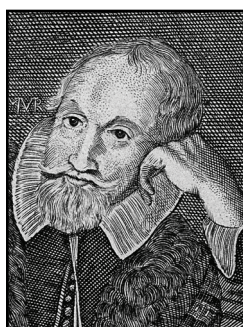


SPYMASTER, POET, PROVOST OF ETON SIR HENRY WOTTON (1568-1639)



A more complicated character than John Chamberlain is Sir Henry Wotton, a professional diplomat and occasional poet and author. He spends the greatest part of his life in public service while wishing he could enjoy the quiet career of a scholar: he once describes himself as “a poor student in philosophy” who has been put “into civil practice.” However, during his last years, which, as Provost of Eton, he passes among other “cloistered men,” he is not sure that the hankering he feels for domestic and foreign news is commendable: to his friend Sir Gervase Clifton, he confesses, “there still hangs upon me, since my foreign vacations, I know not how, a little concupiscence of novelty.”

Wotton’s surviving correspondence begins when he leaves for Germany in 1589 at the age of twenty-one, eager to travel and to study civil law under renowned professors, but it soon becomes apparent that he is sending foreign intelligence home. Thus, he can write from Vienna to his friend Lord Zouche, “I have herewith sent your Honour a letter of Sleydan’s to the French King ... no man is privy to my sending of it but myself, in which respect it requires the greater secrecy.” By the time James I appoints him Ambassador to Venice in 1604, he is ready to serve as a spy-master, dispensing money to agents in diverse cities and arranging to have mail intercepted.

In 1623, thinking he has discovered who has authored “that filthy false libel *de Corona Regia*,” a satire on James I, Wotton proposes that James “send hither a pardon in Latin, under his royal hand and seal ... containing likewise some promise of maintenance” wherewith it should be “no hard matter” to seize the culprit “and to convey him against his will in a covered boat down the Rhene to the confines of the States, and so into England” — or, if he comes willingly, he “may have some appearance of violence for his excuse.”

Since Wotton has a strong religious commitment (he consoles himself and others for painful bereavements by thoughts of resignation to God's will), it is not surprising to find him uneasily arguing, in relation to such devious practices, "so unchristian an art is perchance civil wisdom, if it were well examined."

Wotton is engaged in a lifelong struggle on behalf of the Reformed Religion. In a long letter to James I, he urges that "the common Christian good" is "worthy of a secret room in your zealous and royal heart," and he enthuses over an upcoming opportunity to promote Protestantism in Venice, "when fear shall cease (which is it that now only upholdeth the Pope)." He has a special animus against the Jesuits, whom he calls "the caterpillars of Christendom," and after watching elaborate papal rituals in Italy, he declares, "Of Rome, in short, this is my opinion, or rather indeed my most assured knowledge, that her delights on earth are sweet, and her judgements in heaven heavy."

While Wotton's letters make clear his great pleasure in the company of his intellectual peers as well as his increasingly uncertain health and chronic indebtedness, much of his correspondence is devoted to European politics preceding and during the Thirty Years War, in which Protestant-Catholic hostility looms so large. Mingled with his expressions of hope and fear, however, are brief views of events in his personal life and illuminating character sketches. Of his early companionship with his fellow citizens engaged in trade, friends who must not know of his real work, his letters say nothing. His skill in disguising his mission is visible in the account he sends to Lord Zouche of his arrival at the centre of the Catholic world in 1592:

I entered Rome with a mighty blue feather in a black hat; which, though in itself it were a slight matter, yet surely did it work in the imaginations of men three great effects. First, I was by it taken for no English, upon which depended the ground of all. Secondly, I was reputed as light in my mind as in my apparel (they are not dangerous men that are so). And thirdly, no man could think that I desired to be unknown ...

We are given glimpses of the house Wotton occupies in Venice. At the end of 1617, fire breaks out in a room under the kitchen, "where certain boards and other old dry materials were locked up by the landlord," and the flames engulf the table where the key to the street door lies—"by which mishap," he explains, "we could neither get out ourselves to the channel, nor let in others, till by main force we had broken the bars of the gate." Similarly startling is the occasion in 1635 when the almost sixty-sev-

en-year-old Wotton is arrested in London for debt, his payments from the Crown being in arrears, Six days after the event, he sends a plea for help to Sir Francis Windebank, whom he knew in Venice:

On Friday of the last week, coming homewards from Wallingford House, where I had been to attend my Lord Treasurer's leisure and health, I was, in the midst of St. Martin's Lane, arrested on the way in my coach, like a stroke of thunder, by a number of Westminster bailiffs.... They would have carried me immediately to the Gatehouse, or to some alehouse, but being too stubborn to yield to that, I got them to attend me gently to my lodging, where I have lived ever since under the custody of some of those rude and costly inmates.

Among the characters who stand out, an early example is the Catholic Baron of Berloc, whose company Wotton enjoys as he travels for the first time to Rome: "I found him by conversation to be very indiscreet, soon led, much given to women, careless of religion (qualities notably serving my purpose), for while a man is held in exercise with his own vices, he hath little leisure to observe others." No lightweight like the Baron is the crafty Duke of Lorraine, who, being "cumbered ... with the German troubles on the one side, and the French on the other," is "therefore bound to study the passages of both." Having delivered a message from James I and spoken of the latter's desire to work for peace in Protestant Bohemia, which is revolting against the rule of Catholic Austria, Wotton reports back to James:

The Duke's answer was more tender than free, lamenting much the present condition of things, commending as much your Majesty's good mind, proclaiming his own, remitting the whole to those great and wise Kings that had it in hand, and concluding (with a voice, me thought, lower than before, as if he had doubted to be overheard, though in his private chamber) that the Princes of the Union would tell me what his affections were in the cause.

In Europe, Wotton has one idol, the Venetian theologian Paolo Sarpi, whom he regards not only as "a sound Protestant, as yet in the habit of a friar," but also as "the most deep and general scholar of the world." He notes that Sarpi is "of a quiet and settled temper, which made him prompt in his counsels and answers" and that he is a man whose "life is the most irreprehensible and exemplar that hath ever been known."

FROM FAMILY TO PHILOSOPHY

Sir Henry Wotton is a letter-writer of some distinction and he has a modest place in history, but he is also a fine occasional poet and is perhaps best remembered for two or three frequently anthologized pieces. He is a lifelong friend of John Donne, whose life Izaak Walton asks him to write, and in his old age he enjoys the acquaintance of the young John Milton. He especially appreciates the latter's masque *Comus*, writing, "I should much commend the tragical part if the lyrical did not ravish me with a certain Dorique delicacy in your songs and odes; whereunto I must plainly confess to have seen yet nothing parallel in our language, *ipsa mollities* [softness itself]."