Classic Poetry Series

Chidiock Tichborne

- poems -

Publication Date:

2012

Publisher:

PoemHunter.Com - The World's Poetry Archive

Chidiock Tichborne (c. 24 August 1562 - 20 September 1586)

Chidiock (Charles) Tichborne is remembered as an English conspirator and poet.

<B>Biography</B>

He was born in Southampton sometime after 24 August 1562 to Roman Catholic parents, Peter Tichborne and his wife Elizabeth (née Middleton).His birth date has been given as circa 1558 in many sources, though unverified, and thus his age given as 28 at his execution. It is unlikely that he was born before his parents marriage so he could have been no more than 23 years old when he died.

Chidiock's father Peter appears to be the youngest son of Henry Tichborne (born circa 1474) and Anne Mervin (or Marvin) but the records are unclear. Peter was clerk of the Crowne at the trial of Sir Nicholas Throckmorton in 1554 and was an ardent catholic supporter. Being the youngest son of a youngest son he was of little means and required to make his own way. He secured an education and the patronage of Lord Chidiock Paulet. In later life he spent many years imprisoned unable to pay recusancy fines. Chideock's mother was Elizabeth Middleton, daughter of William Middleton (grandson of Sir Thomas Middleton of Belso, Kt.) and Elizabeth Potter (daughter of John Potter of Westram). William had been servant to John Islip, Abbot of Westminster, and a banner bearer at Islip's funeral 1532 , and later bought lands in Kent.

At least two of Chidiock's sisters are recorded by name: Dorothy, first wife of Thomas Muttelbury of Jurdens, Somerset ; and Mary, second wife of Sir William Kirkham of Blagdon, Paignton, Devon. At his execution Chidiock mentions his wife Agnes, one child, and his six sisters. In his letter to his wife, written the night before his execution he mentions his sisters - and also 'my little sister Babb'. Another sister is implied in a secret intelligence note to Francis Walsingham, dated Sept 18 1586, in which the writer has had conference with "Jennings of Portsmouth" who reports that Mr Bruyn of Dorset and Mr Kyrkham of Devon are persons to be suspect as they had married Tychbourn's sisters.

Given the recent succession of Elizabeth I to the throne after the death of Mary I, he was allowed to practice Catholicism for part of his early life. However in 1570 the Queen was excommunicated by the Pope for her own Protestantism and support of Protestant causes, most notably the Dutch Rebellion against Spain; in retaliation she ended her relative toleration of the Catholic Church. Catholicism was made illegal, and Roman Catholics were once more banned by law from practicing their religion and Roman Catholic

priests risked death for performing their functions.

Chidiock descended from Sir Roger de Tichborne who owned land at Tichborne, near Winchester, in the twelfth century. Chidiock's second cousin and contemporary was Sir Benjamin Tichborne who lived at Tichborne Park and was created a Baronet by King James I in 1621. The Tichborne family is ancient and believed to have held land at Tichborne from before the Norman Conquest. In Chidiock's reported oration from the scaffold before his execution he allegedly stated: "I am descended from a house, from two hundred years before the Conquest, never stained till this my misfortune.".

In 1583, Tichborne and his father, Peter, were arrested and questioned concerning the use of "popish relics", religious objects Tichborne had brought back from a visit he had made abroad without informing the authorities of an intention to travel. Though released without charge, records suggest that this was not the last time they were to be questioned by the authorities over their religion. In June 1586 accusations of "popish practices" were laid against his family.

Chidiock's father secured the patronage of his distant kinsman, Lord Chidiock Paulet (1521–1574, son of the 1st Marquess of Winchester), after whom he named his son. The name originates from a Paulet ancestor, Sir John Chideock, Kt., who owned land at Chideock, a village in Dorset. Chidiock Tichborne was never called Charles - this is an error that has grown from a misprint in the AQA GCSE English Literature syllabus which has included the Elegy in its early poetry section for several years. Unfortunately this error persists in much of the educational literature supporting the syllabus.

In June 1586, Tichborne agreed to take part in the Babington Plot to murder Queen Elizabeth and replace her with the Catholic Mary, Queen of Scots, who was next in line to the throne. The plot was foiled by Sir Francis Walsingham, Elizabeth's spymaster, using double agents, most notably Robert Poley who was later witness to the murder of Christopher Marlowe, and though most of the conspirators fled, Tichborne had an injured leg and was forced to remain in London. On 14 August he was arrested and he was later tried and sentenced to death in Westminster Hall.

While in custody in the Tower of London on 19 September (the eve of his execution), Tichborne wrote to his wife Agnes. The letter contained three stanzas of poetry that is his best known piece of work, Tichborne's Elegy, also known by its first line My Prime of Youth is but a Frost of Cares. The poem is a dark look at a life cut short and is a favorite of many scholars to this day. Two other poems are known by him, To His Friend and The Housedove.

On 20 September 1586, Tichborne was executed with Anthony Babington, John Ballard, and four other conspirators. They were eviscerated, hanged, drawn and quartered, the mandatory punishment for treason, in St Giles Field. However, when Elizabeth was informed that these gruesome executions were arousing sympathy for the condemned, she ordered that the remaining seven conspirators were to be hanged until 'quite dead' before being eviscerated.

Tichborne's Elegy

My prime of youth is but a frost of cares,

My feast of joy is but a dish of pain,

My crop of corn is but a field of tares,

And all my good is but vain hope of gain;

The day is past, and yet I saw no sun,

And now I live, and now my life is done.

My tale was heard and yet it was not told,

My fruit is fallen, and yet my leaves are green,

My youth is spent and yet I am not old,

I saw the world and yet I was not seen;

My thread is cut and yet it is not spun,

And now I live, and now my life is done.

I sought my death and found it in my womb,

I looked for life and saw it was a shade,

I trod the earth and knew it was my tomb,

And now I die, and now I was but made;

My glass is full, and now my glass is run,

And now I live, and now my life is done.

This is the first printed version from Verses of Prayse and Joye (1586). The original text differs slightly: along with other minor differences, the first line of the second verse reads "The spring is past, and yet it hath not sprung," and the third line reads "My youth is gone, and yet I am but young."

To His Friend (assumed to be Anthony Babington)

Good sorrow cease, false hope be gone, misfortune once farewell;

Come, solemn muse, the sad discourse of our adventures tell.

A friend I had whose special part made mine affection his;

We ruled tides and streams ourselves, no want was in our bliss.

Six years we sailed, sea-room enough, by many happy lands,

Till at the length, a stream us took and cast us on the sands.

There lodged we were in a gulf of woe, despairing what to do,

Till at the length, from shore unknown, a Pilot to us drew,

Whose help did sound our grounded ship from out Caribda's mouth,

But unadvised, on Scylla drives; the wind which from the South

Did blustering blow the fatal blast of our unhappy fall,

Where driving, leaves my friend and I to fortune ever thrall;

Where we be worse beset with sands and rocks on every side,

Where we be quite bereft of aid, of men, of winds, of tide.

Where vain it is to hail for help so far from any shore,

So far from Pilot's course; despair shall we, therefore?

No! God from out his heap of helps on us will some bestow,

And send such mighty surge of seas, or else such blasts to blow

As shall remove our grounded ship far from this dangerous place,

And we shall joy each others' chance through God's almighty grace,

And keep ourselves on land secure, our sail on safer seas.

Sweet friend, till then content thy self, and pray for our release.

The Housedove

A silly housedove happed to fall

amongst a flock of crows,

Which fed and filled her harmless craw

amongst her fatal foes.

The crafty fowler drew his net -

all his that he could catch -

The crows lament their hellish chance,

the dove repents her match.

But too, too late! it was her chance

the fowler did her spy,

And so did take her for a crow -

which thing caused her to die.

The only known manuscript versions of To His Friend and The Housedove are from Edinburgh Library MS Laing, II, 69/24

However twenty eight different manuscript versions of the Elegy (or Lament) are known and there are many variations of the text.

Tichborne's authorship of the Elegy has been disputed, with attributions to others including Sir Walter Raleigh. However it was printed soon after the Babington plot in a volume called Verses of Praise and Joy in 1586, published by John Wolfe of London to celebrate the Queen's survival and to attack the plotters. Another poem in the volume is titled: Hendecasyllabon T. K. in Cygneam Cantionem Chideochi Tychborne and is an answer to Chidiock verses, most likely by the poet and dramatist Thomas Kyd, author of The Spanish Tragedy.

Hendecasyllabon T. K. (Thomas Kyd 1558-1595) in Cygneam Cantionem Chideochi Tychborne

Thy prime of youth is frozen with thy faults,

Thy feast of joy is finisht with thy fall;

Thy crop of corn is tares availing naughts,

Thy good God knows thy hope, thy hap and all.

Short were thy days, and shadowed was thy sun,

T'obscure thy light unluckily begun.

Time trieth truth, and truth hath treason tripped;

Thy faith bare fruit as thou hadst faithless been:

Thy ill spent youth thine after years hath nipt;

And God that saw thee hath preserved our Queen.

Her thread still holds, thine perished though unspun,

And she shall live when traitors lives are done.

Thou soughtst thy death, and found it in desert,

Thou look'dst for life, yet lewdly forc'd it fade:

Thou trodst the earth, and now on earth thou art,

As men may wish thou never hadst been made.

Thy glory, and thy glass are timeless run;

And this, O Tychborne, hath thy treason done.

Critical Appreciation

Tichborne's Elegy uses two favorite Renaissance figures of speech - antithesis and paradox - to crystallize the tragedy of the poet's situation.

Antithesis means setting opposites against each other: prime of youth / frost of cares (from the first line). This is typical of Renaissance poetry, as for example in Wyatt's "I find no peace, and all my war is done", with the lover freezing/burning. We also see it in the poem by Elizabeth I, "I grieve and dare not show my discontent", e.g., "I am and not, I freeze and yet am burned."

A paradox is a statement which seems self-contradictory, yet is true, e.g., "My tale is heard, and yet it was not told", or "My glass is full, and now my glass is run."

Often a Renaissance poem will begin with antithesis to establish circumstances and reveal its themes through paradox.

The Elegy is remarkable for being written almost entirely in monosyllables with the possible exception of the word "fallen". However in early editions it was written as "fall'n" which is monosyllabic.

The Housedove exploits a popular image from the period: Tichborne sees himself as an innocent dove caught among his fellow conspirators, (see Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet 1.5.48). The 'crafty fowler' is probably Sir Francis Walsingham, the spymaster who manipulated the Babington plot.

Eserleri:

Elegy (1586)

Elegy

My prime of youth is but a frost of cares,
My feast of joy is but a dish of pain,
My crop of corn is but a field of tares,
And all my good is but vain hope of gain;
The day is past, and yet I saw no sun,
And now I live, and now my life is done.

My tale was heard and yet it was not told,
My fruit is fallen and yet my leaves are green,
My youth is spent and yet I am not old,
I saw the world and yet I was not seen;
My thread is cut and yet it is not spun,
And now I live, and now my life is done.

I sought my death and found it in my womb,
I looked for life and saw it was a shade,
I trod the earth and knew it was my tomb,
And now I die, and now I was but made:
My glass is full, and now my glass is run,
And now I live, and now my life is done.

Chidiock Tichborne

My Prime of Youth Is But a Frost of Cares

My prime of youth is but a frost of cares,
My feast of joy is but a dish of pain,
My crop of corn is but a field of tares,
And all my good is but vain hope of gain.
The day is gone and I yet I saw no sun,
And now I live, and now my life is done.

The spring is past, and yet it hath not sprung,
The fruit is dead, and yet the leaves are green,
My youth is gone, and yet I am but young,
I saw the world, and yet I was not seen,
My thread is cut, and yet it was not spun,
And now I live, and now my life is done.

I sought my death and found it in my womb,
I look't for life and saw it was a shade,
I trode the earth and knew it was my tomb,
And now I die, and now I am but made.
The glass is full, and now the glass is run,
And now I live, and now my life is done.

Chidiock Tichborne