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John Davies of Hereford, the King of Denmark & Shakespeare's

Meeting of Kings: Praise beyond Praise

On the evening of July 17, 1606, seven 'goodly tal shippes' bearing the Danish King sailed up the River Thames and cast anchor at Gravesend.¹ Here, a 'warlike' watch being set, the King slept on his ship and was met the next morning by King James and his court who sailed the four-mile distance from Greenwich on the royal barge accompanied by at least thirty-five more barges carrying noblemen and dignitaries. The event provided a rare double helping of the spectacle of kingship. The Danish ships themselves were marvellous in their craftsmanship. The King's ship was reckoned to be ten or twelve hundred tons and had three tiers of brass cannons great and small. Her upperworks were richly carved from the beakhead to the poop, much of it gilt with gold leaf. All along the upper decks stood a guard in blue doublets and breeches, white hats, and (it must be said, Malvolio-like) yellow garters. The two kings met and, after a suitable period of on-board entertainment, emerged, whereupon James presented his brother-in-law with a privy barge of his own 'made in the fashion of a Tower, or a little castle, all close with glass windows, and casements fair carved and guilt, and wrought with much art'.² The days that followed, according to reports, were filled with hunting and feasting. For the ordinary people in London at the time, the event provided a sumptuous public display of two kings being kings, in other words, a performance of kingship before each other and their respective courts that required the glory of kingship to be unrestrained by mundane encumbrances such as cost.

¹ The most descriptive account of the event comes from an anonymously written publication printed by Edward Allde: *The King of Denmarkes welcome: Containing his ariuall, abode, and entertainment, both in the Citie and other places* (1606), 2STC 5194, p. 3. See also H[enry] Roberts, *Englands farevvell to Christian the fourth* (1606), 2STC 21079.

² *Welcome*, p. 6.

This is an article about one ordinary man's response to such a spectacle of wealth and power; a response that shows a middle class man's desire to please, to catch the royal eye and thus hope to advance himself; a response that shows the hesitation of a man of limited means at the cost of such a lavish display; and a response that simply shows his awe at the spectacle before him. The response is that of John Davies of Hereford. He was a man of modest background who had distinguished himself well enough in his education to become a tutor at Oxford and a teacher to many of the great families. John Davies was a man from the Marches, those broad, fuzzy borders between England and Wales that, despite their distinctly indistinct qualities, have deep cultural resonance and meaning for those who live in and near them. Indeed, John Davies of Hereford is a man who illustrates many of the practical realities of such borders. Though not a very good poet, he nonetheless showed, in his life as much as in the poem that he wrote to celebrate such a grand state occasion, the realities of what it meant to be a man both on and from the borders. Like his place of origin, he was never quite at the centre, always somewhat on the margins. Hereford, his hometown, is even today a border town. Its Welsh name is *Henfford*. Historically, it was a prize for Welsh Kings and a safe garrison from which the English repelled them. Now, it is clearly on the English side, but the question of whether or not Hereford was in the Welsh Marches has itself frequently been unclear. Brian Vickers asserts that in Davies' day the city was in Wales, though all of the early seventeenth-century maps I could find are themselves unclear. This important cathedral city with an indistinct status was not simply Davies's hometown,³ it was his way of distinguishing

³ Alexander B. Grosart (ed.), 'Memorial Introduction', *The Works of John Davies*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh, 1878), I, ix-lxiii; Charles Driscoll Murphy, 'John Davies of Hereford', PhD thesis, Cornell University, 1940; Mark Eccles, 'Texts and Studies', *Brief Lives: Tudor and Stuart Authors*, special issue of *Studies in Philology*, 79 (1982), pp. 38-9; Brian Vickers, 'John Davies of Hereford: a life of writing', *Shakespeare, A Lover's Complaint, and John Davies of Hereford* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 15-46.

himself from his younger, more successful namesake, Sir John Davies, poet and Solicitor General for Ireland under James I. His concern was well placed. Even today, scholars of seventeenth-century poetry blur the two poets together. James Doleman unwittingly conflates the two poets in a discussion of the religious poetry commemorating the accession of King James, and Jonathan Goldberg somewhat amusingly uses the solipsism, ‘Sir John Davies of Hereford’.⁴

Davies of Hereford was thus a man who embodied and indeed blurred the margins. He was a man of the rising middle class, an ordinary man in that sense who wanted to better himself. He was a poet, though not one of any great distinction. But he lived near and undoubtedly knew many of the great poets of his day including Shakespeare, Donne, and Mary Herbert, the Countess of Pembroke. He taught members of many of the great families including the Percys, Thomas, Lord Ellesmere, and he almost certainly taught Prince Henry when he was at Oxford. Today, his poetry is largely lost due no doubt to its flat rhymes and his predilection for abstract, ponderous allusions. But, in his defence, his most valuable talent was one that in our world of word processors and email no longer has the same value that it once did: he had beautiful and versatile handwriting. His transcriptions were highly valued in the manuscript culture of the day, and for this talent he achieved no small fame and a tidy income. But it is clear that he sought to be known for his poetry. He published twelve books of poetry between 1602 and 1617. Vickers notes that this was more than either Jonson or Donne, thought this is a limited comparison when one accounts for what Ian Donaldson describes as Jonson’s ‘distaste for the new print medium and for the bookseller’s trade’—even more limited in relation to Donne, who kept most of his verse in manuscript and even sought to destroy much of that, once he perceived a conflict with his religious vocation.⁵ But, it

⁴ James Doleman, ‘The accession of King James I and English religious poetry’, *Studies in English Literature*, 34 (1994); or Jonathan Goldberg, *Writing Matter: From the Hands of the English Renaissance* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990), p. 155.

⁵ Vickers, pp. 23-4; Ian Donaldson, ‘Jonson’s poetry’, *The Cambridge Companion to Ben Jonson*, ed. by Richard Harp and Stanley Stuart (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 119-139.

would seem Davies's aspirations as a poet were sensible, if a touch transparent. Poetry in an age of patronage had the potential for profit.

Davies was in the habit of writing poems for the great and the good. He wrote a very long, didactic poem commemorating King James's coronation. *Microcosmos* stretched over 6000 lines touching on a range of topics—nature, the souls of plants and animals, digestion and so on. Regrettably for Davies, the impact of this poem was undoubtedly muted by the fact that James' grand entry into London was delayed by plague. It might also have had something to do with the fact that the tone of his poem could seem somewhat pedantic and its organisation tending to wander, clouding the sense of carefully planned design. Nearly three years on, however, the state visit of Christian IV offered another grand event for Davies's pen.

This meeting of two kings was recorded by a number of prose accounts, all of them fascinated with its sumptuous displays. The two kings' procession through London was especially notable. The Conduits before the Royal Exchange and lower end of Cheapside had been made to run with claret-wine. An artificial arbour had been constructed above the latter 'adorned with fruits of all sortes' including apples, peares, plums, and melons.⁶ Further up Cheapside, a large scaffold was constructed where the Recorder of the City and twenty-four Aldermen sat in greeting. Behind them two enormous arches were erected, framing a swath of blue meant to represent the sea and filled with large singing tritons and sea nymphs. Each arch was crowned by two pyramids. Above the left arch Neptune strode a seahorse; above the right, Mulciber, or Vulcan, the god of metals, strode a dragon. The whole scene was further framed by large artificial rocks rising some forty feet high on either side, supported by two Giants. Crowning the tableau were the coats of arms of 'great Bryttain' and Denmark joined together.

⁶ *Welcome*, p. 21.

Accounts of this pageant failed to clarify how these two coats of arms were joined, whether they were actually joined in a single insignia or merely placed side by side. Davies adopted a higher tone in his poem and made few specific references to the events themselves. There are, however, a few subtle hints that the iconography of the Cheapside pageant guided much of his poem. He referred somewhat obliquely to the arches and the Conduits filled with wine (ll. 65, 298). If that were true, one would be inclined to believe the coats of arms were actually joined up in some way, for Union and friendship were the themes of the day. ‘O Vnion!’, shouts Davies, ‘that enclaspest in thyne armes, / All that in Heau’n and Earth is great, or good’. Within Davies’s ejaculation is the hint of an outline of these joined national symbols. Those arms above the tableau at Cheapside, if the allusion stretches that far, ‘enclasped’ the things of heaven (like the gods Neptune and Vulcan) and of earth (like the seas). It’s difficult to tell from his rather opaque allusiveness, but his repeated use of ‘arms’ as metaphors for power and political influence as well as for the nations themselves suggest he was imaginatively elaborating on the pageant at Cheapside.

The prose accounts emphasized the displays of warm affection that were exchanged between the two kings and, of course, the Queen: their ‘louing and tender imbracements’, ‘the repetitions of naturall affections’ that passed between them.⁷ Davies’s highest praise was to merge the kings into one. *Bien Venu: Greate Britaines Welcome to Hir Greate Friends, and Deere Brethren The Danes* begins as a prayer. There is no indication that this is meant to be a real prayer, but Davies uses the register of a prayer to the angels to elevate his praise for the two kings to the highest possible level of abstract symbolism:

Ye Angels which (in Soule inchaunting Quires)
Do celebrate your Soueraignes holy praise
Who ever burne in loues refyning fires,
& concords Tones to highest Thrones do raise

⁷ Welcome, p. 7.

(ll. 1-4)

Abstraction in Davies's poem is, indeed, everywhere. He employs plural nouns for 'Angels', 'fires', 'Tones' and 'Thrones' so one never gets a sense of any specific agent or force. The effect of this rapturous generality is to blur the lines between different modes of distinction, merging the scene into one joyous scene of celebration. This is not just a stylistic quirk (though, to some extent, it is that). It is his poetic strategy for depicting the friendship of these kings, and indeed the kings themselves, in his most complimentary of terms. In many ways both Davies and the other writers recording and celebrating these events were using friendship in a widely accepted Ciceronian tradition popular at that time, a tradition that saw a good friend as a close mirror image of oneself. In *Di Amicitia*, Cicero asserts that 'he who looks upon a true friend, looks, as it were, upon a sort of image of himself'. 'Friendship', he adds, is 'an inclination of the soul joined with a feeling of love rather than from calculation of how much profit the friendship is likely to afford'.⁸ It is a pure bond, free of the corruption of competitive self interest. Francis Bacon would express something similar when he stated 'a friend is another himselfe: For that a Friend is farre more than Himselfe'.⁹ In his representation of these kings, Davies took these sentiments a step farther. More than a mirror, for him these 'two great Kings so agree[d]', it made one virtually indistinguishable from the other. The Danish King 'Is one with ours', he said, 'to make ours more compleat, / As ours with Him makes Him in better case' (ll.35-36). This state visit was no mere meeting of two sovereigns; it is the moment 'where one King lives in two' (l. 8); sovereignty was one rarefied singular power represented in two bodies. In fact, it was represented thrice over: God, the sovereign of angels, was

⁸ Cicero, *Laelius De Amicitia* (Loeb Classical Library, 1923), sections 7-8, http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Cicero/Laelius_de_Amicitia/text*.html#ref1 (accessed 28 October 2015).

⁹ Francis Bacon, *The essayes or counsels ciuill* (1639) 2STC 1151, pp. 162.

joyful at the union of these two kings, and this joy was the highest bliss experienced by all who witnessed the sight. Through this divine sovereignty Davies momentarily formed a kind of trinity between God, 'Loves great Lord' (l. 15), and the two kings. He seemed to recall the pageant at Cheapside when he directed his imagined readers to erect 'Arches tryumphall to the Heavens... Whereunder threefold-Majestie may pass'. 'Make a Ring', he commanded celestial soldiers, 'About the Kings, wherein your King [God] doth joy: / A twofold Guard make for this twofold King' (ll. 17-19). It was an event that demanded a single response, where the 'joy' of the divine sovereign merges into the 'highest blisse' of everyone (l. 15-16).

Davies was similar in his treatment of the two nations. Again he seemed to sketch the pageant at Cheapside when he ecstatically proclaimed 'Thine Armes those Seas embrace', the two nations' 'Armes, together joynd, can compasse all' (l. 39). But his enthusiasm for this unity was curious given the fact that the British and Danish have frequently through history found themselves in conflict. For this, however, he fondly imagined the period of Danish rule, rhetorically surrendering again 'in love':

Thou didst of yore (thou worst) command this Land:
That now againe is present, which is past:
In Loue, thou maist the Land (inlargd) comand:
For, it to thee is *So united fast*,
That one to other cannot choose but stand
(ll. 42-46)

Union, for Davies though, goes beyond a shared history and royal family. The Danes had a racial similarity too which he admired. 'Looke on the faces of these Danes, our kin', he exclaimed, 'How like they are to us'. They are

... as if we were
Borne of each other, as we erst have bin;
If likenesse then begets affection deere,
We may exceed in showing (without sinne)
Our Loves to them, as theirs to us appeare
(ll. 169-74)

Davies is clearly fascinated by the spectacle he saw, a display of opulent majesty that filled him with a sense both of awe and purposeful profligacy that attended such occasions, perhaps a bit like contemporary responses to the London, Beijing, and Sochi Olympics. ‘Where Kings as one appeare / Uniting so their Raies of Roialty’, ‘spare no Cost, sith Gold for glori’s made, / And glory now is got, which cannot fade’ (ll. 124-5, 127-8). His sentiments soon start to run away with him becoming fantastical: ‘Get Phænix-feathers’ for your crests, tip your launces with diamonds, use rubies for their rests. ‘Arme ye in gold’ he orders so that Great Britain can be transformed into Peru (ll. 145-52). Yet, here is where we might detect the middle class views of Davies, the ordinary man. Not satisfied with mere praise, Davies is prone to give careful, conservative, even homespun advice. As soon as he praises the glitter and gold of these royal festivities, he pulls back as prudence reigns in his praise. ‘Much hurt ensues the interview of Kings’ and ‘men in strife for Pompe, are divelish Things’ (ll. 186, 188). ‘Pompe may show her *All*, yet not too much’ (l. 120), he cautions. As soon as he exhorts that wine should flow so that ‘all may freely drinke’, he warns, ‘beware of Drunkards fowle designes’. Yet, as if smarting from his own niggardliness and prudishness, Davies spends a good deal of the rest of the poem justifying the expense he has just criticised: ‘Though Money be the sinewes of the warres, / It must be spent too, to prevent those Jarres’ (ll. 159-60). There is a somewhat touching sense of innocence in Davies’s writing. Like all the writers celebrating this event, there is little, if any, irony. His praise and opinions, if a bit too earnest, nonetheless reveal a sense of his own personal investment in this meeting of kings.

There is no doubt that for today’s reader, Davies’s poetry presents a challenge in its ponderous abstractions and complex syntax. Still, there is evidence that he was read in his own day and that the circle of his readership included the likes of Shakespeare. Brian Vickers has traced one or two probable transformations of Davies’s poetry by the bard, and, with that in mind, it is interesting to compare Davies’s *Bien Venu* with Shakespeare’s own treatment of a meeting of kings

written five or six years later. The opening of *Henry VIII* or *All is True* fashions a conversation between the Dukes of Norfolk and Buckingham. They are not ‘ordinary men’ certainly, but they are nonetheless onlookers to the kings’ meeting at the Field of Cloth of Gold. Norfolk’s account follows the same structure and strategy as Davies. The kings embrace, and their display of friendship brings a merging of the two men who ‘grew together’ into ‘a compounded one’ (1.1.10-12). Lord Buckingham confesses he has been indisposed, a prisoner of his chamber which gives Norfolk the cue to relate what he saw.

Till this time pomp was single, but now married
To one above itself. Each following day
Became the next day’s master, till the last
Made former wonders its. Today the French,
All clinquant, all in gold, like heathen gods,
Shone down the English; and, to-morrow, they
Made Britain India: every man that stood
Show’d like a mine. Their dwarfish pages were
As cherubins, all guilt...
(1.1.15-23)¹⁰

Shakespeare’s account, greatly condensed, uses much of the same imagery that Davies did in *Bien Venu*. Where Davies imagined Britain as a new Peru all covered in Gold, Shakespeare transfers a very similar image of otherness to the French who ‘clink’ in their gold ‘like heathen gods’. Even the cherubins correspond in some sense to the Angels of Davies’s opening verses. Shakespeare, of course, writes about events in a now distant past and can thus frame the conversation of his characters to imply a greater sense of reservation than Davies could afford. Where we might detect a suppressed flinch at extravagance and expense in Davies’s writing, Shakespeare can inject a more knowing, ironical interrogation through Norfolk’s account of two kings poised in a cycle of escalating and competitive glamour, each setting new standards for the other with each new day:

¹⁰ All quotations from Shakespeare are taken from *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt, et. al. (New York: WW Norton, 1997).

...now this masque
Was cried incomparable; and the ensuing night
Made it a fool and beggar. The two kings,
Equal in lustre, were now best, now worst,
As presence did present them
(1.1.26-30)

Both Shakespeare and Davies share a sense of the inflationary rhetoric that surrounds these events. Davies is self-conscious of his own poetry. He worries that if he has used too many 'Hyperboles', then 'Art should discharge... MUCH on loves effect' (ll. 376-7). Shakespeare, as dramatist, is able to stand askance, representing someone very like Davies who struggles to find words rich enough to perform one's appreciation of the royal scene. Shakespeare's Norfolk, like Davies, conflates the two kings:

...him in eye,
Still him in praise: and, being present both
'Twas said they saw but one
(1.1.30-32)

But Norfolk adds a revealing comment on his own observation:

...no discerner
Durst wag his tongue in censure. When these suns—
For so they phrase 'em—by their heralds challenged
The noble spirits to arms, they did perform
Beyond thought's compass
(1.1.33-36)

'Beyond thought's compass' is a phrase that gives away the strategy that we have been straining to follow. It gives a name to this royal hyperbole that points toward praise beyond our abilities to express in language. Indeed, it draws our attention to the requirement of one performing the inability to give adequate praise: praise beyond praise.

Of course, Christian IV's state visit was not the Field of Cloth of Gold with its hyper-competitive, latent aggression underlying every moment. But Shakespeare's parody of royal observers is so well keyed to the tone and strategies used by Davies that one is tempted to wonder if

Shakespeare had read his poem to the Danes and had it in mind. Whether or not this is so, the parody frames Davies's conventional sentiments and earnest expression and shows just how limited the language and ambitions of royal praise can be. Davies should have been pleased. Shakespeare goes on to parallel this boundless praise to the financial catastrophe that hit Henry's noblemen. Compelled to spend in support of their King's glorious spectacle, they 'so sickened their estates' that they were never the same again (1.1.81-84). Davies only had his verse in this game, and the end of *Bien Venu* seems to acknowledge the limited options he has in his praise of these kings. The closing thought of this ordinary man's response to such an extraordinary encounter is the modest hope 'That saddest Kings shall reade it with delight' (481).