The contention betwyxte Churchyeard and Camell, vpon David Dycers dreame sette oute in suche order that it is bothe wyttye and profitable for all degryes (London: Owen Rogers for Mychell Loblee, 1560; STC 5225)

The contention betwyxte Chuchyeard and Camell brings together a series of broadsides and pamphlets first printed several years earlier. It preserves a controversy between Thomas Churchyard, soldier and poet (1523?—1604), and the otherwise unknown Thomas Camell. The Contention’s subject is, at least nominally, the correct interpretation of Churchyard’s Davy Dicars Dreame, a satirical dream vision in the Piers Plowman tradition which may attack the Protector and the Privy Council alongside its more conventional assaults on social and economic morality. As the satire progresses, however, it becomes increasingly self-referential and draws in a number of other writers, both real and imaginary: William Elderton, Thomas Hedley, and Richard Beard; but also ‘William Waterman’, ‘Geoffrey Chappell’, ‘Steven Steple’, and ‘Harry Whobals mon’. Untangling the real and assumed identities of the participants is difficult, but it seems likely that at least some of these (probably ‘Geoffrey’ and ‘Steven’, for obvious reasons, and possibly also ‘William’) were noms de plume of Churchyard himself, and it was almost certainly under his auspices that this ‘collected edition’ was ushered into print. Discussion of the Dreame, both within The Contention itself and by later scholars, has differed over how seriously to take the social criticism of Davy. What has never been disputed, however, is the sheer linguistic exuberance and metatextual playfulness of the texts captured in The Contention, which take the tropes of ‘ploughman writing’ as a starting point and spin them off into a riot of voices, registers, and imagery. Towards the end of his life Churchyard remembered the Dreame as one of his earliest works, perhaps his first. In the preliminary matter of Churchyards Challenge (London: John Wolfe, 1593; STC 5220), he lists ‘The bookees that I can call to memorie alreadie Printed’: ‘First in King Edwards daies, a book named Davie Dicars dreame, which one Camell wrote against, whom I openly confuted’ (sig. *v*). The Dreame, and the resulting controversy whose fires were assiduously stoked by Churchyard, announces his entry onto the public stage as a poet. It was the first step in what was to be a long career of relentless self-promotion.

Print History

The Contention consists of a prologue followed by thirteen poems and two prose narratives, as follows:

1. **Dawy Dycars Dreame** (siggs A1v-A1r); first published London: Richard Lant, [1552]; STC 5225.5
2. **To David Dicars when** (siggs A1v-A2r); first published London: Harry Sutton, [1552]; STC 4527.6
3. **A Replication vnto Camels Obiection** (siggs A2v-A4v); first published London: Richard Lant, [1552]; STC 5252
4. **Camels Reioindre, to Churchyarde** (siggs A4v-B2v); first published London: Harry Sutton, [1552], STC 4527.4

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2. At the time of publication (May 2011), EEBO lacks the Document Image showing sigs H1v-H2v.
4. For instance, by the STC; Livingston, British Broadside Ballads, p. 829.
5. See e.g. Henry W. Adnitt’ account in ‘Thomas Churchyard’, Transactions of the Shropshire Archaeological and Natural History Society 3 (1880), 1-68.
9. Matthew Woodcock’s forthcoming biography of Churchyard, I am very grateful to Dr Woodcock for this information.
(5) The Surreiointre vnto Camels reioindre (sig. B2 -C1); first published London: Richard Lant, [1552], STC 5258

(6) A Decree betwene Churchyarde and Camell (sig. C1f -C3r); first published London: William Powell, [1552], STC 7555.5

(7) Westernne Wyll, Vpon the debate betwyxte Churchyarde and Camell (sig. C3f -D4r); first published London: Richard Harvy, [1552], STC 25668.5

8) Of such as on fantasie decree and discus: on other mens werkes, lo Ouides tale thus (sig. D4f -E1r); first published London: Harry Sutton, [1552], STC 18969.5

(9) A Supplicacion vnto mast Camell (sig. E1f -E1r); first published London: Richard Lant, [1552], STC 4999.5

(10) To goodman Chappels supplication (sig. E1v -E2r); first published London: Harry Sutton, [1552], STC 4527.8

(11) Steuen Steple to mast Camell (sig. E2f -E2r); first published London: Richard Lant, [1552], STC 23251.5

(12) Camelles Conclusion (sig. E2v -F2r); first published London: Harry Sutton, [1552], STC 4527.2

(13) Westernne will to Camell and for hym selfe alone (sig. F2v -G1r)

(14) A plain and fynall confutation: of camelles corlyke oblatracion (sig. G1f -H1v); first published London: William Griffith, [1552], STC 5246


The sequence as originally printed contained at least one more piece not collected here: M. Harry Whobals mon to M. Camel ([London: Richard Lant, 1552]; STC 1656). This mentions Steuen Steple (no. 11 above) and so must have followed it, but cannot be placed more precisely. The Contention also includes one item which has not survived separately, Westernne will to Camell and for hym selfe alone (no. 13). Apart from these alterations, however, there are no significant textual differences between the individual pieces as originally printed and their subsequent republication as a collection.

The works gathered in The Contention have conventionally been dated to 1552, although this is itself contentious. Since the original broadsides and pamphlets are undated, the matter rests on internal evidence from the poems themselves and from Churchyard’s statements elsewhere about his own work. It is usually agreed that they were written sometime during 1547-1553, because when the Dreame was reprinted in A plesaunte laborinthe called Churchyards chance (London: John Kingston, 1580; STC 5250), it is described as ’Written in the beginnyng of Kyng Edwards raigne’ (sig. K4f), and because of the claim in Churchyards Challenge (1593) that he wrote it ’First in King Edwards daies’. There are two further main pieces of evidence.


8.2 To put this into context, sixteenth-century broadsides have an average survival rate of less than 10 per cent, so to find more than one copy of a single text is unusual. See Tessa Watt, Cheap Print and Popular Piety, 1550-1640 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 42.


8.5 For a selection of contemporary broadside examples of this kind of complaint, see The Welspoken Nobody (London: S. Mierdman, [dated c. 1550 by the STC but probably earlier]; STC 18599), based on a German original by Jorg Schan; Little John Nobody, a Catholic response, of which an MS copy made for Samuel Pepys is available at the English Broadside Ballad Archive: Luke Shepherd’s Antipus [London: John Day, 1547?], STC 693; and Other thou it is, or thus it should bee [London: Alexander Lacy, [1570?]], STC 7550.

8.6 Livingston identifies Pan with Churchyard and Apollo with Camell (British Broadside Ballads, no. 37, p.144); Boswell the reverse (’Answer Poem’, p. 138).


8.10 Boswell, ’Answer Poem’, p. 133.

8.11 Scase, ’Daivy Dicars Dreame’, p. 177.


8.14 See Andrew Hadfield, ’Foresters, Ploughmen, and Shepherds: Some Versions of Tudor Pastoral’, in The Oxford Handbook of Tudor Literature, 1485-1603, ed. Mike Pincombe and Cathy Shrank (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), for the attractive theory that Churchyard may have been responsible for the exchange in its entirety (p. 545).

8.15 In A Playn and fynall confucion Churchyard raises the tantalising possibility, not pursued, that ’Camell’ may be the chosen pseudonym of a group of writers: ’I can prowe (O beaw Camew) that you are moe then onel’ (sig. G2f).

8.16 Given the milieu of the bookstall and the narrator’s decision to ’prynte it’ in his mind, we might
First, Camelles states in Camelles Conclusion that 'I trowe I have a byll for cattall that I solde: / That saies howe Rex hath raigned vi. yeare almost I dare be bolde' (sig. F1v). Second, in Churchyard's dedication of The fortunate farewel to the most forward and noble Earl of Essex (London: Edm[und] Bollifant for William Wood, 1599; STC 5234) to 'Harry Seame' (i.e., Henry Seymour), he writes: 'In all my duty good Lord I am bold, because your most honourable father the Duke of Somerset (unlee to the renowned impe of grace noble King Edward the Sixt) favoured me when I was troubled before the Lords of the Counsell, for writing some of my first verses' (sig. A1v). This has historically been assumed to be a reference to Dauie Dicars Dreame, since the other 'first verses' of that period Churchyard mentions in the Challenge — Shores Wife and The Mirror for Man — seem much less likely to have attracted censorious attention. As Churchyard's biographers have shown, he was fighting in Scotland until March 1550 and then left for Ireland some time after September 1550 where he served under Sir Anthony St Leger. Some time after this he went to France and served on the Habsburg side in the wars there. Somerset was imprisoned between October 1549 and February 1550, and sent to the Tower again in October 1551 where he remained until his death in January 1552. The only time, therefore, when he could have 'favoured' Churchyard was either before autumn 1549 or at some point between the spring of 1550 and the autumn of 1551. These details have sometimes been found incompatible with Camell's statement in the Conclusion that the king had reigned 'vi. yeare almost', and it has been argued that Seymour's intervention must have been triggered by some other verses. More recently, however, critics have returned to the idea that Churchyard was indeed 'troubled' on account of the Dreame and have dated it either to c. 1547 or to the more conventional 1551-2. On balance, it seems likely that the traditional dating that places it towards the end of Edward's reign is likely to be accurate.

The date of the first publication of The Contention is more certain, appearing in 1560 under the imprint of 'Mychell Loblee'. It may also have been reprinted in 1565, although no such copy now survives. A couple of items from The Contention were also reprinted individually. As noted above, Churchyard included Dauie Dicars Dreame in Churchyardes chance in 1580. Robert Hackforth's licensing of 'the mesyraile state of kyng Medas' in 1569-70 may also indicate the reappearance of Of such as on fantasies ye decre and discus, a translation of the singing contest between Pan and Apollo from Ovid's Metamorphoses. The length of the original controversy and the number of contributors suggests it was a popular success, as does Churchyard's claim — possibly exaggerated — in A playn and fynall confutacion that 'fyue thousand other men, that Dicarres dreame hath read' (sig. G1v). This impression is confirmed by the unusual survival of many pieces in two sets of copies. The Contention presumably represents an attempt to capitalize on this popularity.

Contents

The basic narrative of The Contention is a debate on the meaning of Dauie Dicars Dreame, pursued circuitously between different personae and with multiple diversions across a variety of forms. The Dreame itself is a satirical vision which takes its eponymous protagonist and distinctive structure from Piers Plowman. 'Dawe the Diker' (i.e., digger) is a minor character who makes a single appearance in Passus 6 of the B-text. The page on which he appears was brought to the attention of mid-sixteenth-century readers, however, in the 'Prologe' of Crowley's 1550 edition, which cites the prophecy on 'the xxxvi. leafe of thyse boke' as an example of textual instability 'lyke to have been added by some other man than the fyrishe autour'. Turning to the leaf in question, the relevant passage reads (sig. I4v):

And when ye se the sunne amisse, and two monkes heads
And a maid haue the maistrye, and multiply by eight,  
Than shall death with drawe, and derth bye iustice,  
And Dawe the Diker shall dye for hunger.  
But if God of his goodnes graunt vs a treue [sic].

*Dauie Dicars Dreame* contains a similar sequence of unlikely conditions (‘when [...] when [...]’), attacking the conventional targets of moral satire — ‘bribes’, ‘fauning speech’, ‘priuate profit and self loue’ — as well as more overtly topical issues: assaults on the ‘comen welth’ and lords that ‘sell [...] sheepe’. These conditions are resolved in the final quatrain, whose proper interpretation drives the controversy (sigs A1r-A1v):

When truth doth tread the streetes, and liyers lurke in den,  
And Rex doth raigne and rule the rost, and weeds out wicked men  
Then balefull barnes be blythe, that here in England wonne,  
Your strife shal stynt I vndertake, your dreedfull daies are done.

The significance of this passage is, of course, that it was written under the Protectorate (probably under Dudley): hence, the implication that the rule of Rex (Edward VI) has been undermined by ‘wicked men’ could be understood as slightly pointed. The extent to which this phrase can be made to carry a subversive charge is the central question for the rest of the series.

The *Dreame*’s pattern of negatives is fairly common in mid-century satire, and it is to this feature that the next item at first responds. To Dauid Dicars when (‘quod T. Camel’) argues that just as ‘beastes of lowe sorte’ must ‘in order behave’, so too must men be sensible of their ‘place’: ‘Jupiters seate standes somewhat to hye / For vs to iudge it, that come it not nye’ (sig. A1v). Churchyard’s riposte, *A Replicacion vnto Camels Obiection*, mocks Camel’s Latinate diction (‘You writ like a clerke’, sig. A2r) and accuses him of malignant misreading for personal gain (‘To flater the Gods, and get a new cote’, sig. A3r). The poem closes with a clear invitation to continue the conversation: ‘Thus here I do ende, and rest for this time, / Excepte you procure me to make a new rime’ (sig. A4r).

The next poem, *A Decree betwene Churchyarde and Camell*, is the first to be written by someone other than the two protagonists, and indeed the first extant piece by the writer William Elderton. It marks not only the entry of other writers into the exchange, but also a shift into more overtly fictional forms and more explicitly metatextual commentary. The *Decree* summarises the *Dreame* and agrees with its conclusions, before ending with ‘The judgement of the Authour’ (sig. C3r), in which ‘as one to you unknowne’ he affirms his intention ‘To make the people laugh at me, and here I make a staye’. This is followed by *Westerne Wyll*, an elaborate narrative staging the composition and consumption of *Dauie Dicars Dreame*. In brief, the story follows three Essex boatmen, ‘Wilkin, Watte, and Herman gent’, browsing the bookstalls at ‘Poules’ while they wait for the wind to change. The ‘thre meri mariners’, looking for ‘Noueltie’, are offered the *Dreame* and the subsequent three broadsides by a printer (sigs C3v-C4r). *Westerne Wyll* includes a full reprint of the original *Dreame*, a summary of the other broadsides, and extensive debate on the origin and interpretation of dreams in general and Davy’s in particular. The story is brought to an end when the boatmen depart for Maldon with the poems, concluding with the sudden emergence of a previously invisible narrator (sig. D4r):

And I that present was at al, for that I lyked the sporte  
Gan prynte it in my fyckle heade in order as I coulde  
And for to pen it out the bet did to my celle resorte  
And drewe it there into a somme, as I had harde it tolde  
Not with such wordes as they it spake, but in suche as I
Had partly learned of my dame, and lyst to fantasy.

The next item, Of such as on fantasies decree and discus, does not refer to the controversy directly but there are obvious thematic parallels in its discussion of Ovid’s singing contest, although attempting to map the narrative of the poem too closely onto the broadside history is probably fruitless. It is followed by four pieces written in an attempted rustic dialect. First is A Supplication vnto mast Camell, nominally authored by ‘Good man Gefferay Chappell, of whipstable’ (sig. E1v). ‘Chappell’ defends Churchyard, whose nom de plume this surely is, and asks for Camell’s clemency. Instead, in To goodman Chappells supputation, Camell confusingly addresses himself to ‘Harry whobal’ (sig. E1v). Churchyard responds, via another alter ego, in Steuen Steple to mast Camell, by chiding him for this error: ‘zwap yer speckles vp se nase [push your spectacles up your nose], and looke about ye better, / And Anser Gefferay Chappell zyr, dat toke ye de suppletion’ (sig. E2v). Not collected in The Contention is a fourth piece, M. Harry Whobals mon to M. Camel, which prolongs the comedy by purporting to emenate from the mysterious Harry’s servant now outraged on his behalf.

Camell’s next and final contribution returns to the original issue of contention. In Camelles Conclusion he adopts the persona of a cattle farmer dwelling at Kings Lynn, and in this character reiterates his original point: ‘que supra nos, nihil ad nos’ (sig. F4v), before following up on his threat in the Reioindre (sig. F4v) to enlarge ‘the meanyng of this whan’ (sig. F1v):

When Rex doth reigne and rule the roste, lo thus you raunge at laste
A meruayle when that suche a when, should out in print be paste.
Dothe not Rex raigne sir dreamer now, what whennyng terme is this:
If Rex reigne not, who reigneth then: a sauci when this is [...]
both, is impossible. Churchyard’s attitude to authority is typically best described as emollient rather than confrontational and it may be that his remembered gratitude to Seymour arises from a misstep. The *Dreame*’s subversive frisson, whether originally purposeful or no, clearly aided rather than hindered Churchyard’s literary career as its frequent republication demonstrates. *The Contention* is often described as a ‘flyting’, a comparison which goes some way towards capturing the frenetic energy of its comic antagonisms. Meanwhile, even readings which endow the *Contention* with serious political intent discover a playfulness in its loaded exchanges. Scott Lucas notes that the back-and-forth between Churchyard and Camell over the exact meaning of ‘When Rex doth raigne’, in which Churchyard repeatedly dares Camell to clarify it and Camell threatens to do so, is effectively a game in which he who first articulates the alleged sedition loses.23 This ludic quality is what ultimately most characterises *The Contention*, which is keenly engaged with the perils but surely also the pleasures of its form.

These impulses inform the pervasive mystery surrounding nomenclature in *The Contention*. Like its date, and degree of contentiousness, the question of authorship remains in many cases unanswered. Churchyard is generally held to be responsible, in addition to the pieces explicitly signed by him, for the missives of the suggestively named ‘Chappell’ and ‘Steiple’, but the extent of his involvement in the other pieces — up to and including those supposedly issuing from the pen of ‘Thomas Camell’ — is uncertain.24 On balance it seems likely that Camell, about whom nothing other than his appearance in these pages is known, probably does represent an entity or entities distinct from Thomas Churchyard, partly because he instigates the debate rather than merely joins it, and partly because of his insistence on highlighting the seditious potential of the *Dreame*.25 On the other hand, it is tempting to speculate that ‘Thomas Camell’ is a pseudonym, mimicking Churchyard’s initials: certainly it is Camell who first introduces a bestial theme in *To David Didcars When*, which at the very least argues for a robust sense of humour about his own identity. Other unknown contributors include ‘Thomas Hedley’, usually assumed in the absence of an obvious joke to be a real name, and ‘William Waterman’/‘Westerne Wyll’, typically agreed to be an alias but whose real identity remains in doubt.26 The writer posing as ‘Harry Whobals mon’, on the other hand, identifies himself in an acrostic in the last lines of the poem (‘rede thes last twelve rowes, and lurne my nome’) as ‘Ar […] I […] S […] A […] A […] Ar […] D […] B […] Y […] A […] Ar […] D’, i.e. Risaard Byard, or as he is more often known, Richard Beard.27 The proliferation of false identities across *The Contention* cannot be read as an index of its subversion, although Camell does try to make this argument (consistent with his habitual hermeneutics of suspicion) in the opening lines of his *Reoindre*: ‘To Churchyard, or Mannaring, or for lak of a name: / To Dicar the dreamer, if you knowe the same’. He claims that ‘three names are to many for one man alone’, and adds darkly in a marginal note whose reference is now obscure, ‘Aske him where he named him self Lord Manarynge, and howe he vsed it’ (sig. A424). In fact, as Churchyard points out in the *Surreoindre*, his own contributions to the debate have been signed from the beginning, nor are his known alter egos likely or intended to resist interpretation for very long. Beard’s acrostic signature exemplifies the basically comic game of names being played across *The Contention*, in which obviously fake personae playfully invite their own decoding so as to reflect credit back on the author.

The false identities of *The Contention* tend to cluster overwhelmingly around a single paradigm, the plain speaking simple man. The ‘Dauiy Dicar’ persona is derived ultimately from Piers Plowman and invites understanding in the same terms: as ‘a sory symple man’ (sig. E32). The basic antagonism between ‘Dicar’ and Camell in the first seven pieces is framed, at least by Churchyard, as an opposition between the rude, unforced honesty of Dicar and Camell’s clerkly misreading, ‘learned past reason or wyt’ (sig. A22). The idiosyncratic dialects of Chappell, Steple, and ‘Harry Whobals mon’ emphasise the traditional rusticity of the agrarian complainant with heightened linguistic effect. The accents are in keeping with the theatrical falsity of these personae, and indeed the ‘Mummerset’ dialect from which these poems unevenly draw is more typically found in plays and dramatic interludes in this period.28 The exaggerated simplicity of these characters and their ‘natural’ speech reverses the movement from obfuscation to clarification enacted in the pseudonyms: whereas in the latter a superficial disguise thinly veils a bid for literary name recognition, in the former the extended valorisation of ordinary speech collapses into near-total incomprehensibility. Large parts of the rustic speakers’ contributions are impenetrable, and the problem only worsens as the exchange continues. Camell’s baffling lurch into rural speech in *To goodman Chappells supplication* responds to this by piling obliquity on obscurity, from its opening salutation to ‘Harry who ball’ to the elliptical final threat: ‘Tis a vengeance beast, and bygge to beare you all, / And if you zit not vast, vum saie, map to vall.’ It also strikingly prefigures his subsequent self-description, in the *Conclusion*, as ‘a sory symple man’ (sig. E32) and a cattle farmer: a last-ditch attempt to appropriate the moral authority and reputation for honesty now definitively identified with the plain speaking countrymen of Dicar’s party.

The authenticity of this figure is given an extra metatextual spin by the extended discussion in *Westerne Wyll*, in which the Maldon fishermen first approve of ‘Dicar’ as a ‘sely swayne’ (sig. D22) who is ‘no fole’ (sig. D22), but then question his plausibility: ‘it [i.e. the *Dreame*] is fine for such a rude vplande’ (sig. D22). At this point the printer introduces Dicar’s ‘frende at court’ who ‘Gan drawe it into a frame’, i.e. implicitly both reshaped it into poetry and into the compositor’s
frame for printing. The proffered narrative simultaneously asserts the poem’s originary authenticity in the unschooled mouth of David Dicar (a story contradicted elsewhere by Churchyard’s overt identification of himself with Dicar) and the artifice of its presentation, shaped by the friend at court and perhaps also by the mysterious narrator who confesses to re-telling ‘not with suche wordes as they it spake’ (sig. D4v) in the final lines. This commentary highlights the role of print in the manufacture of these simple rustics, describing a recursive relationship in which the plain truths of plain men are turned into ‘a rolle of Rithimes’ (sig. C3r) through learned intervention and then recirculated among the people: in this case, the Essex fishermen but also perhaps the ‘fyve thousand other men’ that Churchyard claims have read his ‘When’ in his plain and fynall confutacion.

The narrative of Westerne Wyll can be read as a parable about the nature of popular literature in an age of mass print, figuring the larger work in which it is embedded. The texts of The Contention insistently evoke the traditional tropes of agrarian satire only to play with them, exploring the limits and possibilities of the genre in a new medium. The sheer anarchic energy of the debate which follows was, at least in part, fuelled by print, which enables its unusual length and number of contributors. The many voices of The Contention are vitally engaged with the peril, but also the potential, of the press; and while the work may in part reflect anxieties about uncontrolled dissemination and consumption of discourse, it is also keenly alive to the possibilities therein. One such issue, discussed above, is the politics and economics of pseudonymity; other questions only briefly touched on might be those of access to the nascent public sphere, of criticism and censorship, and of collaborative and multiple models of authorship. These issues were all the more urgent because print technology, although no longer new, was undergoing a period of massive expansion in England. The texts brought together in The Contention were first printed five or six years before the Stationers’ Company was granted its Charter, the collected edition three years after. It thus stands not only at the head of Churchyard’s career, but also at the beginning of a new era of ‘ephemeral’ literature.29 The Contention displays technical proficiency as well as literary verve: A Supplicacion to Mast Camell, for instance, is remarkable not only for its linguistic ingenuity but also for its elegant visual effect, described by one commentator as ‘a beautiful little bit of typography’.30 It is innovative in other ways too: The Contention was the first ‘collected edition’ produced by Churchyard, anticipating his later volumes, already mentioned, Churchyard’s chance (1580) and Churchyards Challenge (1593), as well as Churchyarde chippes (1575; STC 5232), Churchyards choise (1579; STC 5235.2), and Churchyards charge (1580; STC 5240). Published just three years after Richard Tottel’s groundbreaking Songs and Sonettes (1557; STC 13861), it thus belongs to a key period in the evolution of Tudor writing, prefiguring later verse collections (many items from which were also published separately, as broadsides) as well as constructions of authorship — Churchyard was not alone, but merely prescient, in grasping the importance of ‘works’ in establishing a literary name.31 From this period of vital ferment emerged The Contention, a joyously inventive and ambitious experiment that continues to surprise, to entertain, and to provoke questions about authorship, ownership, and the nature of ‘the work’. It is a legacy with which even Churchyard might be satisfied.

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