

**DEMOCRITUS HIS DREAME.
OR, THE CONTENTION
BETWEENE THE ELEPHANT
AND THE FLEA (1605)**

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Democritus his dreame. Or, The contention betweene the elephant and the flea (1605) by Peter Woodhouse

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PETER WOODHOUSE

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XV.

DEMOCRITVS

his Dreame.

OR,

The Contention betweene the
Elephant and the Flea.

OF

PETER WOODHOUSE.

(1605.)

EDITED, WITH INTRODUCTION AND NOTES AND
ILLUSTRATIONS,

BY THE

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INTRODUCTION.

THE only recorded exemplar of the Poem now "after so long a time" reprinted, is at Althorp. It is bound up in a considerable volume of kindred rarities—all in nearly virgin state as they came from the press. I find no mention of PETER WOODHOUSE or of his poem anywhere. Even the lynx-eyed RITSON knew nothing of either; nor does the book appear in any of the great Sale-catalogues, e.g., Heber or Reed or Bliss or Corser. It is difficult to account for this utter obscurity. The Reader will very soon discover that the Poet of *Democritus his Dreame, or The Contention betweene the Elephant and the Flea*—adopting the subsidiary title—is no novice in the rhyming art, but contrariwise holds a practised pen and possesses an ear open to harmony. His simple name to the Epistle to the Reader and at close argues contemporary knowledge of him—and reliance thereon on his part. The large and clever woodcut of the title-page—which I have had most carefully re-engraved in *fac-simile**—together with the whole appearance of the book, makes us satisfied that the Publisher was not unwilling to spend his money on the venture. I shall hope that our reproduction may lead to a 'find' somewhere of the Author's personality. I can scarcely think that *The Flea* was either his first or last production.

Turning to the Poem itself it seems clear that if we could read between the lines it should be revealed that there is intended satire of high-placed personages under the "Elephant" and the "Flea" and other creatures introduced. It were wasted pains at this late and dim day to conjecture who might or might not be meant. I suppose we shall all have our varying shrewd suspicions—none the less that at the close such "interpreting" of the "dreame" is

* By Robert Langton of Manchester. See page 12 of the Poem.

castigated and any "answer" scorned, the avowed aim being "Some kinde of faultes and not some faultie men."

Besides the excellent *moral* of the superiority of activity over mere bulk and strength — lesson still requiring to be urged — there are occasional couplets that put apophthegms tersely and effectively, as these : —

As shadowes still attend upon the Sunne,
So glory yet could neuer enuye shunne.
Where as fire is, there alwayes will be fmoake,
Enuye will euer fecke vertue to cloake.

. laugh I dooft afke?
What, to see vice thus put on vertues maske?
To hear a villaine tell fo fsmooth a tale,
And hipocrites fet vp fo full a faile?
To see her great ones still would greater be,
And none contented with their own degree?
How lightly others vertues some doe weigh,
Whilst that felfe loue doth beare fo great a fwayne.
O, when I heare that beafts vie reafon, then
I weepe to thinke beafts liue in fhape of men.

For fuch as without all foresight are bolde
Foole hardye, and not valiant we hoide:

How long we liue it fkills not, but how well.

Thou faift thy teeth are good, they are: but when?
When thou art dead: they'r never good till then.

The Fox hates grapes when they're out of his reach.

He [The Elephant] brags that he is entertain'd of Kings,
And fo am I, but yet for diuers things.

He as a drudge or as a flurdie flane,
My company at bed and boord they'l haue.
The fayrest Ladyes that do liue in Court,
Will fometime entertaine me in fuch fort;
As he would hang himfelfe to finde the grace,
But once to harbour in fo fweete a place.
O, this is fuch a fweet felicitie,
That men enuying my prosperitie,
Haue wifht to be transform'd into Fleas,
That fo they better might their fancie please.

Opposite the last is placed "Ovid," but Dean Donne supplies a more passionate and eke grotesque enough

confirmation of the Flea's audacious pleading—as every one knows.

Three *bits* perhaps call for special notice. (1.) In the Epistle-dedicatorie, at the end, one pricks up one's ears on reading of "Justice Shallowe": (2.) Glancing onward we come on this:

. true valour neuer danger fought.
Rafhnes, it selfe doth unto perill thrust:
That's onely valour where the quarrel's iust.

The Italized line recalls a more famous one:—

Thrice is he arm'd that hath his quarrel iust.
(2 Henry VI., iii. 2.)

(3.) The Poem-proper ends thus:

A Shadowe of a shadow thus you see,
Alas what substance in it then can bee?
If anything herein amisse doe seeme:
Confider 'twas a dreame, dreamt of a dreame.

Compare *Hamlet* ii, 2:—

Guil. What dreams indeed are ambition, for the very substance
of the ambitious is merely the shadow of a dream.
Ham. A dream itself is but a shadow.
Ros. Truly, and I hold ambition of so airy and light a quality
that it is but a shadow's shadow.
Ham. Then are our beggars bodies, and our monarchs and
outstretched heroes the beggars shadows.

With reference to the "dreame" seen-and-heard contest for sovereignty, as between the Elephant and the Flea, it will doubtless interest the Reader to compare a description in prose of the election of a King by the Fishes. This I take from a work of NICHOLAS BRETON, the only exemplar of which known is now before me, viz., *Wits Trenchmour, In a Conference had betwixt a Scholler and an Angler*, 1597.

The "Scholler" and the "Angler" thus speak:—

I pray you let mee have your tale of the choofing of theyr King: Sir, quoth the Angler, as I haue heard it I will tell you: in the vnkowne deepes of the wonderfull water called the neuer scene Sea: when fishes could speake and