

William Basse's *Polyhymnia* and the Poetry of Service

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Abstract

The career of the little-known seventeenth-century poet William Basse (c. 1583-1653?) combined two distinctive elements. He served, in the first instance, as a 'retainer' to the Wenman family of Thame Park in Oxfordshire for a period of more than forty years. He was also, however, a published poet who produced a substantial body of verse which reflected and intertwined with his career in service. The article aims to stimulate interest in Basse by drawing attention to a manuscript collection of his poems which remains unpublished and has until now been considered 'lost' in scholarly accounts of the poet. The *Polyhymnia*, held at Chetham's Library in Manchester, was prepared as a gift in the late 1640s or early 1650s for relations of the Wenmans who lived on the nearby Rycote estate. It brought together poems from across the course of Basse's career, and displayed him writing in a wide variety of forms and genres. The article summarises current knowledge of Basse's life in service, sets out the context of the *Polyhymnia* as a manuscript apparently designed to fortify the links between Thame Park and Rycote, and explores the importance of Basse's perspective as a servant to some of the more intriguing poems in the collection. It concludes by suggesting some of the ways in which a renewed focus upon Basse might contribute to study of the links between service and literature in the future.

Keywords: Presentation Manuscript, Retainer, Service, Seventeenth Century, William Basse

1. *Introduction*

The purpose of this article is to instigate reappraisal of a seventeenth-century poet, William Basse, who has until now elicited scant critical attention, and to ask how his writing might be of interest to scholars concerned with the relationship between service and poetry (or indeed literature more generally) in the early modern period. Basse spent much if not all of his life in service to a noble family – the Wenmans of Thame Park in Oxfordshire. What makes him particularly interesting however is the fact that he both enacted and reflected upon aspects of his service role in a variety of ambitious and sometimes experimental poems. Many of those poems have already appeared



in print, either during Basse's own lifetime or in the important nineteenth-century edition of his work edited by R. Warwick Bond. My interest in Basse here however stems from examination of a manuscript long considered lost and itself as yet unpublished. When Bond assembled *The Poetical Works of William Basse* in 1893 he recorded the existence of two variant copies of a collection entitled *Polyhymnia*, both of which had surfaced and then disappeared again over the course of the preceding century. He was thus able only to provide contents lists for these manuscripts and a few fragments of the verse they contained, drawn from descriptions by their previous owners. The whereabouts of both have been viewed, in biographical accounts of Basse, as unknown ever since. One of them, however, in fact forms part of the Corser collection at the Chetham's Library in Manchester, catalogued under the shelfmark Mun.A.3.54.¹ This version of the *Polyhymnia* is a beautiful and unique presentation manuscript, and adds a substantial amount of new verse to Basse's canon. As well as being an aesthetically appealing literary artifact in itself, it clarifies details of Basse's life and career, provides the texts of some interesting and unusual poems which span a wide range of genres, and raises a whole host of questions relating to both service culture and poetic culture during the first half of the seventeenth century. I will attempt to give some flavour of its nature and significance here by approaching it through two related areas of discussion.

The first is a material one, centering around issues of scribal publication and manuscript circulation. In the Chetham's *Polyhymnia* we encounter Basse using the form of the presentation manuscript to inscribe and reinforce his status as a trusted family servant, to underwrite his privileged personal position within that family's local Oxfordshire network and, I will argue, to fortify the ties which existed between his employers and their local relations. The resulting interplay between Basse's status as a family servant and his purposes as a poet offers a rich and multifaceted example of how presentation manuscripts could function as social and textual phenomena.

The second area of discussion is a more literary one. Basse is a rare example in the period of a servant who was also an established and prolific author. It is significant then that the Chetham's *Polyhymnia* combines the kind of functions we might expect of a presentation manuscript – offering praise, soliciting patronage and recording details of his patrons' family history – with exploration of a more diverse set of social and literary themes. There is a significant vein of poetry in the manuscript which depicts carefully figures of lower social rank, experiments with what might be considered more

¹ The manuscript is not at present listed in the online Catalogue of English Literary Manuscripts 1450-1700, <<https://celm2.digsum.kcl.ac.uk/>>, accessed 22 December 2014, and is described as lost in both Blackley 1992 and Kathman 2004.

popular genres and modes, and ultimately turns to celebrate serving subjects themselves. It suggests that while Basse's poetry could act as an extension of his service role, his perspective and experiences as a servant were also an important source of literary inspiration in themselves. This aspect of Basse's work is open to a variety of interpretations. I will thus attempt here only to suggest some of the questions that it might throw up for critics interested in the way service intersected with literature in the early modern period, particularly in the light of Basse's distinctive role as a servant-author.

Before turning to the Chetham's manuscript, however, I wish to review the known facts of Basse's biography – in order to provide some context for the subsequent discussion of this relatively unknown poet, and in order to outline his interesting position within the complex sphere of early modern service culture.

2. *Basse's Life and Career*

In the only surviving contemporary account of Basse, Anthony Wood describes him as 'of Moreton near Thame in Oxfordshire, sometime a retainer to the lord Wenman of Thame Park'.² Probably born in the early 1580s, Basse appears to have spent his entire adult life living in Oxfordshire in the service of the Wenman family, whose main residence at Thame Park was about fifteen miles from the city of Oxford itself. Its lord during the majority of Basse's residence there was Richard Wenman (1572/3-1640), created Viscount Wenman of Tuam in 1628. Comments in one of Basse's works raise the possibility that he was originally from Northampton, and this led Bond to suggest that Basse may have travelled to Thame Park as a page in the service of Richard Wenman's first wife, Agnes, who was also a native of Northamptonshire, and who came to Thame upon her marriage in or around 1596 (Bond 1893, xii).³ At some point Basse married, but it is not known when. Only the date of Eleanor Basse's burial is recorded, on 27 September 1637. He had at least one daughter, who died in 1634, and possibly more. Wood's description of him as 'of Moreton' (about a mile from Thame Park) suggests that at some point his position advanced enough for him to obtain his own property independent of the main house, probably through the benefaction of the Wenmans (Bond 1893, xx-xxii). He lived to an advanced age, and is thought to have died in 1653 or shortly thereafter.

² Quoted in Kathman 2004. The main sources for Basse's biography (upon which I have relied here) are Bond 1893, 'Introduction'; Blackley 1992; Kathman 2004.

³ Agnes Wenman was herself a writer, whose translation of Jean de Maumont's French version of John Zonaras' *Historyes and Chronicles of the World* is still extant in Cambridge University Library, MSS Dd.i.18, Dd.i.19 and Mm 3, 32.

Basse began writing poetry early, and published three relatively substantial works during the early 1600s: *Sword and Buckler, Or, Serving-Mans Defence* (Basse 1602a), a precocious and carefully designed defence of the class of family servants to which Basse himself belonged; *Three Pastoral Elegies* (1602b), a pastoral narrative imitative of Spenser and dedicated to Sir Richard Wenman's mother, Lady Tasburgh; and *Great-Brittaines Sunnes-Set* (1613), an elegy occasioned by the death of Prince Henry, but dedicated and addressed to his own master Richard Wenman. Two major collections of his work were assembled towards the end of his life (although they drew together poems composed at different points in his career) which remained in manuscript. The first of these was the *Polyhymnia*, in its two variant forms, and the second was *The Pastorals and Other Workes*, a carefully prepared volume (dated 1653 on its title-page) which formed the centre-piece of Bond's nineteenth-century edition of Basse, and which is now in the Folger Shakespeare Library (MS V.b.235). The latter included a set of nine 'Eclogues' dedicated to Richard Wenman but composed over a period of many years; an early Ovidian narrative (written before 1612), 'Urania: the Woman in the Moon', dedicated to Wenman's daughter Penelope Dynham; and a later narrative poem, 'The Metamorphosis of the Walnut-Tree of Boarstall', written in the late 1640s or early 1650s at the request of the same daughter, and set in the grounds of her own home near Thame. As with the *Three Pastoral Elegies* and *Great-Brittaines Sunnes-Set*, both of these manuscript collections display abundant evidence of the origination and circulation of Basse's poetry within local social networks linked directly to the Wenman family. Other works, however, hint at a wider literary acquaintance and raise questions about how well-connected Basse was beyond the immediate circle of the Wenmans and their relations, and whether or not he can be considered to have had a significant career or life as a writer distinct from his professional employment in Oxfordshire.

Basse was almost certainly the 'W.B.' who contributed a commendatory poem to the second book of William Browne's *Britannia's Pastorals* in 1616, a fact which put him in the company of other contemporary poets including John Davies of Hereford, George Wither and Ben Jonson.⁴ He is probably now most commonly cited as the author of a widely circulated epitaph on Shakespeare, mistakenly attributed to Donne in the first edition of his *Poems* (1633), later reprinted in the 1640 edition of Shakespeare's own poetry, and possibly alluded to by Jonson in the elegy on Shakespeare he contributed to the 1623 folio (Bond 1893, 113-117).⁵ A poem by Basse appeared in the

⁴ It has also been suggested that Basse was the 'W.B.' who contributed commendatory verses to Francis Beaumont's *Salmacis and Hermaphrodite* (London, 1602) and Philip Massinger's *The Bondsman* (London, 1624), although I find both attributions problematic.

⁵ For a recent attempt to reattribute the epitaph to Donne, see Centerwall 2006.

volume *Annalia Dubrensis* (Walbancke 1636), celebrating Robert Dover's 'Cotswold Games', which again set him alongside significant contemporary poets including Michael Drayton, Thomas Randolph, Ben Jonson, Owen Feltham, John Mennes and Shackerley Marmion. In 1653 a song of Basse's appeared in Izaak Walton's *Compleat Angler*, which Walton described there as 'lately made at my request'. The Oxford clergyman and physician Ralph Bathurst also wrote a commendatory poem intended for Basse's *Pastorals and Other Workes*, when that collection was apparently being prepared for the press.⁶

His inclusion in the Browne and Dover volumes suggests a connection to the poetic circles of Jacobean and Caroline London and has been taken by Basse's biographers to indicate a network of literary friendships. Several things need to be taken into consideration in this regard however. Critics, for instance, have not previously noted that the second commendatory poem prefixed to Browne's *Pastorals* was by Thomas Wenman (1596-1665), the son of Sir Richard Wenman and Basse's own employer later in life, who had entered the Inner Temple (of which Browne was a member) in 1614.⁷ Whether Basse escorted Thomas to London as an attendant of some kind, accompanied Thomas or his father more occasionally to the capital on business, or was simply given access to literary circles through correspondence with his master's son, it seems quite possible that Thomas was his primary source of contact with the metropolitan literary world and occasioned his appearance in the Browne publication. Both Bond and David Kathman suggest that George Wither was referring to Basse in *The Shepherd's Hunting*, when he said that his work had been 'graced' by 'the noblest nymph of Thame' (Sidgwick 1902, 23-24). Wither however was in that passage asserting his fitness to 'woo a shepherdess' and it is highly unlikely that he would refer to Basse as a 'nymph'. It is far more likely that Wither was referring to Agnes Wenman who (as noted above) was herself an author and did not die until 1617. If Basse did know Wither then it was likely to have been through Thomas Wenman or Agnes herself. The wide circulation of the Shakespeare epitaph certainly demonstrates contact with networks of manuscript circulation, but again such contact may well have occurred through the Wenmans rather than through personal relationships maintained by Basse himself.

His appearance in the *Annalia Dubrensis* is hard to interpret because the exact circumstances of the volume's assembly and publication are not clear. The poems would appear to have been composed over a number of years, some specifically for the volume and others more occasionally, and so Basse's inclusion cannot be taken to indicate personal intimacy with any other poet

⁶ There were also a few more ephemeral Basse publications. His poem 'A Memento for Mortalitie' was included in the popular miscellany *A Helpe to Discourse* (London, 1619), and songs by Basse were printed as broadsheets in 1620, 1676 and 1682.

⁷ For details on Thomas see Carlyle 2004; for the poem Browne 1616, sig. A2r.

who appeared therein.⁸ Dover's games may have provided an occasion for Basse to foster or maintain literary friendships, but this is as likely to have reflected his relatively close proximity to and frequent attendance at the games (which were held about 35 miles from Oxford), as an active social network which stretched significantly beyond his Oxfordshire locale. This relative proximity also makes it likely that the Wenmans themselves would have attended the games, and that they may again have influenced Basse's contact with literary and cultural circles. It is worth noting that in his account of the *Annalia in Athenae Oxonienses*, Anthony Wood sets Basse apart from the better known contributors to the volume as a poet of 'lesser note' (Bond 1893, 106), and that Basse self-consciously describes himself in his poem as 'the slendrest Oate, / That Mirth hath to your Mountaine brought' (*ibid.*, 110), meaning that his contribution may not have been sufficient to obscure the social or cultural distinctions between himself and some of the other authors.

By what means Walton solicited the text of a song from Basse, or whether they were personal friends, is not yet clear, but Bathurst's knowledge of Basse emphasizes the point that the most obvious hub of social and intellectual activity available to him was probably Oxford itself and that much of his own cultural activity is likely to have taken place within the close environs of his Oxfordshire home.⁹

Another problem is presented by Basse's apparent acquaintance with two of the period's most significant women writers and patrons, Mary Herbert, Countess of Pembroke and Elizabeth Cary, Viscountess Falkland. Basse referred to the patronage of Sidney several times in the *Pastorals* (see eclogues 2, 5 and 8 in Bond 1893), whilst he included two sonnets to Cary, written on the occasion of her departure for Ireland in 1622, in the *Polyhymnia* itself. I have not yet been able to establish how or how well Basse knew these women: Herbert was related through the marriage of her son Philip to Bridget Norris, the wife of Francis Norris, whom the *Polyhymnia* in part commemorated and who was a relation of the Wenmans. We also know that from 1615 Herbert was building a house at Houghton just over thirty miles from Thame Park.¹⁰

Cary meanwhile spent her early life at Burford Priory in Oxfordshire, again just over thirty miles from Thame Park (see Hodgson-Wright 2004).

⁸ Bond presumes that the poems were composed annually to mark the celebration of the games, and that Basse's poem must have been composed in 1618 because the games were said to have been founded in 1602 and his poem appeared sixteenth in the volume. There is no evidence however either that the poems were composed in this way (internal evidence in fact suggests not), or that the games were indeed established in this exact year (Bond 1893, 106).

⁹ We might note that his elegy for Prince Henry was printed at Oxford and the title-page of *The Pastorals* makes clear that this volume was to be printed there too.

¹⁰ Bridget was the sister of Philip's wife Susan, Countess of Montgomery. For details of the family connections see Hannay 2010; for Houghton, Hannay 2004.

These suggestive hints indicate that further connections may be established in the future. The probability is again though that any contact Basse had with such aristocratic women would have come through the activities or facilitation of his own employers, rather than through his own literary connections.

Evidently then more work needs to be done on the nature of Basse's links to other writers. We can only say at this point that where his work was published in London or appeared alongside that of more well-known writers this credibly involved the influence of his employers, and the idea that he sustained a more independent network of literary relationships, whilst worth exploring, also needs to be treated with care. We have by contrast plentiful evidence of his poetry's imbrication within the Wenman's local, family sphere. I would thus argue that this sphere should be viewed (for the moment) as the primary and most significant context for his work.

3. *The Nature of Basse's Service Role*

With this established we might ask exactly what kind of service Basse provided for the Wenman family. This task is inevitably hindered by the fragmentary nature of his life records and we must therefore turn to the potentially unreliable evidence of the poetry itself in order to develop a picture of his career. There is justification for this however: biographical and local details form a central constituent of Basse's writing throughout his *œuvre*, be they factually presented (as in the many references to people, places, patrons and so on) or more figuratively portrayed (as one suspects is the case, for instance, with some of the landscapes described in the *Pastoral Elegies*). Such details consistently tally with the known facts of his life, and suggest that he saw his poetry as a vehicle for recording and preserving elements of his own biography, presumably in the awareness that it would often be read by a local audience of readers who knew him well, rather than for creating elaborately fictive personas for himself.

One of Basse's earliest published works, *Sword and Buckler*, is an explicit defence of serving-men against the views of 'The publike multitude that do's us wrong' (Bond 1893, 5). It makes explicit claims about Basse's situation at the time. He states that 'I ... have served but a little while' and 'Live in the place and manner of a Page' (28). The poem also implies that Basse considered himself to be part of a class of household attendants of relatively humble background who had to work for their livelihood, rather than those drawn from the children of the nobility or gentry:

A man that's neither borne to wealth, nor place,
But to the meere despite of Fortunes brow,

...

Submits himself unto a servile yoke,
And is content to weare a livery cloke. (9-10)

He nevertheless had a sense of hierarchy, and other passages intimate that he waited directly upon the Wenmans themselves, and that this distinguished him from servants who undertook more menial domestic duties. He described the serving-man from whose perspective he wrote as ‘Continually at hand, to see, to heare / His Lords his Masters, Ladies, Mistris will’ (10). He also made clear their relative superiority within the household structure:

... you charge us much with idlenes,
 And chiefly those that have superiour roomes
 In service; but to meaner offices,
 As Bailiffes, Caters, Vndercooks and Groomes,
 You doe impute more labour and lesse sloth:
 ...
 No Serving-man, that ever waited well
 In’s master’s chamber, or in other place,
 But will be sworne with me his toyles excell
 The daily labours of th’ inferiour race ... (23-24)

Sword and Buckler then suggests a picture of Basse working as a page in the Wenman household from a young age, distinguishing himself from more menial or domestic staff by the fact that he wore his master’s livery and attended personally upon him, but not himself of noble or gentle background.

We are also faced in the poem however with Basse’s evident and relatively precocious learning. As well as being able to read and write, his poetry suggests that he had received a solid literary education, indicated in his developed imitations of Spenser and Ovid amongst others, and his command of a wide variety of literary genres. Details in his later work suggest that he was probably a proficient Latinist (see, for instance, the epigraph from Horace on the title-page of the *Polyhymnia* below; see fig. 1). His own family may have been of sufficient standing to send him for a grammar school education either in Northampton or in Oxfordshire before he entered employment at Thame Park, but the extent of his literary abilities, his sizable early poetic output and his repeated references to the encouragement he received from members of the Wenman family combine to suggest that his education was probably continued and extended within the household itself. On the basis of a passage in the *Pastorals* Bond speculated that Basse studied at Oxford in some capacity – possibly at Balliol. That passage however implies only the attendance of the narrator’s acquaintance ‘Meredit’ at the college, not Basse’s own.¹¹ In fact, given Basse’s references to Oxford and his acquaintances there, and his tendency throughout his writings to stress the debts he owed to the Wenman family, it is hard to believe that Wenman could have funded a stay

¹¹ Bond 1893, xii-xiii, and for the passage from the *Pastorals* in question, 205.

at Balliol or another college without much being made of it in Basse's verse. It is also hard to see why Wenman would choose to send a page of common background to the university when his key role was one of service, however talented the boy. These arguments are only supported by the absence of Basse's name from the university registers (Bond 1893, xiii), and the strongest likelihood appears to be that his education was advanced domestically. If Wenman employed tutors to teach his own sons Basse may well have been given instruction by them, and once his literary potential was understood he may also have been granted free time and access to the family's library in order to promote his own reading and writing.¹²

If these surmises are correct, then it also seems highly likely that he would have gone on to fill a more advanced secretarial or administrative role within the household, perhaps in relation to the management of the estate, the organization of correspondence and accounts or even, as time passed, the tutoring of younger children. The profound emphasis on thanking, praising and commemorating his employers in his poetry suggests a strong association in Basse's mind between the practices of writing and service, an association which would be appropriate if he undertook secretarial tasks as part of his employment. Certainly, if the *Polyhymnia* manuscript was copied by Basse himself, then he was a skilled scribe. We might also note that many of his poems, with their emphasis on fable or parable-like narratives, their simple moralisations and their relatively accessible style and diction, would have worked well as texts to be performed for or circulated amongst a varied domestic audience of men, women and children. Other poems flatter the Wenmans' relations and memorialise details of family history. Producing poetry for household consumption or other social purposes may then have come to be a recognised part of his role. Domestic academic training might thus have been provided for Basse with the intention that he would use it practically in serving the family and their estate.

The conclusions above are speculative, but what is certain is that by the later part of his life he had risen to become a well-respected member of the Thame Park community. It has not been noted before that in Sir Richard Wenman's will of 1640 Basse was bequested an annuity of ten pounds per annum, to be paid for the rest of his life – a privilege accorded to only three other servants from the household (National Archives, PROB 11/182/587). Richard's son Thomas served as a parliamentarian commissioner in negotiations with the king throughout the civil war, and it has again not previously been noticed that in the state papers of John Thurloe there is a 'List of the retinue to the

¹² Wenman apparently had four sons, Thomas, Edward, Philip and Charles, although only Thomas and Philip lived to adulthood; see Bond's genealogical table in Bond 1893, inserted between 142 and 143.

parliament commissioners' dated 1645 which includes Basse's name amongst the four servants Wenman took to the negotiations. This demonstrates that he was sufficiently trusted and respected in Wenman's eyes to attend upon him in a highly sensitive political context, and that his services had been retained after the elder Wenman's death and despite Basse's own advanced age (Birch 1742, 59). We have already noted that at some point Basse was probably provided with his own property in Moreton by the Wenmans. We might also note that on the title-pages of the *Annalia Dubrensis* and the Chetham's *Polyhymnia* manuscript (probably compiled in the late 1640s or early 1650s) Basse styled himself as 'gent.'. This indicates that if he viewed himself in 1602 as a young domestic servant with little or no wealth or social status of his own, he could view himself later in life as a man of some means and respectability.

Basse then offers us at one level an example of the variety and flexibility possible within early modern service culture: a household attendant who was also a self-assured poet and who may have moved within literary circles; a professional family servant who rose from the humble status of a page to style himself 'gent.'; and an individual who served different generations of the same family in a career which stretched from the final years of Elizabeth I's reign to the political upheaval of the civil war. It is also worth considering in this context, however, Wood's description of him as a 'retainer' later in the century (Bond 1893, 106). Basse's career straddled a shift in the meaning of that word and the actual practices which lay behind it, from the feudal sense of a nobleman's dependent who wore his livery, attended him as a mark of status in public and turned out to fight for him when necessary, to that simply of a household servant (often of long-standing) (*OED* 1.a.).¹³ That shift mirrored the change which has been identified as taking place in domestic service more generally during the seventeenth century, from a culture of important social bonds centred around the aristocratic household towards 'more contractual and occasional forms' of wage-based service (Rivlin 2012, 10; see also Evett 2005, 4). Wood probably used the term 'retainer' simply in the sense of a family employee who had contributed many years of service. Yet the feudal connotations which still linger around the word might give us pause.

We have already seen that Basse described himself in *Sword and Buckler* as wearing his master's livery and also there stressed his personal commitment to and attendance upon his lord. He even shaped a narrative voice for himself which displayed a martial air redolent of the retainer as servant-in-arms. The poem can be read in this sense as gesturing towards a traditional ethos of neo-feudal service. A concomitant sense of deep social

¹³ On the feudal role of the retainer see, for instance, Girouard 1978, 20. On the decline of that role see Girouard 1978, 84-85; Mertes 1988, 190-193. Note that Mertes mentions Basse at 191 but gives a misleading account of his biography.

connection with and reliance upon the Wenmans and their relations is in fact prominent throughout Basse's writing and is of particular significance for the *Polyhymnia* itself. That collection, assembled in the wake of the civil war, can also be read as emphasising themes relevant to an idealised but potentially nostalgic view of service, including loyalty, gratitude, respect and intimate co-dependence. Basse may have emphasised such themes for a variety of reasons: to give coherence to his own identity as a servant-poet and to unify a body of poetry composed over many years; to reflect values which had been genuinely important to a career stemming back into the sixteenth century; and perhaps also to counterpoint the traumas of the revolutionary period by invoking a cohesive social order which rested in part upon such ideals of service and mutual obligation. If these surmises are correct, then we can see Basse as representing a tradition of service which was in many ways in decline. At the same time we can see in his *Polyhymnia* an example of how that mode of service could be deployed as a literary trope or device with its own social and cultural connotations.

4. *The Polyhymnia Manuscript*

These ideas will be made clearer as we examine the particular context of the *Polyhymnia's* genesis. The Chetham's manuscript is a beautifully copied presentation volume in quarto, of 57 leaves (18.7 x 15 cms), copied in an attractive calligraphic-italic hand. The care taken over the manuscript is reflected in the almost complete absence of corrections. The *recto* of the first leaf bears the name 'Norreys' in what also appears to be a seventeenth-century hand. The collection itself begins on f. 4r with the title-page seen in figure 1.¹⁴ It consists of ten individually titled poems or poetic sequences, which together make up about 1583 lines of verse. Its contents are highly varied, and briefly comprise: an initial group of commendatory or panegyric poems, including two poems to members of the Norris/Bertie family and two sonnets to Elizabeth Cary, Lady Falkland; two connected poems on natural subjects, 'Of a Great Floud' and 'Of the Raine-bowe'; a long allegorical narrative entitled 'The Youth in the Boate'; a lyrical reflection upon 'A fayre & virtuous Ladye's Picture' and a country house poem 'On the House of a Noble Knight'; a second allegorical narrative, the 'Elegie of a rare singing Bull-fynch'; and a mock-epic poem 'Of the foure mile Course ... run over by two famous Footmen'.¹⁵ The final two leaves of the manuscript (f. 56 and f. 57) are blank. Page margins are ruled in red ink and names and key words are highlighted in the same colour throughout. All of the poems in

¹⁴ Folio numbers are my own as the manuscript is not currently foliated or paginated.

¹⁵ A precise listing of the contents can be found in the table provided in the Appendix below.

the manuscript were evidently copied at the same time, but whether the hand in which they are copied is Basse's own or that of a scribe is not yet clear.

The considered and skillful presentation of the manuscript is significant because it points to the volume's nature as a gift, given specifically to the residents of Rycote, who were kinsmen of the Wenmans. Richard Wenman's grandfather (also Richard) had married in the sixteenth century Isabel Williams, daughter of Lord Williams of Thame. Isabel's sister Margery had meanwhile married Henry Norris (eventually to be made a baron by Elizabeth I) and the families had thus been linked for several generations.¹⁶ The Norrises had a family seat at Rycote, only a few miles from Thame and Thame Park.¹⁷ The occasion upon which Basse made this offering to the family is not stated in the manuscript itself or recorded elsewhere, but the manuscript must have been produced between 1648 and Basse's death in 1653 or thereabouts.¹⁸ It was in the first instance addressed 'To the Right Noble and vertuous Lady, the Lady Bridget Countesse of Lindsey, Barronesse of Ersbie, & of Ricot, &c.' in a poem signed 'Your Honors most humbly devoted Servant Will: Basse' (see figures 2 and 3), a detail suggesting that the volume was intended particularly for her eyes. Bridget was the sole surviving child of Elizabeth Norris and Edward Wray, born in 1627. Her first marriage in 1645 to Edward Sackville (second son of the Earl of Dorset) was apparently cut short when he was murdered by a soldier at Chawley near Oxford in the following year (Lysons 1813, 473). She subsequently married Montague Bertie, second Earl of Lindsey, some time between 1646 and 1653 (when their first son was born), possibly on 8 November 1648.¹⁹ Basse's styling of Bridget as 'Countesse of Lindsey' means his poem must post-date her marriage. Another poem in the Chetham's manuscript, the 'Elegie of a rare singing Bull-fynch', was dated 'June 19: 1648' in its title, and the manuscript must also have been copied after this date.

¹⁶ See Bond's genealogical table: Bond 1893, inserted between 142 and 143, although the table may not be reliable in all respects.

¹⁷ For information on the history of the estate at Rycote see the Bodleian website, <<http://rycote.bodleian.ox.ac.uk>>, accessed 22 December 2014.

¹⁸ Describing the manuscript in 1850 Thomas Corser asserted that 'It has the autograph of Francis, Lord Norreys, on the flyleaf', leading Bond to conclude that it must have been begun between 1621, when Norris was made an earl, and 1623, when he died (Bond 1893, 140). There is, however, no evidence that the name on the flyleaf represents the earl's autograph, and it seems more probable that it is simply a mark of family ownership, added at some point after the manuscript was presented at Rycote. That this took place after Francis' death is indicated by the title of the second poem in the volume, 'Verses To the Right Honorable Francis Lord Norreys Earle of Berkshiere (in his dayes)'. Bond was unaware of the presence of that final phrase in the Corser manuscript.

¹⁹ The latter date is given by Thomas Delafield in his eighteenth-century manuscript 'history of Rycote', Bodleian MS. Gough Oxon. 24, f. 274. See <<http://rycote.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/thomas-delafields-history-of-rycote>>, accessed 22 December 2014.

The *Polyhymnia* (like the other work which Basse had set down in manuscript at this time – the *Pastorals*) gathered poems and recorded events and friendships from across the course of his career. The second poem, a panegyric addressed to Francis Norris, was evidently first composed whilst Norris was still alive. The poem to Elizabeth Cary was presumably written in 1622 when she accompanied her husband, who had just been appointed Lord Deputy, to Dublin. Another poem in the second manuscript of the *Polyhymnia*, ‘Verses on the Chapel of Wadham College consecration’, was probably written in the year of that event, 1613. The Chetham’s volume was, then, a presentation manuscript circulated within the boundaries of the Wenman’s Oxfordshire family network, and recording both the historical and contemporary connections between Basse and the Norris/Bertie household. The statement of these facts however raises questions. What were the broader implications of a servant of the Wenmans offering such a volume to their neighbours and relations? Why were there two versions of the manuscript?²⁰ And what might the manuscript itself add to our understanding of how literary texts circulated within the scribal medium?

Answering the first two questions, I will propose that the manuscript was intended by Basse not merely as a private bid for patronage or a commemoration of personal relationships, but as a more communal contribution to the social and historical bonds which linked Thame Park and Rycote. The purposes of such a contribution are likely to have been manifold. In the light of this suggestion the differing versions of the *Polyhymnia* will be read as reciprocal counterparts, repeating certain materials in order to reflect the shared heritage of the two households, whilst in other ways being tailored to suit the interests of their individual occupants. This reading portrays Basse serving a subtle but integral role in the Wenman’s familial affairs, and offers us an interesting and suggestive example of the complex range of purposes that a presentation manuscript could fulfill.

Both the Chetham’s *Polyhymnia* and the still-untraced version which Bond called the ‘Cole’ manuscript, and which was described in the late eighteenth century, made clear their dedicatory and panegyric intent towards the Norris/Bertie family. Both opened with Basse’s poem to Lady Bridget Bertie, a poem which praised the countess by claiming that she embodied all of the historical virtues of the Norris line:

Renowned Ricot’s garlands still are seene
 Like to the Bayes that on Pernassus growes,
 ...
 As fresh, as if they yesterday had beene.

²⁰ For a comparison of their respective contents see the table in the Appendix.

And you (Rare Lady) both in birth & spirit,
The only heire that all their worthes inherit. (f. 5v)

Not only did Basse picture her as the sole inheritor of the family's glories, he also claimed that it was at her personal request that he was presenting his poems (stanza 4, f. 6r), exhibiting his close relationship with the countess and her household. Both versions of the manuscript followed this poem with his verses addressed to her grandfather Francis, the former lord of Rycote. This was another poem of extravagant praise which sought 'to frame / True honours to the great Norrey'sian name' (f. 7v). Both manuscripts also included a poem celebrating Wytham House (often known as Wytham Abbey), another country seat of the Norrises in Oxfordshire.²¹

The two versions of the *Polyhymnia* also, however, contained important differences. What the table in the Appendix shows is that the 'Cole' manuscript included poems specifically relevant to the Wenmans of Thame Park, whilst the Chetham's manuscript replaced these with poems of a more general tenor, or which had some relevance to Rycote which cannot now be discerned. The 'Cole' manuscript included a poem on Richard Wenman's sister-in-law, Lady Aungier, and acrostics on his first wife and daughters. It also included a poem 'On Caversham ... House', which Bond suggested was left out of the Rycote or Chetham's *Polyhymnia* because there was some kind of feud between the Norrises and Caversham's owners, the Knollys (Bond 1893, 148, n. 2). In their place the Chetham's manuscript included 'Of a Great Floud', 'Of the Raine-bowe' and 'Of Pen and Pensill, vppon A fayre & virtuous Ladye's Picture', all of which potentially alluded to events or objects linked to the estate at Rycote, although this was not made explicit in the poems themselves. There was thus a subtle counterpoint between the manuscripts. Both celebrated the Norris/Bertie family, but one seems to have been aimed at the Norrises themselves, whilst the other appears to have been prepared for their kinsmen at Thame Park. They represented an act of scribal publication in which both families were invited to engage and hence offered to make a concrete intervention into the social and familial relationship between the two households.

This idea can be understood more clearly through consideration of the poem to Bridget Bertie that we have already examined. In the context of the Chetham's manuscript, gifted to the countess herself, the poem would have acted as a conventional gesture of praise and flattery. In the 'Cole' manuscript, likely circulated at Thame Park, the poem would have served as a reminder to

²¹ 'On the House of a Noble Knight, & worthy favourer Of my Muse' was presumably the same poem as 'Of Witham House, Oxfordshire, the house of a noble Knight, and favourer of my Muse'; see Appendix.

the Wenmans of the prestige and virtue of their nearby relations – a reminder which was blended in the collection as a whole with praise of some of their own members, perhaps with the idea of demonstrating the virtues which the two dynasties shared. The collection, carefully reshaped, could thus act as a buttress of dynastic pride and familial identity for both households, with Basse acting as a sort of anchor or conduit between the two. Because the Chetham's *Polyhymnia* did not contain any poems explicitly praising members of the Wenman family, its power to link the households in this way might appear more tenuous. What must be remembered however is that, in the Rycote manuscript, Basse himself acted as the principal link back to Thame Park and the Wenmans, meaning that his own professions of respect, and indeed his presentation of the gift itself, could serve to evoke the connection between the estates.

Several reasons can be posited as to why a pair of manuscripts touching upon the links between the residents of Thame Park and Rycote might have been assembled in the years between 1648 and 1653. The heads of the two households supported opposing sides during the civil war, Thomas Wenman as a parliamentarian and Montague Bertie as a royalist, yet both were defined by their committed efforts as peace commissioners seeking to reach an accommodation between the king and parliament (Carlyle 2004; Smith 2004). We do not know how the war affected the other members of those communities which lived in and around the two estates, but their shared proximity to the royalist headquarters at Oxford means that they were each likely to have experienced disruption, and there is evidence that both houses were occupied by royalist forces at different points (Lobel, 1962, 160-178).²² Basse may well have been attempting to diminish the memory of internal divisions and to heal rifts caused by the war when he shaped a collection dwelling on the links between the two households. Lack of any direct mention of the war may in this context have been a careful diplomatic gesture. If this was the case, then his project may have had particular significance once the war had ended, when both Wenman and Bertie appear to have withdrawn to their estates, and when there would have been a palpable need to rehabilitate local relationships. Lady Bridget's second marriage introduced a new branch into the family network and may itself have stimulated the desire for a renewal of relations between the houses, even if the *Polyhymnia* did not celebrate that event directly. The relative calm of the years following the war may also have offered an opportunity for the revival of cultural activity within households such as those of Thame Park and Rycote, thus appearing to Basse as an opportune moment in which

²² Information on the Bodleian Rycote website, <<http://rycote.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/the-english-civil-wars-and-Interregnum>>, accessed 22 December 2014.

to circulate a collection which combined fresh creativity with nostalgia for past generations and events.²³

The nature of Basse's poetry as a function of his service role is key in this regard, since it was only by drawing upon his established reputation as a servant of the Wenmans and by matching his rhetorical strategies to his status as such that he could convincingly have contributed to the familial dynamics of his employers and patrons. He made that function visible in the *Polyhymnia* through a variety of means. The first and most obvious of these was his manipulation of the conventional rhetorical modes of dedication and panegyric. We have already seen that the collection as a whole was offered in the first poem to Bridget Bertie who, Basse claims, was called 'Polihymnia' by her parents (f. 5v) and therefore gave the collection its name. The poem combines the gesture of offering and dedicating the collection to Bertie with the claim that the poems themselves rely upon her for their emergence:

For had not you, into this twofold light
Of Muse-befreinding Phoebus, & your owne
Commanded them, my slender Poems might
In darke obscuritie haue slept vnknowne,
Whence, so by you redeem'd, These (as your right,
Illustrious Lady) wait on you alone,
Their life to lengthen, by depending on
Your Name & vertues ... (f. 6r)

Basse thus uses the dedication to register his own deferential humility and reliance upon the dedicatee. This was a technique which had been employed throughout his writings. The *Pastoral Elegies* of 1602 were dedicated to Lady Tasburgh, Richard Wenman's mother, in recognition of her 'honourable encouragements' and with the hope that in the future he would be able 'to make some more acceptable composition with your bounty' (Bond 1893, 35). The latter phrase implied that patronage like hers was integral to his own efforts as a writer. Despite the fact that it was an elegy mourning the death of Prince Henry, *Great Brittaines Sunnes-Set* was dedicated to Richard Wenman himself (Bond 1893, 91) and, though the work treated an event of national significance, approached its topic by invoking the shared grief of master and servant. That approach culminated in a remarkable image of sympathetic unity which figured the poet as simultaneously serving and being served by his lord:

²³ It is worth noting that if a professional scribe was hired to produce the manuscript, rather than it being copied by Basse himself, then this would indicate the seriousness with which it was treated by the Wenmans (who would presumably have commissioned such work) and provide further evidence both of the collection's real significance as a contribution to inter-family relations, and of the Wenmans' own willingness to employ Basse as an agent of some prominence within their personal affairs.

To you I therefore weepe: To you alone
 I shew the image of your teares, in mine;
 That mine (by shewing your teares) may be show'n
 To be like yours, so faithfull, so divine ... (Bond 1893, 93)

Again then Basse's poetic offering in fact revealed itself to be an expression of his own reliance upon and obligation to his addressee.

Allied to the act of dedication was the panegyric purpose of much of the poetry in the *Polyhymnia* manuscripts, evident in the Chetham's *Polyhymnia* in the poems treating Bridget Bertie, Francis Norris, Elizabeth Cary and the 'Noble Knight' of Wytham House. Again though, Basse's praise is often one which conceives itself as reliant upon the very subjects he praises. In his poem to Francis Norris he asks:

... what doth moue
 The Lawrell-louing Phoebus to allow
 The neuer fadeing favours of his love
 To winde themselues about my simple brow? (f. 7v)

He goes on to suggest that it is Apollo's desire to see Norris praised, rather than anything to do with his own worth as a poet, and concludes 'I iustly owe my Musique to this name' (f. 8v). He similarly begins his poem to Elizabeth Cary by asking 'What happy song might my Muse take in hand / (Great Lady) to deserue your Muses eare?' (f. 9r), again implying that the driving force behind any poetic success he might achieve resided with Cary as its addressee rather than with Basse himself as author. Thus, although Basse's panegyrics undoubtedly offered praise as one aspect of his duty as a servant and client, they also expressed an intimate sense of professional and artistic reliance upon those who facilitated, sanctioned and received his work.

This theme of mutual creative dependence is echoed in Basse's depictions of the idealised social order which he credits his patrons with maintaining on their estates. His poem to Francis Norris celebrates in Rycote a place:

Where ample lands, in ample hands are plac'd
 And ancient deeds with ancient coats descend:
 Where Noble blood combin'd with Noble spirit
 Forefathers fames, doth with their formes inherit.

...
 Where Loyalty, with Piety is infus'd,
 And publike rights are cherish'd with their owne ... (f. 8r)

The flourishing of the estate here rests upon the liberality of its lords and their respect for 'publike rights', but the mutual contract of service between the owners of Rycote and their dependents also offers the Norrises a key sphere in which to demonstrate their virtue and nobility. They are likewise rewarded

in this regard with the gift of Basse's praise. The same message is implicit in the poem 'On the House of a Noble Knight' which, in a conventional conceit of the country house poem, dwells upon the munificence of the house and its lord towards all classes of resident and guest:

The stately Chimney peece there, not disdaynes
 T' expose her herrauldry, to th'smokey staynes
 Of lib'rall fires, nor doth the daynty roome
 Nicely distast, the hot and dayly fume
 Of the full furnish'd board; but to the tast
 As to the eye, affordes all free repast,
 And in proportion such, as to the bare
 And indigent, still left a pious share.
 Wherin I marke, That what sometimes presents
 Least shew, may proue the best of ornaments.
 A dwelling rich, that has a ragged dore,
 Armes much adorne *the* gate, but almes much more. (ff. 44r-v)

The poem presents an idealised picture of estate hierarchy in which the generosity of its lord fulfils the needs of its lowlier members. This is a mutual economy however and what is crucial for the functioning of both this poem and the *Polyhymnia* as a whole is the role that Basse and his poetry play. As a servant and client Basse implicitly depicts himself as a beneficiary of his patron's magnanimity, but as a poet he contributes to and sustains the estate's reciprocal economy with the gift of his recognition and praise. By reflecting rhetorically in poems such as these his unique position as a servant-poet who both depended upon and benefited his addressees, he would almost certainly have given credence to his own attempt to reinforce the ties between Thame Park and Rycote.

We have already noted that Basse may have undertaken that attempt in direct response to the civil war, returning to poems which evoked idealised memories of harmonious estate life as a way of ameliorating some of the divisions and disturbances which the conflict had thrown up. If that was the case, then his project was also surely aided by his very real status as such a long-standing employee. Basse may have been able to call upon his rhetorical skill in celebrating values of mutual respect and obligation but, with a career in service to the Wenmans lasting half a century, he also stood as a tangible embodiment of such values. He would in this sense have been both a fitting and a convincing mouthpiece for messages of goodwill, friendship or reconciliation. His proven fidelity may also have granted him a somewhat privileged position in offering such messages to his superiors. Certainly it would have given a particular poignancy to the *Polyhymnia's* nostalgic tone, since Basse could claim to offer living memories of happier (or at least more idealised) moments in the families' history, and to have witnessed first-hand those amities they may have been seeking to restore.

The above interpretation reveals the *Polyhymnia* to be a rich and multifaceted example of the way a presentation manuscript could be employed in early modern England. Such manuscripts are, understandably, most often understood as tools for soliciting material patronage or preferment from patrons or dedicatees. Henry Woudhuysen has said that 'The presentation manuscript, the book as gift ... was a powerful weapon in the quest for patronage' which 'flattered the recipient's vanity and could win the donor a reward of some kind' (1996, 90). Manuscripts in the author's own hand 'must have made, or at least have been intended to make, a particularly personal appeal' (88). Harold Love has similarly said that 'In relationships of patronage and dependence, the client would present manuscripts upwards, either as a bid for reward or an expression of gratitude' (1998, 179). What is interesting about the *Polyhymnia* (in both its forms) is that although Basse was indeed an employee and client of his addressees, the collection seems to reveal a far more complex set of functions than the mere solicitation of reward or favour. Indeed, Basse's age, experience and apparent independence of means by this stage of his life suggest that the collection probably did not embody a quest for preferment in any conventional sense, since his position and security were already well established. The *Polyhymnia* undoubtedly wove together threads of recognition, gratitude and deference, and may have served in part to maintain his esteem amongst his addressees as he aged. It also, however, recorded details about the history and social connections of the Wenman and Norris families, made a potentially significant intervention into the cultural politics of their Oxfordshire milieu and indicated Basse's own importance within that milieu. It allowed Basse to draw together and preserve elements of his own biography and poetic achievement, to reflect on social themes and, as we shall see below, to pursue literary agendas which spread beyond the reiteration of personal and professional obligations alone. Perhaps it will seem obvious to state that presentation manuscripts were often likely to have enfolded multiple cultural functions. Yet the Chetham's *Polyhymnia* offers us a particularly interesting example of how this could work in practice. It may be valuable to scholars in the future asking how such manuscripts' various uses related to one another, and especially how their imbrication in patronage relationships was affected by the more personal creative and ideological imperatives of their authors and/or scribes.

5. *Other Aspects of the Polyhymnia*

With this in mind it is significant that the *Polyhymnia* constituted not only a tool of service deployed in Basse's relationships with his employers and patrons, but also a space within which he explored the poetic possibilities of a wider range of social subjects and perspectives. Many of these seem likely to have derived from his experiences as a figure who mediated between different

ranks and levels of society within his own locale, and perhaps particularly his experiences as a servant. The three longest and most distinctive poems in the Chetham's manuscript – 'The Youth in the Boate', 'An Elegie of a rare singing Bull-fynch', and 'Of the foure mile Course on Bayards-greene, sixe times run over by two famous Footmen Patrique Dorning & William O-Farrell' – are heterogeneous in their genre and subject-matter, but also share certain key features which are crucial in this regard. 'The Youth in the Boate' is a long allegorical narrative in two parts, reminiscent of the ballad form in its use of what is often called common metre, and brought to a conclusion with a 'Morall' advocating acceptance of those things which are most beneficial to us, even where they do not accord with our loftiest desires or aspirations. The poem counterpoints the stories of two contrasting figures: a wealthy youth forced to cast a contemptuous woman with whom he is besotted from his boat, and a poor fisherman's son who rescues and finds love with the castaway. The 'Elegie of a rare singing Bull-fynch' is in part a mock-elegy and in part a comic animal fable which describes the birds who attend the bullfinch's funeral. It again combines moralisation of the various birds' fitness or otherwise to attend the event with an engaging narrative style, underpinned by its swiftly moving iambic tetrameter couplets. 'Of the foure mile Course on Bayards-greene' is, as its title implies, a lighthearted mock-epic account of a race between two footmen which took place at Baynards Green, just less than twenty miles north of Oxford. It combines an entertaining account of the race itself with a coda (evidently written later) confessing that Basse composed this high-spirited poem in his youth, and offering a more sober account of the spiritual virtues necessary to win the soul's 'race' toward heavenly redemption.

What can immediately be said about these poems is that they turn from the sophisticated rhetoric of panegyric and commendation evident in the poems quoted above to explore genres and forms of a more accessible and popular kind. They experiment with genres including fable, parable and allegory, and combine humour with a strong narrative instinct and, where appropriate, straightforward moral exposition. To this extent they again raise the question of whether Basse produced such poems to be enjoyed by a wide domestic audience, including perhaps not only his noble patrons and their children but their servants as well. Such a conclusion would reinforce our understanding of Basse's poetry as an extension of his service role, but at the same time indicate his interest in addressing strata of the estate community (at either Thame Park or Rycote) beyond those high-ranking members whose favour underpinned his position.

This possibility is made more probable by the nature of the subject matter which Basse treats in these poems. Whilst the first part of 'The Youth in the Boate' describes the journey of a somewhat courtly figure, who sails in an ornate boat with 'Oares [of] Ivory' and 'Sterne [of] guilt' (f. 12v) and is largely consumed by his own introspective amatory quandaries, the second part (which is substantially longer) draws an affectionate picture of the working-class fisherman's son and

his parents. That picture features carefully selected details of the fishermen's everyday existence – the 'plaine & poore' condition of their boat (which they are nevertheless content with) (f. 21v); the son's 'motley gowne' (f. 23v); the 'country antidot[s]' his neighbours bring to revive the half-drowned woman (f. 24r). It also incorporates repeated arguments for the virtue of the meek and lowly, suggesting that a 'humble' heart so pleases heaven that '[i]t, mercy out of raging seas, / And helpe from ruine drawes' (f. 33r), and that 'want do's make *vs* better men / Then wealth' (f. 37v). In this context it is significant that Basse's narrator explicitly praises the castaway's decision to remain with the fishermen, whilst fashioning for himself the narratorial persona of a 'simple Swayne' (f. 42r), who professes his own lack of learning and his 'simple tongue' (f. 20v).

The 'Elegie of a ... Bull-fynch', because of the specific date given in its full title ('June 19: 1648'), might be thought to encode some political allegory relating to the second civil war. Yet if such an allegory is present it is extremely hard to decipher, and it may be that the poem was instead provoked by the real (if trivial) death of a pet and actually sought to diffuse or turn away from the realities of the war. Thus, although the narrator suggests that the bullfinch may have died of 'greife / To see and feele so cold a June' (f. 45v), perhaps in reference to the resumption of fighting in the summer of 1648, he then digresses self-consciously into lighter terrain, so that the poem becomes in part a kind of satire on local or provincial society. The idle cuckoo is criticised as one 'that liues at large, / And on the parish leaues his charge' (f. 47v) whilst the narrative concludes with Basse proclaiming:

My Muses meaning, it is this,
 Too much retir'dnesse, feare, or folly,
 Jearing, or rude, or melancholly,
 To civill meetings (if they list)
 May come, but if away not mis'd.
 Who is too much himselfe alone,
 Is nones companion but his owne.
 Who only is for others, he
 Must to himselfe needs wanting be.
 ...
 Dissembling, foolish, faynt, or dull,
 Doe nothing honest to the full.
 But to be good, (without deceit)
 In all good actions, that's compleate. (ff. 49v-50r)

The poem's reference to the 'parish' and to 'civill meetings' suggests that it has become a gentle skit upon parochial life, and whilst it is hard to tell whether its facetious tone was actually aimed at the stock character types it depicted or provincial morality more generally, either may have inspired knowing amusement when delivered by Basse in the environs of Thame Park or Moreton.

‘Of the four mile Course’ is interesting in this regard because it explicitly takes two racing footmen as its subject, as well as a country sport which (like Dover’s ‘Cotswold Games’) would probably have provided entertainment to a wide demographic of local residents. The poem is crucial to our discussion in that it formed the culmination point of both versions of the *Polyhymnia* – a work which occupied a significant position as the final piece in the collection – but at the same time placed serving subjects unapologetically at its centre. It is true that the poem adopts a mock-epic style in its treatment of the footrace, but it is important to note that this does not translate into straightforward mockery or denigration of the footmen themselves. The tone of the poem is in fact irreverent and celebratory and whilst it is humorous in its portrayal, also insinuates that the footmen themselves are individuals not unworthy of consideration and commemoration. Thus the poem opens:

The Pegasean Lady, that the deeds
 Of mighty sinnewed, & well-dieted steeds,
 Was sometime pleas’d, to memorize, among
 The weightier subjects of her numerous song,
 Lest where inferiour actions are related,
 Mens worthyer acts should passe vncelebrated,
 Now sings: the six-fold Race ... (f. 50v)

The suggestion of a parallel here between the footmen and ‘well-dieted steeds’ exhibits the bathetic comedy typical of mock-epic. However the imputation of the third couplet, that their exertions should in fact be viewed as ‘worthyer acts’, can be read as a defense of Basse’s portrayal of the serving-class in his poetry. Thus, after an energetic account of the race (which O’Farrell eventually wins), the poem concludes on an elegiac note which blends awareness of the frivolity of his subject with a nostalgic impetus to record and preserve the provincial scene:

Thus not alone with print of Charriot wheele
 Or forged plate of Coursers barbed heele,
 Hath this Olympus euer trampled been,
 But now and then, the buskin trac’d the Greene
 And th’infant Eyebright, and the dasye proud
 Vnder the whisking sandall scarsely bow’d
 When as this Muse & Course were neighbours young
 And one lent Eccho to the others song
 Those then, that of perenniall Poesie mis’d
 Vanish’d in their owne shouts, These here subsist
 In Shepherds songs (though litle state it beares,
 Yet made heroicall, by heroicall eares. (ff. 52v-53r)

The final line reiterates Basse’s characteristic argument that it was in part his noble audience which elevated his poetry. There is also however a contrasting note of affection for his serving subjects, evident in the assertion that those who had

otherwise 'Vanish'd ... here subsist / In Shepherds songs'. The lines recognise that Basse's poem has memorialised lives that would otherwise be forgotten, and imply that such lives are worth memorialising, even if they are of 'litle state' to many eyes. They also assert this as an important function of Basse's own verse.

As will already be evident, to point this out is not to suggest that such poems outwardly challenged the orderly social ethos which Basse elsewhere invoked. These works were in fact an integral part of the collection which he offered to his employers, and can often be interpreted as endeavouring to buttress a hierarchical outlook. Thus 'The Youth in the Boate', whilst dwelling on the dignity of its working-class characters, also endorses the power of their patrons and benefactors. Basse-as-narrator muses that the 'gracious heau'ens, for poor ones sake / Doe often blesse the greater' and imagines a 'happy heart, that most depends / For helpes, on hands aboue' (f. 38v), again seeming to idealize a social system based around responsibly administered aristocratic largesse. Similarly the 'Elegie', in condemning those birds who are 'Proud, idle, careless, ignorant', lack 'good manners', and only 'seeme to mourne / By their outsides' (ff. 47v-58r), attacked many of the faults which Basse had specifically defended the serving class from in the *Sword and Buckler* at the start of his career, and which were a classic preoccupation of didactic literature about service in the period (see, for instance, Rivlin 2012, 15).²⁴ The poem can thus be read as implicitly promulgating the values of good and loyal service whilst also reflecting on communal relations more generally.

'Of the four mile Course' is again a crucial culmination point in this respect, for the way it simultaneously revels in and moderates its portrayal of the footmen. We have already seen that Basse defended his choice of subject-matter whilst acknowledging the role of his noble auditors in endorsing his verse. He went on to echo this duality at the end of the poem. Noting his own youth when he had composed the main body of the narrative, he suggested that it might still 'please some men / (Perchance) as youthfull now, as I was then' (f. 53r), but also confessed the limited consequence of such 'trivially pastime[s]', before turning to the spiritual message of his revised conclusion. He thus offered a restrained perspective on the import of his portrayal of Dorning and O'Farrell, whilst also refusing to dismiss them out-of-hand as figures of literary interest.

Hopefully it will by now be clear that the poetry of the *Polyhymnia* constituted not only a vehicle by which Basse could enact aspects of the service role he performed for the Wenmans and their relations, but also a more variegated creative enterprise. The poems described above moved away from courtly panegyric and the solicitation of patronage, attached value to servant

²⁴ Such literature was often keen to condemn 'eye-service', which appeared outwardly loyal but hid self-interested motives.

figures and scenes from common life, and began to explore the ways in which poetic form could be used to reflect or register diverse aspects of Basse's own experience as a servant. As a result the *Polyhymnia* gives us a glimpse both of literature shaping service, and of service being used to shape literature. I would like to conclude by asking how its rediscovery might be useful to scholars studying the intersection between these two fields in the future.

6. *Future Potential*

The issue I turn to first is one of subjectivity. Important recent studies have become interested in the way the labours of work and service (and their opposites – unemployment and poverty) were related to the subjective experience of members of the lower and working classes.²⁵ Yet it is also the case that investigations of early modern service have often had to rely upon literary representations of servants and workers, commonly in combination with contemporary polemical tracts on the subject, because of the lack of writings left by actual servants themselves (see, for instance, Anderson 2005, 9). Basse then is immediately of interest because he worked for an extended period as both retainer and poet, and explored many themes relevant to service fulsomely in his work. He provides us with the opportunity to study the poems of a writer who emerged from an often hidden or ignored sector of society, in a body of non-canonical texts which have themselves been largely forgotten, perhaps in part because of Basse's relatively humble status.²⁶ He also offers us a provincial perspective, fostered certainly in the country houses of wealthy Oxfordshire landowners, but at some distance (for most of his life, it would seem) from the London hubs of the Inns of Court, the court itself, Parliament, and even the now much-studied theatres.

Basse's work then might be used to think further about how early modern service culture could be viewed from within, and offers the opportunity to study both the way an early modern servant articulated his own sense of self and the way he portrayed other servants and members of the working class. I have broached a relatively conservative reading of the *Polyhymnia* here, in which Basse apparently offered no resistance to or critique of his professional position, and instead expressed gratitude about his status as a beneficiary of reciprocal estate communities founded on rank and patronage. Such a reading might itself be of interest in relation to ideas such as those of David Evett's concerning 'volitional primacy' (2005, 27-28 and chapter 7 *passim*), namely the means by which servants could construe service as a product of choice rather than imposition (and hence perhaps discover in it the possibilities of

²⁵ See, for instance, Fumerton 2006; Dowd and Korda 2011, especially the introduction.

²⁶ On the turn towards non-canonical texts see, for instance, Howard 2011, 244.

satisfaction or self-fulfilment). Equally, though other critics might discover possibilities for tension or conflict in his writing, conscious or unconscious, and hence relate it to some of the fault lines inherent in any culture based fundamentally upon service. What for instance were the implications of juxtaposing courtly panegyric with works which portrayed and idealised figures of lower rank in the *Polyhymnia*? What were Basse's intentions when he offered to his patrons moralistic narratives which commended beneficence and good governance whilst also praising, on occasion, the meek and lowly?

Studies of service have often turned to the problem of power (Evet 2005, 21), how it was negotiated in relationships between servants and their employers, and how it underpinned literary representations of service. The *Polyhymnia* provokes questions on this topic because, whilst it proclaims to offer poetry in service to its dedicatees, the nature of the manuscript also raises questions about Basse's own agency and influence as an intermediary in family affairs and a representative of the Wenmans. Was he acting alone or with their blessing when he presented his gift to the countess of Lindsey? How did his poetry serve to advance his own position and status as a servant? And how might the Wenmans have benefited from his capabilities as a medium of communication and display? In raising such questions the Chetham's manuscript has the potential to contribute to future studies of the relationship between service and power, especially where such studies are interested in the servant's point of view.

The issue of performance may well be key in this regard. Elizabeth Rivlin has suggested that as peripatetic, wage-based service displaced more traditional, intimate bonds between servants and their employers, service became inherently more performative (Rivlin 2012, 17). Basse's career though suggests a more complex story. His poetry seems to offer evidence of the intimate place poetic performance could occupy in a life of committed personal service, yet it must also have functioned in part as a commodity for soliciting favour and reward. The *Polyhymnia*, similarly, testifies to the power of deeply-felt personal alliances, but may itself be a specially prepared performance designed to sure up such alliances under the pressure of fragmentation. What then, it might be asked, did the literary text as performance allow Basse to bring to his service role, what tensions did his performances reveal, and how did these relate to wider changes in service culture over the course of the seventeenth century?

I wish to mention finally some of the ways in which an awareness of Basse's professional identity might advance literary study, rather than vice versa. The most evident of these concerns genre. Basse's innovative engagement with genre was one of his defining characteristics as a poet, and the *Polyhymnia* itself offers fulsome evidence of his skill in this regard. The texts contained therein thus have much to offer scholars interested in the way writers working from a service perspective could reshape and deploy established literary forms

for their own purposes. I should also note here that this is not only true of the *Polyhymnia*, which needs to be set in the context of Basse's work as a whole in order to be fully understood. Many of Basse's other writings suggest the importance of his experience as a servant to his literary enterprise – from its obvious role in *Sword and Buckler*, where he used poetry explicitly to defend the serving class, to the *Three Pastoral Elegies*, where he subtly used the first-person narrative perspective of an attendant figure to reveal the amorous tribulations of the poem's other courtly protagonists. Studying such work might provoke further reflection on the way service itself could function as a literary trope and device.

The *Polyhymnia's* idealisation of hierarchical and reciprocal local society in the wake of the civil war also raises questions about the manuscript's political and ideological significance. As we have already seen, Basse was possibly a friend or acquaintance of the royalist and Anglican writer Izaak Walton. With this in mind the nostalgic tenor of the *Polyhymnia* might be read as betraying a conservative distaste, of which Walton would have approved, for currents of social radicalism unleashed by the revolution. His work then usefully proposes the question of how service was used as a political or social signifier, in both literary texts and elsewhere, during the decades of the civil war and interregnum, and particularly of how Basse's evocation of a nostalgic social order related him to other authors who made service their subject at that time. This said, the *Polyhymnia* did not express a duty of service either to king or parliament (or indeed to any other political faction), and so the manuscript also raises questions about how ideologies of service and social hierarchy were employed beyond the spheres of rigidly partisan and polemical discourse, and how factors such as localism and personal identity could inflect literary responses to the upheavals of the war.

7. Conclusion

The questions and avenues of study proposed above are not intended to be definitive or limiting. They are offered instead in order to demonstrate the possibilities inherent in a return to Basse's work, and some of the rewards which might result from his incorporation into the study of early modern service. The *Polyhymnia* manuscript itself is a beautiful and intriguing material object which includes a substantial quantity of unpublished poetry deserving of further study. It is of particular value though, as I hope I have shown, for offering us an insight into the first-hand literary endeavours of a writer whose long career was shaped by the profession of service, and whose work was defined by a constant interplay between these aspects of his life.

Appendix

Contents of the Chetham's ('Corser') MS	Contents of the 'Cole' MS (drawn from Bond 1893, 147-148)
'To the Right Noble and vertuous Lady, the Lady Bridget Countesse of Lindsey, Barronesse of Ersbie, & of Ricot &c.' (ff. 5r-6r)	'To the Right noble and virtuous Lady, the Lady Bridget, Countess of Lindsey, and Baroness of Eresbie and Ricot, in verse'.
'Verses To the Right Honorable Francis Lord Norreys Earle of Berkshiere (in his dayes)' (ff. 7r-8v)	'To the Right Hon. Francis Lord Norreys, Earl of Berkshire (in his dayes).'
'To the Lady Falkland vppon her goeing into Ireland. 2. Sonnets.' (ff. 9r-9v)	'To the Right Hon. The Lady Aungier (then wife of Sir Thos. Wenman) upon her coming out of Ireland, and return thither.'
'Of a great Flood.' (ff. 9v-10r)	'To the Right Hon. the Lady Viscountess Falkland, upon her going into Ireland, two Sonnets.'
'Of the Raine-bowe.' (ff. 10r-10v)	'The Youth in the Boat.'
'The Youth in the Boate.' (ff. 11r-41v) (including: 'The Second part Of the The Youth in the Boate' (ff. 19r-39v) and 'The Morall' (ff. 40r-41v)	'Acrosticks.' 'Of the truly noble, virtuous, and learned Lady, the Lady Agnes Wenman.' 'Of the Lady Penelope Dynham.' 'Of Mrs. Jane Wenman.'
'Of Pen and Pensill, vppon A fayre & virtuous Ladyes Picture.' (ff. 42r-42v)	'Verses on the Chapel of Wadham College consecration, St. Peter's Day 1613.'
'On the House of a Noble Knight, & worthy favourer Of my Muse.' (ff. 43r-44v)	'On Caversham or Causham House.'
'An Elegie of a rare singing Bull-fynch, found dead in his Cage in the cold & wet June 19: 1648.' (ff. 45r-50r)	'Of Witham House, Oxfordshire, the house of a noble Knight, and favourer of my Muse.'
'Of the foure mile Course on Bayards-greene, sixe times run over by two famous Footmen Patrique Dorning & William O-Farrell.' (ff. 50v-55r and including: 'The Spirituall Race', ff. 53v-55r)	'Elegy on a Bullfinch, 1648.'
	'Of the Four Mile Course of Bayardes Green, sixe times over, by two famous Irish footmen, Patrick Dorning and William O'Farrell.'
	'L'Envoy.'

Comparison of the contents of the variant manuscripts of the *Polyhymnia*

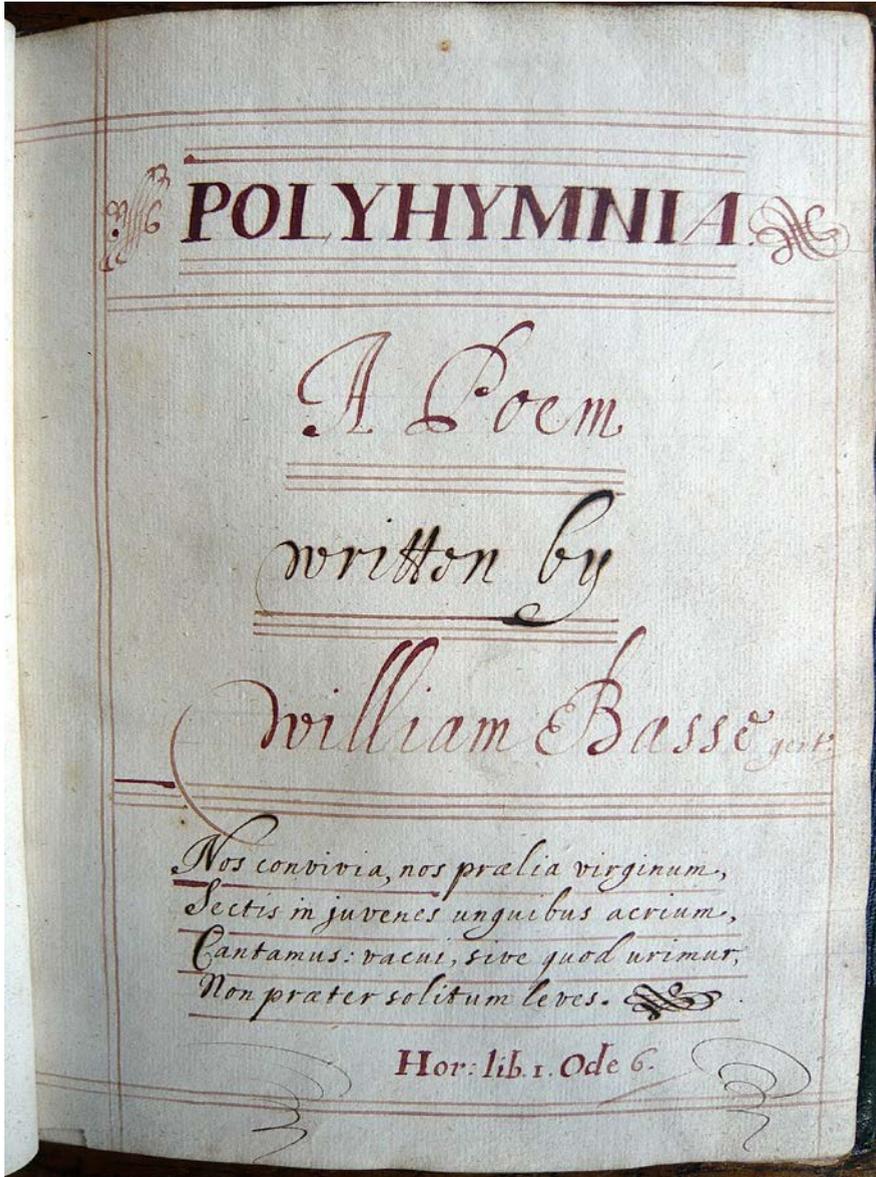


Fig. 1 - Title-page of William Basse's *Polyhymnia*: Chetham's Library, Manchester, MS Mun.A.3.54, f. 4r (all images reproduced by permission of Chetham's Library)

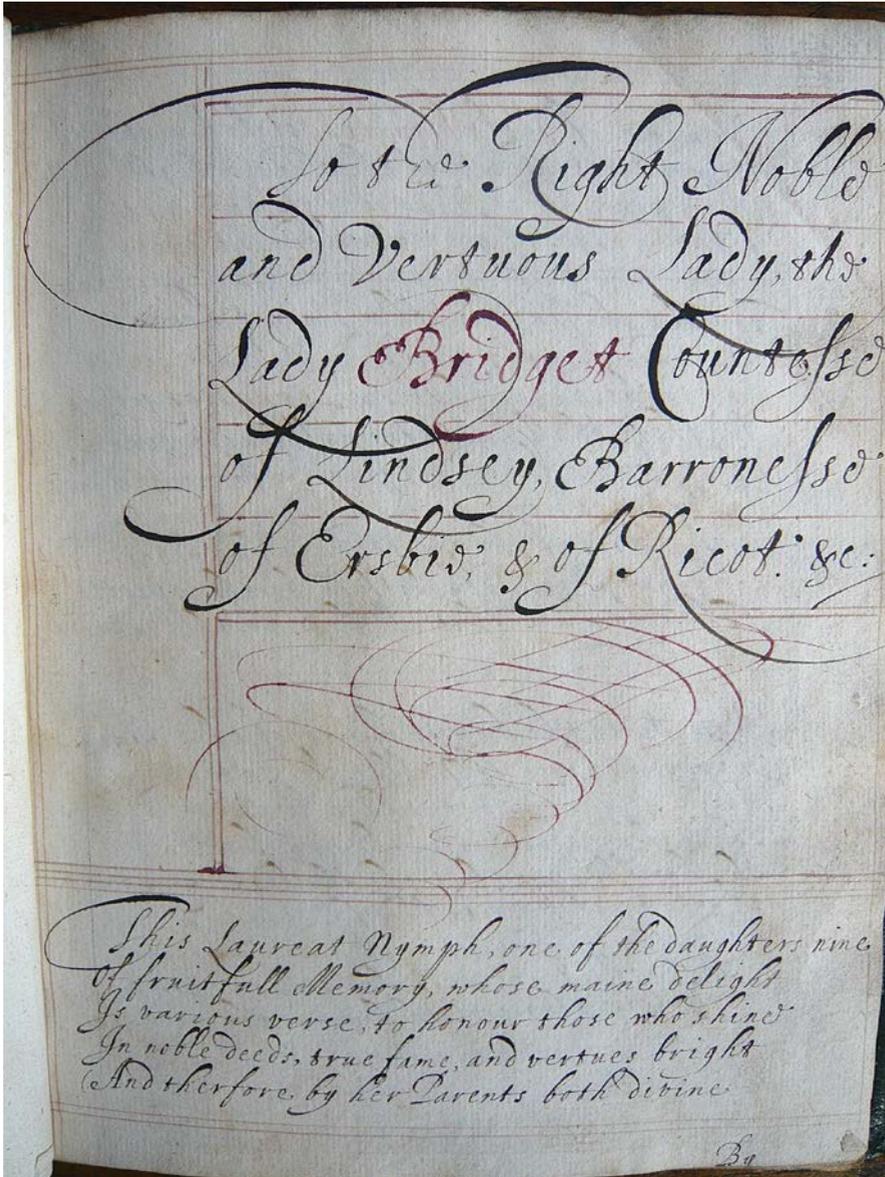


Fig. 2 - Title of the collection's opening poem to Bridget Bertie, countess of Lindsey, f. 5r

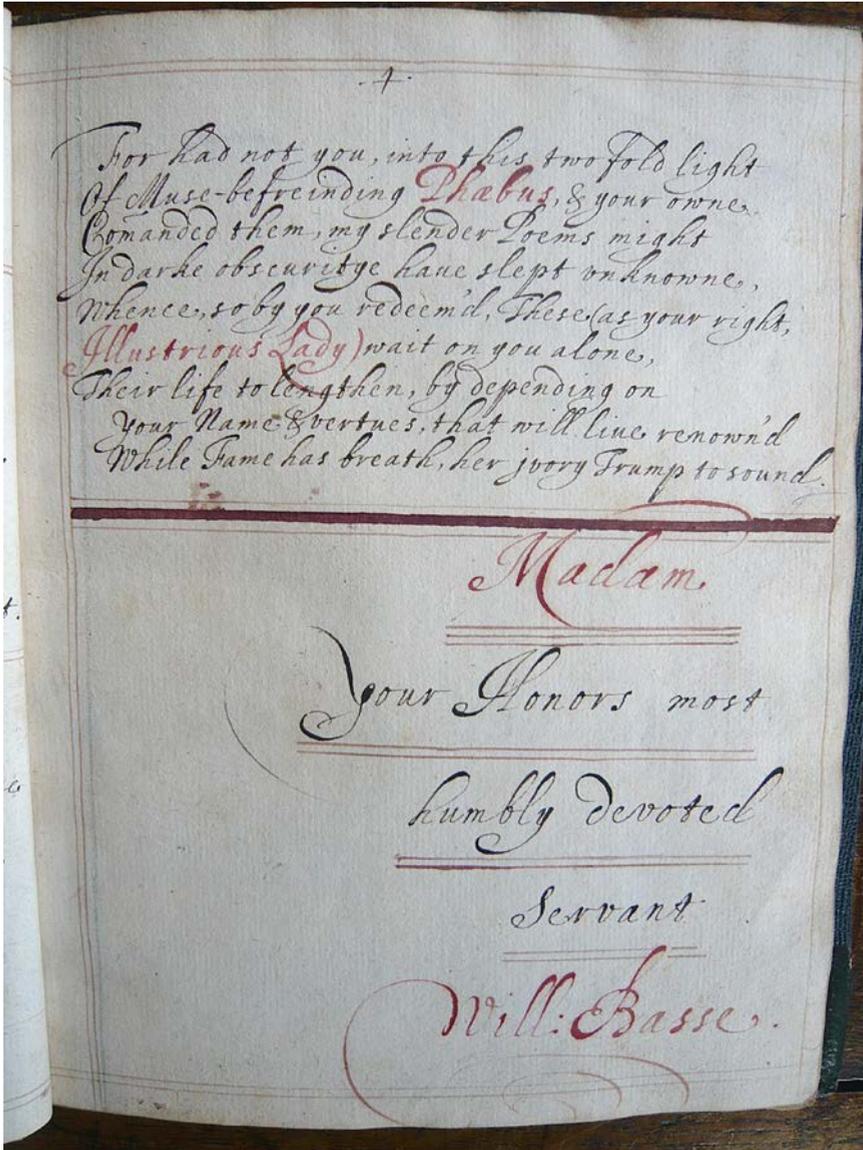


Fig. 3 - Subscription of the collection's opening poem to Bridget Bertie, countess of Lindsey, f. 6r

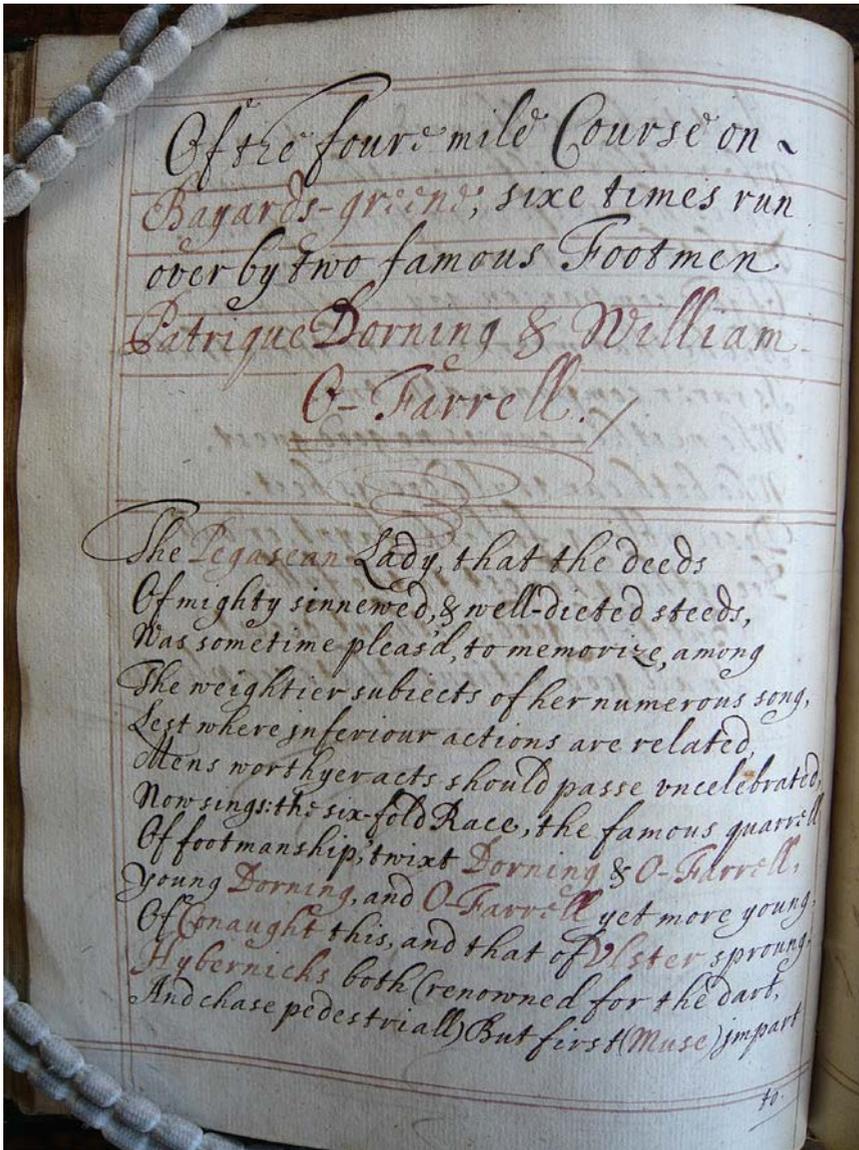


Fig. 4 - Title of the collection's final poem, describing 'the two famous Footmen Patrique Dorning & William O-Farrell', f. 50v

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