

Certain poems

A commemorative dialogue upon the death of Mary Cecil, the especially beloved wife of the most distinguished gentleman William Cecil and the sister of John Cheke

Interlocutors:

Life. Death. Mary Cecil.

Life:

Why do you lie so suspended with a doubtful heart,
As to which you must choose: life or death?
Put aside this concern; I will quickly resolve this debate.
I am a blessing; death mixes together all bad things,
I am a sweet joy; death is heavy, frowning, and horrible.
Will you let your flourishing life slip away like this?
Will you let the glory of your resplendent beauty fade?
Instead, look¹ to me and learn how many favors
I can give to you: first, a long life
And a large abundance of wealth to bless you,
And a sweet throng of children around you,
And you have a husband, such as Haemon
Was to Antigone, and your brother surpasses
The choir of doctors, as the moon outshines lesser stars.
Your venerable mother thrives, as do your sisters.
Therefore when such benefits follow in my wake,
If you have good sense, you will not abandon so many good things.

Death:

Life will not give you what it promises,
What can darkness, dust, bubble reputation, and smoke offer?
Life is uncertain. How can it ever guarantee the good things it promises?
Things which are vain, fleeting, fluctuating, false,

¹ respicis: respice

Like strength, pleasure, beauty, profit, and glory,
In this life they ebb and flow, just as when a dark storm
Churns the sea with an immense whirlwind.
Fortune, hope, deception, worry, troubling fears
Drive and shape all human experience,
These things guide life, which is
Always staggering, always wandering unreliably.
As life rolls out many changes over the years,
So it gravely disturbs the minds of men with miseries,
The harvest of evils grows anew day by day.
Which is why the wise Menander said, "God loves those
Who are snatched straight from their sweet mothers' laps."
Therefore the debt you incurred for a false and fleeting breeze,
A payment you made to Nature, your creator,
Do not let it weary your heart any longer.
Behold, here I am, Certain Death, I who bestow certain blessings,
I will bring an end to your misfortunes:
A respite from heavy labors, the pleasant harbor
Of final quiet, the culmination of your destiny,
Which all flesh will walk with equal footsteps,
The last doctor of every illness,
The end of fleeting life, the eternal steps,
The key to salvation, by which, once the prison
Of perennial death has been unlocked, Christ,
The savior of all, opens the path to salvation for all faithful people.
Therefore, in place of appealing but uncertain things, choose the certain,
You will leave behind the comforts of your dwindling life that ebb and flow:
And you will happily embrace me, for I will quickly give you a life
Which Life will not give to you.

Mary Cecil Responds:

Both of you have said enough: be quiet, it's my life.
You are pleasing enough, Death; Life does not please me.
For my life, the one which I had, was no life,
An empty trifle whispered into willing ears,²
The things which life gives—strength, wealth, years, honor—
They are mere playthings of a deceptive age.
I have life in Christ alone, he is my everything:
My husband, my father, brother, sisters, and children.
Just as you³ Christ, I will leave these matters in your cup, one after another,
In this way it pleases me to live, in this way Death is a great reward.
Nor does a longing for fleeting life keep me:
I have lived enough because, Christ, I have lived enough for you.

To William Bill, from his most brilliant companion:
O handsome Bill, *meilleures salutations*, my most handsome fellow.
When the sun has left the snowy horns of the goat,
And the watery waves are scattered across his splendid face,
And turns, reweaving the year anew,
The custom has evolved from ancient times,
Or has been perpetuated amongst the country people themselves,
By sending signs of affection back and forth
To recall those pacts of friendship.
We therefore, handsome Bill, my most handsome fellow,
We whom our hearts bind in tight chains,
We whom our mind and harmonious will does the same
Should we allow these sacred rites
Which have accumulated from ancient times to now
To lie thus spurned by us, thus sullied?
They do this, Bill, whom the goddess of discord aids,

² Thebaid 9.35

³ Ut: Tu? "You Christ, in your cup I will leave these matters one after another,"

Whom a crazed mind and greedy spite confuse,
An evil thron'g which swells all too much daily,
What a severe crime, what a grave evil to hear!
Should discord separate those whom Christ approves of⁴?
Can a galled mind befoul those whom letters adorn?
Bill, we have better fates, we do.
Each of our Muses rejoice in a chorus,
The Latin Goddesses, the Goddesses of Parnassus⁵
Nourish, love, and help us more each day.
Both of us love Cheke, Cheke loves both of us
Because I have ranked him amongst the most valuable.
Therefore we whom firm ties join
And the highest associations of the highest love bind
Thus more firmly let us conjoin our hearts
Therefore the songs which our Muse pours forth
Albeit unkempt, crude, long, harsh, and lifeless
They are certain bonds of our love (Bill),
If you understand them with a smooth expression, as you are accustomed,
We seek nothing else, thus we have all things.
O handsome Bill, farewell, my most handsome fellow.

⁴ Unit: nuit?

⁵ Parnasides: Parnasides