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‘Drunken porters keepe open gates’: Macbeth and Henry Smith

Henry Smith, lecturer at St Clement Danes without Temple Bar from 1587 until his retirement in 1590, was popularly known as ‘Silver-tongued Smith’, and likened by Thomas Nashe to Ovid, as gifted enough to write ditties for Apollo, and one whose death the Muses mourned.¹ An undated sermon by him, ‘A Glass for Drunkards’, first appears in The Sermons of Maister Henrie Smith (1593). Examining Noah’s drunkenness, Smith notes that ‘It is sayd that drunken porters keepe open gates... as wine went in, so wit went out’.² Although the two phrases are offered as proverbial by Smith, while the second is listed as common by Tilley, the first is not.³ Nor does a proximity search on EEBO-TCP reveal any other uses, until the third edition of Robert Hill’s The Pathway to Prayer of 1609.⁴

The image of the porter of Cawdor Castle letting in the outside world, so the fact of the king’s murder will be revealed, is natural enough. But why need the Porter in *Macbeth* explain – at length - how drink has given him ‘the lie... I’ the very throat’ (1.3.125-6)?⁵ The length of the explanation might, editors point out, give the actors playing the Macbeths

¹ G.W. Jenkins, ‘Smith, Henry (1560-1591)’, Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/25811?docPos=3> [accessed 10/5/2016].

² The Sermons of Maister Henrie Smith (1593), p. 598.

³ M.P. Tilley, *A Dictionary of the Proverbs in England in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1950), W465, W471, W481.

⁴ R. Hill, The Pathway to Prayer (1609), p. 81; earlier published as Christ’s Prayer Expounded (1606) and in an expanded version, 1607.

⁵ W. Shakespeare, Macbeth, ed. A.R. Braunmuller (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

enough time to wash and change from the previous scene. The topic, though, seems to arise from working back from a proverb that has not been hitherto recognised. If the play needs, in dramatic terms, a scene which opens the gates to truth, then this brings to mind a drunk Porter. And if a drunk Porter, then perhaps a discussion about how drink makes one speak out what should be hidden or equivocated.

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