

SUMMARY: Dedicatory epistle to Anne Cecil, Countess of Oxford, in Geoffrey Fenton's 1575 publication *The Golden Epistles*. The *Epistolas familiares* of Antonio de Guevara (1480-1545) had been translated from Spanish into English by Edward Hellowes, Groom of the Leash, in 1574. The title page of Fenton's translation indicates that it includes epistles taken from 'the remainder of Guevara's works', as well as 'other authors Latin, French and Italian'. *The Golden Epistles* was reprinted in 1577 and again 1582.

To the right honourable and virtuous Lady Anne, Countess of Oxenford, Geoffrey Fenton
desireth long and honourable life

Since the first creation of man everyone particularly hath found so many calamities and travails of life that it hath been a perpetual industry in all to search wherein rested this true and assured contentment which we call felicity. Some referred it to the prosperity of riches, & with others it was established altogether in virtue. Whereof as the one being but the possessions of fortune, and therefore both uncertain and miserable, brings with it his proper confusion, so the other, aspiring to immortality, hath no subjection to frailty or infirmity, and therefore, justifying itself by his own nature, is worthily adjudged that felicity which the world so much desireth. What man is possessed with a spirit of virtue, in the same man is truly expressed the similitude and action of beatitude, the one holding such community with the other that as virtue is the forge whereon this sovereign good is wrought, so felicity is the effect and stipend of the same, and they both no other thing than the very heaven and residence of God wherein the soul is formed and created. No man feeleth a perfect taste of felicity if withal he embrace not virtue, no more than the savour of meat is pleasant to the sick whose senses suffer imperfection, infirmity or error, nor any standeth destitute of beatitude whose mind communicates with desires and motions of virtue, as to those whose faith is unfeigned and incorrupt is assured the estate of eternity and perpetual patrimony. This virtue, besides that it is originally administered by divine influence and grace, hath also his natural means subsisting to his perfection & stability which the ancient followers of philosophy & wisdom have referred to the study and science of good things, as colours best apt and convenient to blaze the true coat and figure of virtue. Sciences, say they, prepare men's minds to virtue, and all our thoughts and motions, being made foul by our first corruption, are yet repurged by the quality of science and knowledge, as the dross and scum of metal is mortified by the industry of workers to whom the profession appertaineth. Infinite are the commodities of knowledge & science, which shining in their particularities as well in the works of many wise men as in their life and examples, it agreeth not now to recount them, only there are few who in study and knowledge find out notable rules to govern the body and excellent doctrines to qualify the mind with authentic counsel besides, to exercise the residue of the man in the necessary consideration of his mortality and frailness. Science travaileth to the favour of posterity, and is the assured protector of men's acts and monuments against forgetfulness and envy. It is the pillar of prosperity and infallible retreat and refuge in adversity. It

fashioneth the rudeness and ignorance of youth, and restraineth the crabbedness of age to modesty & civility. It invents counsels to the accomplishment of our affairs, & ministreth to our minds stability and resolution of courage. Yea, science and knowledge are the very seminary or seeds out of which do bud all our flourishing blossoms of virtue, and wherein our sprites are made able to judge of high and hard things, and so raised to those holy desires of well-doing wherein all good mean reappose their sovereign contentment.

These happy fruits of science and learning raise noble personages into merit and dignity, and sets a-work excellent wits to record the reputation of their greatness & virtues, dividing the doings of their life, some into warnings to avoid harms and miseries, and some into precepts the better to establish examples and draw to imitation. And as above all others of our time your Honour hath been always right worthily noted a diligent follower of those arts and studies which best serve to the declaration and glory of true virtue and piety, so at the contemplation of the same I am bold to bring forth (under the protection of your Ladyship) this treatise containing moral discourse sorted with philosophy & some texts of divinity, not that I hold it worthy your view and judgment, but (according to good meaning) to use it as an interpreter of the devotion and service wherein I am vowed to your Ladyship and your honourable house and parents. And where in the intentions of the writers in these days this is a lamentable error, that they consider not those customs & good doctrines agreeing with holy virtues and commandments of the law of God, but think it is a great testimony of their singularity and excellency to publish under forms of speech matter either merely vain in itself or at least unfruitful to the use and instruction of life, I thought good by the experience of their writings not to be so curious to set out this work with elegancy of phrase and rhetoric as to exhibit precepts to live well, joining to that small eloquence of words I have used a diligence withal to dress and institute conversation and manners, the same being the direct line that leads to virtue, which (without this) is but the figure and image of that it ought to be. Wherein having respect to modesty I am far here from meaning to challenge the labours of others, and much less seek to obtrude upon mine own any dignity or merit, but refer me and my travails to the opinion of your Ladyship, whom I humbly beseech, as touching the order and parts of art in the book, to judge them with that property of favour which is wont to construe nothing to blame, and for the texts and precepts whether moral, civil or of divinity, your Ladyship, in all the works you shall read, cannot find better doctrine than in the life of your honourable father, in whose manner and actions is fulfilled a more full example of virtue than in all the rules and similitudes which my pen can deliver. And as stones of rare and precious price express their lustre better in gold than in any other metal, so good and well qualified discourses are holden so much the more noble and dear by how much are worthy and excellent the persons to whom they are presented, the dignity of the one supporting and amplifying the nobility of the other. And as trees transplanted or removed out of their natural stock into a better become both more fair and goodly to behold, and yield a fruit more pleasing the taste, in like sort a work of learning drawn out of her proper author and recommended to some noble & virtuous personages becomes so much the better received, and with a fruit more liked, by how much it is incorporate in the virtues and name of an excellent patron. In which respect, knowing that there shines in your Ladyship a virtue of learning and judgment as doth the

pearl in the gold, & that your mind is divinely inclined to the contemplation of virtuous studies, I beseech you, let this be admitted amongst the public monuments of your virtue, though far unworthy of your noble desire, yet being covered with the wings of your authority and name it may be holden so much the more perfect and plausible by how much it is an imp grafted in the soil of your greatness and enriched with the gold of your name and virtues, referring the faults rather to the infirmity of my skill and knowledge than to my desire and will, which is wholly dedicated to the service of your right honourable father and his house. At my chamber in the Blackfriars in London the fourth of February 1575.

Your Honour's humbly to dispose and command,
Geoffrey Fenton