Cotton’s Will suggests to me that the Bishop was extremely anxious to see his younger brother well supported for the remainder of his days, and that he has been a favoured member of the household:

Item to my brother William Cotton I giue one hundred Poundes being sorry that my ability is soe small that I cannot supplie to him that *which* my brotherly love desireth, but according to my slender porcion I haue not bin wanting to his necessities, as he knoweth, and I charge my Children as many as shalbe able to use him lovinglie and kindly and not to see him want.

It strikes me that William Cotton was not exactly ‘in poor circumstances’, as Hasler suggests, but was, rather, a valued family member who, as one-time steward to the Queen’s favourite Lord Chamberlain, was seen as a man of some status who ought to be supported in a gentlemanly style by the more prosperous members of the Bishop’s enormous family. He appears to have been unmarried.

I have already mentioned Elizabeth, nee Carey (1576-1635), the recipient of Cotton’s letter. She had married Sir Thomas Berkeley (1575-1611) on 19 February 1595/6 – an occasion which some scholars, including myself, have associated with *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*.¹⁶ The phrase in Cotton’s letter about Lady Berkeley’s ‘Losses and chaunges’ could allude either to her father’s recent death and/or to ongoing uncertainties about where the young couple and their children were to live, and possibly also to a recent miscarriage or failed pregnancy. I am inclined to date Cotton’s letter either to May 1605, when Lord Hunsdon had been dead for nine months, or to May 1606, when he had been dead for twenty-one months. However, it could have been written three or four years later. William Cotton’s elder brother the Bishop of Salisbury endured ill health for many years, but did not die until 29th March 1615.¹⁷ Cotton’s letter seems unlikely to post-date the rather sudden and premature death of Elizabeth Berkeley’s husband Thomas in 1611. This was surely far too grave a ‘loss’ to prompt such a playful (and egotistical) petition.

¹⁵ NA PROB/11/125/513 fol. 3.

¹⁶ Cf. K. Duncan-Jones, *Shakespeare: Upstart Crow to Sweet Swan* (London: Bloomsbury, The Arden Shakespeare Library, 2011), pp. 202-7.

¹⁷ Julian Lock, ‘Cotton, Henry (c.1545-1615), *bishop of Salisbury*’, *ODNB*.

In the letter quoted below Cotton reports that, to his keen regret, he has heard nothing from ‘my Lords friends and folowers’ – that is, the retinue of the late Lord Hunsdon – for ‘manie moneths’. If the letter were later than 1605 or 6, Cotton might have abandoned hope of hearing from such people – and might also have measured their silence in years rather than in ‘moneths’. Lady Berkeley was a notable patroness of men of wit and learning. In 1594, when she was only seventeen, Nashe dedicated *The Terrors of the Night* to her. Material surviving at Berkeley Castle and elsewhere shows her to be associated also with Richard Eedes, Ben Jonson, Humfrey King, Hugh Holland, William Camden and Philemon Holland, among others, taking a close interest in their writings. As the daughter and heir of Cotton’s former master, the Second Lord Hunsdon, she was an obvious patron to whom to appeal for help.

The most interesting component of Cotton’s florid letter is its postscript, which raises questions about the character and possible identity of the bearer. It seems to have been a convention for letter-writers in this period to raise light and amusing topics in postscripts, and to compose such playful afterthoughts in a deliberately informal, extempore style. Lord Hunsdon, Elizabeth Berkeley’s late father, certainly did so in his letters to his wife. Cotton may be deliberately mimicking his late master’s epistolary practices. In contrast to the ‘almost Tragicall’ letter proper, whose ‘passionate lynes’ are evidently intended to tug strongly at heart-strings and purse-strings alike, the postscript is written ‘according to my accustomed manner’. This implies that during those golden days when he was Lord Hunsdon’s favoured factotum William Cotton could be relied upon to be jocular and good company, whether in the flesh or as a letter-writer. His jocular affability may be a major reason why the sociable and pleasure-loving 2nd Lord Hunsdon both retained and valued him.

The letter’s bearer may have been a man already well known to Lady Berkeley. Apparently he is nothing much to look at in the ‘face’: ‘looke upon his face, itt promiseth no great matter’. However, says Cotton, he ‘hath been a great travayler in the world’. We should note Cotton’s use here of the phrase ‘the world’ – not ‘the land’. This elderly man, who has had so many masters, has apparently travelled very widely indeed, far beyond England, carrying his basket of clothes with him. In the dedicatory epistle to his *Nine Daies Wonder* (1600) the fool and dancer William Kemp alludes to his own ‘ill face’, as well as to his extensive travels – ‘I have without good help daunst my self out of the world’. What may have been the very last, and most extensive, of Kemp’s many adventurous journeys abroad was in 1601-2, when he travelled to Germany and Italy, getting as far South as Rome, but returned both exhausted and impoverished after a very difficult journey back across the Alps. Though most scholars, taking their lead from Edmond Malone, have claimed that Kemp was dead by 1602/3, I have suggested

elsewhere that there is no conclusive evidence for this, pointing out that none of half a dozen subsequent allusions refer to him as dead.¹⁸

Earlier in his career Kemp had frequently served as a letter-bearer both in what is known as ‘real life’ and on the stage. To cite just one example of each: in the winter of 1585/6, while in the retinue of Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, Kemp carried letters from Sir Philip Sidney, written in the Netherlands, and addressed to his father-in-law, Sir Francis Walsingham, and to his wife. About a decade later Kemp – alluded to as ‘Will’ in Q1, and as ‘Kempe’ in Q2 – performed the role of the sub-literate clown Peter in *Romeo and Juliet*, who is given the job of delivering a batch of letters of invitation to the Capulet ball. Much earlier in his career Kemp may also have performed the cameo role of the foolish ‘Clown’ in *Titus Andronicus*, whom Titus entrusts with a letter of complaint to the Emperor Saturninus (*Titus Andronicus* 4.3. 76-119).

Like William Cotton, Kemp had been a servant of the late Lord Hunsdon, as a member of the Lord Chamberlain’s Men. Before that, he had been a servant of his father, also as one of his retained players. It seems plausible therefore that the now freelance Kemp would seek to attach himself to a senior member of the second Lord Hunsdon’s former retinue. As a particularly celebrated and talented entertainer, he might, in truth, be a more desirable retainer in a noble household than his current master, William Cotton.

I am not sure how seriously we should take Cotton’s account of his great misery and need. He claims that he would be happy to take refuge in a ‘Sanctuarie, or Monasterie’, or even a ‘hospitall’, provided that this asylum was close to Lady Berkeley’s own abode. However, the Bishop’s Palace in Salisbury was, in truth, palatial, and William Cotton was a secure member of his elder brother’s household. Even if the Bishop did not maintain his younger brother in quite such a lavish style as that which he had enjoyed as steward to the second Lord Hunsdon, he was clearly not living as a pauper. Ostensibly, Cotton hoped to be taken into Lady Berkeley’s household, rather than simply given a handout. But I suspect that even this may be more a play of fancy than a serious petition.

Just below the letter’s endorsement Elizabeth Berkeley has written in her own hand: ‘geuen to him- 5li’ – but it is not clear whether this handsome reward was to be given to the letter’s writer, or to its bearer. Either way, it is clear that William Cotton continued to reside chiefly in the Salisbury household of his episcopal brother until the latter’s death in March 1615. The distinguished Bishop was kind to his sometimes feckless siblings,

¹⁸ See Katherine Duncan-Jones, ‘Did William Kemp live on as ‘Lady Hunsdon’s Man?’, *Times Literary Supplement*, August 2010, 13-15.

and as mentioned above, left perfectly adequate support to William in his Will. Meanwhile, the far more celebrated bearer of the letter may have spent the remainder of his life in the households of Elizabeth Berkeley and her mother, Elizabeth Carey, Lady Hunsdon. This scenario is supported by an allusion in the Berkeley Household Accounts to a payment of 4s 4d ‘to William Kempe my Lady Hunsdons man’ in November 1610.¹⁹ Perhaps the true purpose of William Cotton’s letter was to transfer its talented bearer back to the Carey/Berkeley family, his previous patrons, with his self-presentation as a man of great misery being little more than an attention-seeking rhetorical posture.

Appendix: William Cotton’s Letter²⁰

Endorsed:

To the right honourable and my most esteemed *Mistress* the Ladie Elizabeth Barckley att Calydon neere vnto Couentrie²¹

Most worthie *Mistress*

If euer disconsolate man had greater cause to repayre for comfort in some measure my disasters and extremities were to be endured: but I find them not to be paralld [*sic*]. Were either Sanctuarie, or Monasterie allowed I might resort unto, I then ~~knewe~~ I knewe an end of my unhapines: I am vnluckie *that* I am hetherunto vnfit for an hospital, but were itt neere vnto *yowr Ladiship* I wold willinglie deiect my self to *that* comtempt, *that* I might daylie here of *yowr Ladiship* and for some short tyme see enioye the sight of *yowr self* and happie issue.²² Vnto my auncient frends I am altogether a straunger: I lyue with the Bishop my brother: partelie by reason of his indisposition of bodie *which* is still declining and the small hope I haue in his lyfe to attayne to benefit, or after his death. I will not saie itt were able to perplexe, but absolutelie \to/ distemper a settled mynd: but as I neuer distrusted in gods prouidence, I doubt not but ~~still~~ by his grace to be assisted to continue my patience, although I still groane vnder heauier burdens then anie of my fashion²³

¹⁹ There are at least three further record of payments made to ‘Lady Hunsdons man’ which may relate to the same individual. The sums are in line with rewards given to itinerant Fools.

²⁰ Reproduced with permission from Berkeley Castle Muniments: General Series Letters 5/99

²¹ Callowdon Castle, a couple of miles South East of Coventry; this was the chief residence of Elizabeth Berkeley’s father-in-law, Henry, 7th Lord Berkeley.

²² Elizabeth and Thomas Berkeley had two children who survived to adulthood: Theophila, born 1596; and George, born in November 1601, who succeeded to the Barony of Berkeley in November 1613 on the death of his grandfather Lord Henry.

²³ Cf. *OED* ‘fashion’, sense 12 (now obsolete): Of high quality or breeding; of eminent social standing or repute; from 1490.

endured: but I feare the next will be extreme miserie: and therefore itt resteth in *yowr Ladyship* either by *yowr* comfortable answeare for some tyme to continue my lyfe *which* by the course of nature cannot be Long, or hasten my end, *which* I shuld accompt happiness itt self. I latelie vnderstode of *yowr Ladyships* losses and changes, but I doubt not, but being so Long accompanied by the lyke, out of *yowr* iudgment *you* will esteem of them as tryalls to direct *you* to the consideration of a more happie \estate/, knowing from whence all all [*sic*]- goodness is to be expected.

I kiss *yowr* hands in all humbleness: I haue lyued manie monethes, since I haue receyued from my noble Lordes frends and followers either *letters* or commendacions: yeat haue solicited them thereunto by often writing, and such and in *yowr Ladyships* knowledge haue \been/ much beholding vnto me. I haue ouer lyued all my frends, and I feare my shame will ouer lyue me. Thus haue I troubled *yowr Ladyship* with a tedious and almost tragicall discourse, whose happiness I will still praie for: and will neuer be defectiue in anie service *yowr Ladyship* shall commaund me: and so commit *you* and *yowr* noble issue to all \good/ fortunes in this world, and *that* eternall happines whereof I of I [*sic*] hope to be a partaker with *you* all. Salisburie this 15th of Maie.

Yowr Ladyships euer most dutifull but poore seruaunt William
Cotton

Giue me leaue after these passionate lynes to add some thing according to my accustomed ~~lynes~~ manner, I haue made choyse of this poore felowe to see *yowr Ladyship* if *you* looke upon his face itt promiseth no great matter, but hath been a great travayler in the world: he hath already had 19 masters and is now my follower, he will venter his lyfe for me att 20 myles a daie but I feare he will go farther in one daie then he will returne in 3 he is yeoman of my wardrope, the chardg is not great for all is conteyned in one basquet: he swears he will kepe a horse for me when I haue him: he is superanuated from anie press and so I doubt not of his returne

Note after the endorsement, in Elizabeth Berkeley's hand:

geuen to him- 5li.