

A NOTE ON BACKSWORDS IN THOMAS MIDDLETON

THE *Oxford English Dictionary* lists the use and definition of *backsword* as follows: '1. A sword with only one cutting edge.'¹ The first use of this word, according to the *OED*, is from 1611 in the dictionary by R. Cotgrave, *A Dictionary French & English Tongues*, 'Badelaire, a short and broad back sword.'² The word *backsword* in fact occurs several years earlier, in Thomas Middleton's play *The Phoenix*.³ The first performance of *The Phoenix* is dated 1603–04,⁴ and the first printed edition of *The Phoenix* is from 1607.⁵

The scene from *The Phoenix* is set in a tavern and features justice of the peace, Falso, and the older litigator Tangle. The lines read:

'Tangle: A Writ of Delay, Long-Sword. |
Scandala magnatum, Backesword. |
Falso: Scandals are back-swords, indeede.'
(F2v,⁶ scene 9, lines 170–171).⁸

Clearly, this is an earlier appearance of the same type of sword as in Cotgrave.

Middleton's familiarity with sword terminology can also be seen in his line on the use of smaller and lighter continental weaponry: 'our lawyers are good rapier and dagger men; / they'll quickly despatch your—money' (II.iii.188). The references to

both medieval and contemporary weaponry in this scene could be related to the socio-political situation in England and the ongoing dispute between England and Spain wherein the rapier came to symbolize continental tastes as opposed to the sturdier English swords. Middleton might have come across the writings of George Silver, an English fencing master, who wrote the manual *Paradoxes of Defence* in 1599. Here, Silver condemns the modern, continental rapier as un-English, because, 'to seeke for a true defence in an vntrue weapon, is to angle on the earth for fish, and to hunt in the sea for Hares'.⁹ The complete scene in *The Phoenix*, then, implies familiarity with the technical side of fencing and appropriation of legal and socio-political metaphors.

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⁹ G. Silver, *Paradoxes of Defence*, EEBO, British Library copy, (By Richard Field for Edvard Blount, London, 1599), A4r.

THE MELANCHOLY EARL: SIR WILLIAM HERBERT IN THE MEDICAL CASE NOTES OF DR BARKER OF SHREWSBURY

During his lifetime, William Herbert, third earl of Pembroke (1580–1630), was a noted figure in the courts of Elizabeth and James. He was the head of the second richest landowning family in England, and his political and financial influence was widespread. Of all his many accomplishments, however, he is best remembered today as the greatest arts patron of his generation, with Ben Jonson, George Chapman, George Herbert, Inigo Jones, Nicholas Hilliard, John Dowland, and possibly also William Shakespeare numbering among his beneficiaries. Outside of the royal family, no one in the period attracted as many literary dedications as Herbert: the first, Thomas Moffet's *Nobilis* (1593), came when the future earl was just twelve years old, while the most

¹ *Oxford English Dictionary*, 'Back-Sword, N.'

² R. Cotgrave, *A Dictionarie of the French and English Tongues*, compiled by Randle Cotgrave, Hollyband, EEBO, Folger Shakespeare Library copy, (Printed by Adam Islip, London, 1611).

³ T. Middleton, *Thomas Middleton: The Collected Works*, ed. G. Taylor, J. Lavagnino, and M. P. Jackson, (Oxford, 2007).

⁴ L. Danson and I. Kamps note that the play was entered in the Stationers' Register on 9 May 1607, but they argue that it was written probably between the spring of 1603 and early 1604. See Taylor, Lavagnino, and Jackson, *Thomas Middleton and Early Modern Textual Culture: A Companion to the Collected Works* (Oxford, 2007). Chambers quotes from a letter by Philip Gawdy which states that 'Ther hath bene ij (two) playes this shroftyde before the King and ther shall be an other to morrow' (Gawdy, 141, in Chambers, 1923, IV, 118n4) further reference in (Taylor, 2007, 346) and E. K. Chambers, *The Elizabethan Stage* (Oxford, 1923), IV, 169.

⁵ T. Middleton, *The Phoenix*, EEBO, Henry E. Huntington Library and Art Gallery copy, by E[dward] A[l]lde for A[rthur], I[ohnson], (London, 1607).

⁶ From the EEBO edition.

⁷ From Middleton, *Collected Works*.

⁸ No comment is made about this occurrence in Middleton, *Collected Works*.