

‘Was This the Face That Launch’d a Thousand Ships?’¹
A Portrait of England's Maiden Queen in Lute and Voice

Why would one write yet another article on Elizabeth Tudor? Such an endeavor appears rather redundant, at least at first blush: redundant as well as daring. One might even hold that too many scholars have already delved into the origins of the Elizabethan myth. The work of such individuals has inevitably been crowned with the type of success that comes in varying degrees. The scholarship which has been sprouting around the figure of good Queen Bess naturally belongs to the realms of history and literature. One would argue that there is no more room for research, especially if it is conducted by one generally viewed as a relative stranger to the above-mentioned areas of expertise.

As a specialist in Renaissance music I have had to come to terms with some of the pitfalls hidden away in the particularities of studying that period. It has been made clear to me that researchers insist on revisiting the overly plowed field of the English High Renaissance because they believe they can furnish the world with yet another, perhaps clearer, interpretation of the signs provided by sixteenth-century humanism and the repercussions thereof. Potential danger lies, already at this stage. It is obvious that any attempt at reinterpreting data naturally involves an explanatory act and that this educatory process may in itself justify the researcher's very existence as an academic entity. On the other hand, researchers are being constantly reminded that their chances at stumbling over new data with regard to Elizabeth and her reign are, to say the least, rather meager. In fact, their vision tends to become more clouded as the chronological gap between the Renaissance and our era widens.

Consequently, it is understood that scholars can hardly hope to add their contribution to an already completed picture. Everything from poems to diary entries has been reviewed again and again by representatives of movements such as Romanticism, Marxism, Post-Modernism and Feminism. There is precious little to discover and even less to surmise. Moreover, the gap between the sixteenth and the twenty-first century leaves almost no space for interpretations based on the researcher's intuition. The field becomes even richer in mines if one considers that data may appear obscured to us today not only because of the four century gap mentioned above, but also due to reasons related to the Elizabethan era itself. For example, one may not tap into the English queen's exact feelings

¹ See Christopher Marlowe. ‘The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus.’ in The Plays of Christopher Marlowe. London: J.M Dent & Sons Ltd, 1929, p. 154.

with regard to Mary Stuart's prearranged but unrealized marriage to Robert Dudley. This is because Elizabeth herself artfully hid her motives for this political move under the veil of her own self-created image of chastity.

This territory, full of unanswered and unanswerable questions, forms the backdrop for this paper. I do not wish to paint yet another picture of the fable created around Elizabeth I. I will merely attempt to rearrange the already existing pieces of the puzzle. The purpose of this paper is to follow the thread of the Elizabethan myth as it appears in songs of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Ballads, lute songs, madrigals and even restoration semi-operas attest that England's enigmatic sovereign gradually cast off her corporeal shell and turned herself into a legend. Her faults were duly explained away as her country faced the turmoils which came with the Stuarts and the commonwealth. As the civil war ravaged the country, the Elizabethan era was longed for and idealized as a period of stability and prosperity. With the reopening of London theaters the character of the virtuous queen was recast and molded as a stage symbol of England herself. Gloriana found a new voice in the unsurpassed magnanimity of the good Indian queen. Thus, the Tudor ballad which is basically an historical narrative peppered with comments and folk cliches, transforms first into a 'wink of a political comment' safely hidden in the rich folds of lute songs and four-part madrigals. Then, in the 1680s and 90s it turns into a less defined though equally powerful dramatized symbol of a country's golden age.

The sixteenth-century ballad composed during Elizabeth's reign allows us to catch a quick but quite enlightening glimpse of people's reactions with regard to the demise of members of the nobility who had played their part in recent history. Suffice it to say that such songs were bound to help circulate comments which sprouted in the wake of important battles, executions and other such events. As ballads are seldom attributed to a specific author, they spread much faster than printed works and cannot be easily hushed up. The plebs laments the death of kings and their courtiers in a free, slightly tongue-in-cheek fashion unique to the genre.

In ballads which mourn a death, words are sometimes put into the mouth of the person in question. He or she recounts his or her life soon to be brought to a tragic end, either by natural causes or by the executioner's ax. Whether the victim is on her deathbed or in her prison cell, her story is infallibly peppered with the requisite pleas for forgiveness addressed to God or the queen. It is by means of those words that one can trace where the writer's loyalties lie.

One such prayer is supposed to have been sung by Sir Walter Devereux, first Earl of Essex, the night before he died. The text is attributed to Francis Kinwelmarsh or to Essex himself who had been appointed Earl Martial of

Ireland and died there on the twenty-second of September 1576.² The song is indeed a simple prayer of a man humbled by impending death and anxious for a place in Heaven. Of the four arrangements associated with what later became known as My L. of Essex's Song, one is by William Byrd, another is attributed to the Earl's personal musician, William Hewese, and still another materialized late enough to be composed on the rogero, a popular ground which came from Italy where it was in vogue in the beginning of the seventeenth century.

At first glance, there is nothing really amiss with this ballad. In fact, it merely mirrors the last wishes of a dying man. However, this seemingly unpretentious poem became uncharacteristically popular. Instead of crystalizing into an instrumental 'character piece,' the sung version of this ballad went on claiming space in people's collective memory for an unusually long time. There are details telling enough to make the scholar reconsider the value of this simple farewell ode. Thus, on second thoughts, the work in question calls for further scrutiny. Firstly, the surviving text clearly points to a man quite unsurprised by, and resolved with, the fact that death is eminent. In other words, the Earl's death was a result of natural causes and not violence. Secondly, at least one of the musical renditions is based on a figured ground bass which flourished roughly 50 years after the Earl's actual death as it was an offshoot of the Italian Baroque and not the English Renaissance.

If we choose to read behind the lines or the staves as it were, we will see that the text is just a common and unpretentious prayer associated with the Earl of Essex only by means of its title. Moreover, we are at no point confronted with any allusions to foul play. As far as we know, Sir Walter died peacefully in his bed and did not even take the trouble to mention his name or title in the final appeal to his maker. Why then was this song set to music at least four times and why did it continue being popular well into the 1630s? The answer is simple enough. Rumor had it that His Lordship was poisoned due to the machinations of Her Majesty's favorite, the Earl of Leicester.³ We also know that the said rumor was quickly hushed up as it implicated the queen herself. However, it flared up again in the 1630s, i.e. just when the rogero version would have become popular. In my opinion, the ballad in question was composed in order to show that Sir Walter's death was the result of natural causes. The very

² The epitaph to the Earl of Essex as well as detailed information on textual and musical sources may be found in Peter Seng, ed. Tudor Songs and Ballads from ms Cottonian Vespasian. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1978, Ballad no. 25.

³Ibid., Ballad no. 25.

existence of such a simple prayer was in itself a covert way of dissociating the English queen and her court from the circumstances of Essex's death. His Lordship was apparently suffering no pain when, the night before he died, he summoned his musician and asked him to play his song. Thus, the Earl was in a condition to sing while Hewese accompanied him on the virginals.⁴ A murdered man who is suffering a painful death by poisoning would hardly be expected to act in so calm and composed a manner. This is not the prayer of one betrayed by his fate and his queen. The dying man begging the Holy Trinity for forgiveness is at peace with himself and is facing death with serenity and dignity. In short, he is what Classical Greece and Renaissance Humanism would call happy: a man who enjoyed a good life in a prosperous country ruled by a righteous sovereign.

Having had its say, the ballad followed the usual course and became an instrumental piece, a 'song without words' earning a place in virginal and lute books. For four decades, only its title reminded lutenists and harpsichordists who came across it of the long dead nobleman. However, in the 1630s Charles I was leading England to chaos. When civil war was on the threshold the forgotten rumors resurfaced. With them came the old ballad freshly set to a popular chordal ground. This new accompanying style naturally meant that the melody would be sung once again. The song would now serve as a simple prayer composed in plain English and easily understood by the 'common man.' The old dug-up prayer would hark back to the glorious King Harry and his pious daughter who banished popery and became a just ruler in the name of the true God.

The religious issues initially raised by Henry VIII fed the flames of many an upheaval uncharacteristic of, and unwelcome to the realm. Elizabeth's sister Mary I (1554-1558) was a devout Catholic and tried all too unsuccessfully to return England to the fold of the 'true faith.' Since inquisition had never flourished in the British Isles the population were not used to torture and death on the 'slow-fire.' In the five years of Mary's reign more than 300 Protestants lost their lives as Smithfield became notorious for what is hence known as 'Mary's burnings.' Consequently, many saw Elizabeth's accession as a real blessing. The new queen did indeed tolerate Catholic recusants and their beliefs, unless of course they proved to be a threat to the political stability of the kingdom.

The ballads composed in this period are rich in allusions to the ill-starred years which followed the English Reformation. Queen Mary is referred to either as a generic figure of a woman destined to die unloved and childless,

⁴ The ballad in question refers to the first Earl of Essex, Sir Walter Devereux, father of Sir Robert Devereux, who was executed on the Queen's orders in 1601.

or as a tyrant from whose clutches England will eventually be delivered by Elizabeth. In a lament for Queen Mary's death it is the queen herself who becomes the primary narrating voice.⁵ First, she addresses her ladies in waiting in the fashion of Queen Dido and informs them of her impending death. Then she grapples with the memory of her absent husband, King Philip, who has apparently gone to Spain with no intention of returning. Her words are veiled in some sort of innocent naiveté obviously aimed at the listeners' emotions. Towards the end the queen asks to be robed in her shroud of fine sable and the finishing touches are provided by the voice of a second narrator who paints the picture of an angelic princess who has relinquished her earthly crown but earned a heavenly one. Mary's reactions are not those of a queen regnant and there are no references to historical events or figures other than the dying queen, her ladies in waiting and King Philip. This fade-out with regard to Mary's historical background succeeds in neutralizing the song by depriving it of its role as social commentary. What is left hardly depicts a resident of the real world. Ultimately, this ballad talks of the death of a mythical queen. Mary Tudor is pulled away from her historical self. In fact, she hovers a few feet above the level of reality and stays high enough to be unsoiled by the consequences of her actions. She is no longer accused of having failed as a ruler because no deeds are attributed to her in this song. She is just a character cut out of a fairy tale, a queen whose tragic end somehow earns her the wings of ultimate angelic purity.

We will now examine two more ballads written during Elizabeth's reign. Both are sprinkled with liberal amounts of good English phlegm and both have a word or two to say against Elizabeth's Catholic predecessors. The first is a graphic rendition of the 'calamity' that the good Duchess of Suffolk and her family suffered under Queen Mary.⁶ The Duchess' mother was King Henry's sister and therefore the Duchess herself, Lady Francis, was first cousin to both queens. Her first husband, Sir Henry Grey Duke of Suffolk, was executed in 1554 and one of her daughters, Lady Jane Grey, was little more than a child when she followed her father to the block. Those two tragic deaths are inexplicably not mentioned anywhere in the song. The ballad tells us how the Duchess fled the country along with her husband, her infant daughter and the infant's nurse. Her husband, who remains nameless throughout the song, is bound to be her former steward whom she married after the Duke's execution and the baby referred to is apparently an offspring of this second marriage.

⁵ See Richard Johnson. The Crown Garland of Golden Roses. London: Thackeray, 1662, Ballad no. 25.

⁶ *Ibid.*, Ballad no. 17.

The song starts by mentioning the premature death of the boy King Edward VI who advocated for tolerance with regard to religious matters and whose demise is viewed as a punishment for ‘our sins.’⁷ Mary's reign of terror, which culminated in the infamous burnings, casts an ominous shadow visible throughout the song. Special reference is made to the good Lady Elizabeth who awaits her death while a prisoner in the Tower. We follow the Duchess and her family as they leave London on foot, cross the channel and travel from Flanders to Germany. They are waylaid and end up arrested by the German authorities. Finally they manage to convey their pleas for food and shelter in the lingua franca of the time and the poem ends with their return to England upon Elizabeth's Accession. The final verse is a heart-felt though stylized prayer for the new queen's happiness and well-being. Queen Mary is actually referred to only once towards the end in the context of her own death. The contrast between her and her sister is stark since Elizabeth is viewed as one blessed with a ‘happy reign’ and a pious and altogether holy life.⁸

The second ballad in which Mary is mentioned alongside her sister Elizabeth is the ‘princely song’ about the six women married to King Henry.⁹ This song may be characterized as history in the making although it contains more than a dash of English mischievous humor. The anonymous writer is no Papist and therefore chooses his adjectives and adverbs like a good Protestant. So, King Henry looks for his first bride ‘carefully-carefully’ and as a result marries his brother's widow ‘most lawfully.’¹⁰ Is it safe to surmise that this is a naughty allusion to the fact that Henry's wedding to his first wife Catherine was deemed illegal according to the Deuteronomy and, as a consequence, their only daughter Mary was declared a bastard? After all, her name is mentioned only in passing and she is allowed no personal comments whatsoever. Henry's second wife though Elizabeth's own mother is also treated rather cavalierly. She is described as virtuous and brave and is referred to as a ‘virgin by fame.’¹¹ We cannot help laughing at the use of such epithets especially considering that Queen Anne was visibly pregnant even before her wedding day. After having dealt with the queen-mother accordingly the writer pauses for a moment and pays due tribute to the country's well-loved queen. He calls her ‘our sweet princess,’ and ‘England's Elizabeth.’ He

⁷ See Richard Johnson. The Crown Garland of Golden Roses. London: Thackeray, 1662, Ballad no. 17.

⁸ Ibid., Ballad no. 17.

⁹ Ibid., Ballad no. 24.

¹⁰ Ibid., Ballad no. 24.

¹¹ Ibid., Ballad no. 24.

writes that she came into this world ‘blessedly-blessedly’ and that the whole kingdom was made happy by her birth.¹² The rest of the song continues winking at the listener in jest. Only when he praises Britain's glorious queen is the maker of this ballad entirely in earnest.

Can a ballad tune ever predate the words associated with it? This question may lead scholars to dangerous chicken and egg conjectures based on inadequate data. There are, however, two songs that have undoubtedly sprouted from veritable hits of the period. The Rowland tune came to England from across the channel, probably Protestant Flanders and its original title seems to have been Soet Soet Robbertgen (Sweet Sweet Little Robert).¹³ It was a jig with a text preserved in a source which dates from 1599. William Byrd (1591) as well as various Baroque composers such as Samuel Scheidt and Johann Sebastian Bach encapsulated the tune in keyboard works mostly of the theme and variation type. In England the song was known as My Lord Willoughby's Welcome Home or Lord Willoughby's March. The text, which was coupled with the tune on the Continent carried no special meaning and thus, was soon forgotten in favor of the more elaborate instrumental versions. However, I believe that in England, the Willoughby tune paid due tribute to its Protestant origins as the words associated with it were of a strictly anti-Spanish and therefore anti-Papist nature. In my opinion, the Rowland was identified as a Dutch tune and, as such, was assigned pro-Reformist duties. It was specifically chosen to recount ‘the bravery of Peregrine Bertie, Lord Willoughby of Eresby who with 1,500 men is credited with defeating a Spanish army of 40,000.’¹⁴ There is a good deal of exaggeration in these numbers but this is an understandable phenomenon should one consider the anti-Catholic reaction triggered by the war in the Low Countries and the Babington plot to overthrow. Both words and music make more sense if they are seen in the broader context of the anti-Catholic propaganda which attributed superhuman powers to any Protestant patriot loyal to his country and his queen.

Anthony Babington's plot was by no means Elizabeth's sole source of trouble. The 1580s were marred by a sense of general instability. As Philip of Spain annexed Portugal, the threat of a potential Spanish invasion became more and more palpable. The survival of England as a Protestant country in the midst of allegedly strong Papist

¹² See Richard Johnson. The Crown Garland of Golden Roses. London: Thackeray, 1662, Ballad no. 24.

¹³ See Claude Simpson. The British Broadside Ballad and Its Music. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1966, p. 467. In modern Dutch, the word soet would be spelled with a z.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 468.

enemies depended on the health and well-being of the queen. During the last decade of her life, Mary Queen of Scots outdid herself in hatching fresh plans to depose her cousin and name herself queen of England. Elizabeth's Catholic rivals also launched a vicious attack on the Earl of Leicester accusing him of every possible political and social scandal. This character assassination took effect especially as it was coupled with another devastating blow. The Earl's only legitimate son died suddenly at the age of five. Elizabeth, who celebrated her fiftieth birthday in 1583, was obliged for the first time to take extreme measures against English Catholics. As the myth of an invincible Spanish armada slowly turned into fact, Catholic recusants were automatically regarded as traitors. The privy council became increasingly protective of their queen and even the populous revered her as a loving mother. By 1588 Elizabeth sent her troops to battle professing that though only a woman she had the feelings and emotions of a king of England. This identification with the legendary figure of her father who had defied the Pope and lived to tell the tale created a kind of aura around the queen's person. She too was invincible because she was armed with chastity and aided by divine providence.

The Duke of Anjou, younger brother of King Henri III of France, died rather unexpectedly in 1584. His death marked the end of Elizabeth's courting days. In her love letters the queen had often called him her frog in jest. She had even taken to wearing a jewel with a little frog made of gold. In general, people referred to the Duke of Anjou as Monsieur. That was the custom. The dance tune known as Monsieur's Almain could not have been composed after his death as it was named after him. It proved exceptionally popular and was used in many compositions of the time. After the English victory against the Spanish armada in the summer of 1588, Thomas Deloney wrote a poem to the tune of Monsieur's Almain and thus the instrumental work was turned into a patriotic ballad. The tune consisted of one consequent preceded by two alternating antecedent phrases. This fact made it possible for it to be successfully coupled with a strophic poem. The poem in question relates how the English captured a Spanish galeazzo, a monumental vessel heavily built and less agile than the small English warships. The narrative is peppered with the usual propagandist comments. The title itself mentions the Gospel and 'our Good Queen'¹⁵ for whose sake the men are fighting. The Gospel is of course the true word of the Lord which has not been corrupted by Popish pomp. The reference to a good queen is a countermeasure to the rumors (spread all over the

¹⁵ See Thomas Deloney. Thomas Deloney: Three Ballads of the Spanish Armada. New York: J.F. Taylor and Company, 1903, page not numbered.

Continent) that England was governed by an excommunicate, a heretic and a bastard. God is continually referred to especially in the beginning stanzas where it is made manifest that the foreign forces rely on their greater numbers while the English depend upon the grace of God. Moreover, the Pope is purported to have blessed and sanctified the enemy's 'bad pretence.'¹⁶ The purpose of the song was to reassure both the troops and the populous as the Spanish and their allies kept feeding the flames of a rumor that a new armada was due to sail for England any day. The song provides no detailed description of the battle in question. Initially, after dealing with the religious issue mentioned above, the poet furnishes us with a rough sketch of the galeazzo and then moves on and describes the capture of other, smaller galleons. Later, he returns to the galeazzo with its 100 cannons and finally tells how the Spanish would have liked to murder innocent women and children and rob the gracious English queen of both life and crown. This ballad was a product of the spontaneous outburst of merry-making, which succeeded the summer of 1588. The generally happy mood was not marred even by the death of Robert Dudley in early September. The song's popularity urged a number of English composers such as Thomas Morley (1599) and Daniel Batcheler (1610) to elaborate on the tune which is thus remembered primarily as a work for harpsichord, lute or broken consort. Only its title harks back to the French Duke who came so close to marrying the English queen.

In this series of ballads we have traced Elizabeth Tudor's progress. In the earlier songs she was regarded as a glimmer of hope and a beacon signifying a new beginning devoid of terror and torture. Her subjects attributed qualities to her such as divine justice and piety. She and the poets who lived in her court deliberately fed the flames of this myth by naming her after the chaste Diana or the just Astrea. Wisdom gradually replaced her fading good looks and, as the years went by, Elizabeth was revered by her people who needed to add a protective though tangible Marian figure to their newly formed Protestant English-speaking trinity. Thus emerged the queen who healed skin ulcers by touch and washed the poor women's feet on Maundy Thursday. The queen found in the ballads is not purely mythical in the Arthurian sense of the word as she is not remote or hazy around the edges. She is a maiden who, though divinely just and protective of her people, is herself in occasional need of protection and loyalty. One notices immediately that there are no descriptions of her person, her attire, her jewels or her queenly beauty. In fact, there are ballads, such as the one attributed to Sir Walter Devereux, first Earl of Essex, where Elizabeth is not even

¹⁶ See Thomas Deloney. Thomas Deloney: Three Ballads of the Spanish Armada. New York: J.F. Taylor and Company, 1903, page not numbered.

mentioned. She is present in the background as the immovable and invincible impersonation of justice who keeps watch over the dying earl. Suffice it to say that the majority of Elizabethan ballads does much more than glorify a queen. They fulfill the rather circular role of providing a two-way channel of communication between the anonymous plebs who generates the poems and the monarch who receives and reacts to them. In most instances the reader has a feeling that both sides play the part of giver and receiver at the same time. The queen we have seen in the ballads is a woman entirely devoted to her people like a mother. In return she is presented with these songs of almost unconditional love. Ballads are meant to circulate people's feelings and the feelings represented here are joy, hope, trust and safety.

Should we move on to a more elaborate genre such as the madrigal or the lute song, we would be confronted with more intricate conclusions. I am deliberately refraining from examining the numerous direct references to the queen's person such as the song entitled Eliza Is the Fairest Queen or the Triumphs of Oriana, title of a collection of English madrigals. It will, however, become obvious that researchers have discovered analogies between the yearly production of madrigals and the quick rise and steep fall of the star of Sir Robert Devereux, second Earl of Essex.¹⁷ I will also try to shed some light on two lute songs marked by clear allusions to the above-mentioned earl and the relationship between him and his aging sovereign.

In September 1596 Robert Devereux finally managed to acquire the glory he had coveted for so long. He returned from his only successful expedition and was received by the London crowds as a hero. That year no madrigals were published but during 1597 and 1598 while the news of his victory remained fresh in the people's memory, composers such as Thomas Morley and William Holborne published no fewer than 75 and 83 madrigals respectively.¹⁸ In the year 1599 Essex was appointed Lord Deputy in Ireland whence he returned in disgrace only to be placed under house arrest. In 1600 there appeared only 20 new madrigals and in 1601, the year of the Earl's execution, the madrigals published had not been freshly produced. It is obvious that composers of those times were intimately connected with court dealings and regulated their output accordingly.¹⁹ This was natural as most

¹⁷ See Lillian Ruff and D. Wilson. 'The Madrigal, the Lute Song and Elizabethan Politics.' Past and Present 44 (1969): 5.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

practicing musicians virtually depended on the blessings of royal patronage which provided them, not only with fame, but with the infinitely more palatable daily bread and cheese. Nevertheless, we can safely surmise that the overall production of works of art was seriously inhibited around the turn of the seventeenth century. The queen, enfeebled by age, was regarded by the younger male members of her court as an inadequate and somewhat troublesome, outdated female ruler. The songs composed by John Dowland are closely related to madrigals. In fact, they can be played or sung either as four-part consort works which in themselves are makeshift madrigals or as solo songs for voice and lute where the lute is responsible for covering the three lower parts. In 1597 John Dowland published his First Book of Ayres which contained a galliard named after the second Earl of Essex. A galliard is a fast dance in triple time. It can be very lively especially as it is characterized by a graceful little skip which takes up the fifth and sixth beats. The queen herself took to dancing a few galliards each morning before she was served breakfast.

This particular piece also known as Can she excuse my wrongs displays a masterfully crafted lute part complete with an intricate countermelody which accompanies the whole of the third strain. Thus, the closing lines are sung on a solemn and practically immobile slow vocal line while the countermelody moves under it in perpetual stepwise motion. In fact, the vocal line or canto is technically not slow at all. It maintains a rhythmic pattern just as fast as the countermelody. The illusion of slowness is produced by the large number of repeated notes set syllabically in the canto. As for the words sung to the third strain described above, this is where the earl, supposedly enamored of the queen who is more than thirty years his senior, declares that suffering a thousand deaths is preferable to being tormented by fruitless unreciprocated love. In 1597, after quarrelling with the queen, the earl left the court and went into self-imposed exile. His goal was to keep gnawing on Elizabeth's emotions until he emerged forgiven and triumphant over the queen who he believed senile and incompetent. Devereux's ill-channeled pride is obvious throughout the song, as it is not quite clear whether young Essex seeks to forgive or be forgiven. The opening words are those of one humbled at the feet of his sovereign: 'Can she excuse my wrongs with virtue's cloak?'²⁰ However, one does not have long to wait before the mood changes. The very next verse reads: 'Shall I call her good when she proves unkind?'²¹ The whole song follows this rather indecisive pattern in

²⁰ See John Dowland. The First Book of Ayres. New York: Galaxy Music Corporation, 1965, pp. 8-9.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 8-9.

which the arrogant but still powerful Devereux continues to defy Elizabeth in the covert manner incorporated in the first two verses. Sir Robert's unparalleled impetuosity is mirrored in a token of supposed self-criticism dating from that same year. While in exile, he wrote a poem in which he bemoaned himself for having been treated unfairly by the queen. Again, his intelligence and learning allowed him to hide behind the effective use of both pun and allegory but it is obvious that he was nursing much dissatisfaction and insidious anger. Dowland set the poem to music and included it in his Third and Last Booke of Songs or Ayres . . . which was published in 1603 shortly after Elizabeth's death and two years after Sir Robert's execution. In this song the Elizabethan court is depicted as a beehive ruled unnaturally enough by a king, instead of a queen. This is, I believe, an allusion to the poet's personal opinion according to which, as it is impossible for a beehive to be governed by a drone, so is it unnatural for the realm to be ruled by a woman.

Twas a time that silly bees could speake and in that time I was a sillie bee who fed on Time until my heart gan break, yet never found the time would favour mee. Of all the swarme I only did not thrive yet brought I waxe and honey to the hive.²²

The ambitious earl was apparently under the impression that people such as Sir Walter Raleigh and the secretary of state Sir Robert Cecil were enjoying special royal favors, which he could not partake of. This supposition was not entirely false as the queen generally avoided entrusting young Essex with important diplomatic missions. The earl's rivals are likened to fruitless insects such as butterflies. In the third and last strophe the 'silly bee' duly complains to the king who, instead of offering consolation by means of the long awaited compensation, is hardly moved by his pleas and dismisses him rather harshly. 'Peace, Peevish bee, Th'art bound to serve the time, the time not thee.'²³

The two lute songs we just examined were composed shortly before Queen Elizabeth's death. By then, the aged queen had outlived her generation and had had to reconsider her reactions and moves if she wanted them understood by the younger members of her council. Her astute judgment and quick mind did not forsake her in her old age. On the contrary, the virgin queen continued to employ her extraordinary abilities until the end. As a result she did not become a fossil of her younger self. After her demise James Stuart and his son Charles proved far worse

²² See John Dowland. The Third and Last Booke of Songs or Aires. New York: Performers' Facsimiles, 1603, Song no. 18. Also see Diana Poulton. John Dowland. London: Faber and Faber, 1972, p. 285.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 285.

diplomats than their predecessors. The clashes between Charles and his parliament eventually led to a civil war followed by the barren years of the Commonwealth. As we have seen, the reign of good queen Bess was fondly remembered in those troubled times. She was accordingly stripped of all her faults and vices and was turned into something as threadbare as a vignette, an epigram or a charcoal drawing. Her memory worked its way into her subjects' subconscious and there were songs written about her and the most legendary members of her court.

During the Commonwealth and Restoration, songs and plays portrayed the quintessential figure of princely goodness. This sometimes happened on a subcutaneous level either by chance or for political reasons. One must not forget that court composers sought their sovereign's protection and, therefore, could not sing Elizabeth's praises thus publicizing negative opinions about the monarch they were expected to serve. For example, when John Wilson composed a simple pastoral song in the new chordal style of the Baroque, he used an old poem written years ago for Elizabeth's delectation.²⁴ In fact, that poem contained a humorous comment on the queen's marriage. It is a simple strophic work in dialogue form and the three voices present are the narrator, a shepherd and a nymph. The shepherd asks the nymph to marry him but she refuses as she believes men are by their very nature never in earnest. She summons all the Gods to be witnesses and only then is the marriage consummated and the satisfied nymph crowned Lady of May.²⁵ Her title, along with her initial outright refusal to marry, are the only clues with regard to the existence of a deeper, less accessible layer. Later, Henry Purcell wrote a catch about someone referred to as Sir Walter.²⁶ The catch describes in graphic detail an affair between this seemingly unidentified individual and his damsel. One has to be aware of Sir Walter Raleigh's unquenchable passion for the queen's maids of honor in order to understand the hidden reference to the lovers' identity.

I will conclude this paper by discussing the depiction of the Elizabeth figure in a play staged more than 90 years after the queen's death. The Indian Queen, by John Dryden and Sir Robert Howard, was produced with incidental music by Henry and Daniel Purcell. Henry died in November 1695 and his unfinished score was completed by his younger brother. The play is set in the Spanish New World and is about the virtuous lawful queen

²⁴ See John Wilson. [Manuscript containing 30 preludes for lute and 226 songs with continuo].

²⁵ See William Gray, ed. The Miscellaneous Works of Sir Philip Sidney, Knt. Oxford: D.A. Talboys, 1829, pp. 213-230. The Lady of May is a poem by Sir Philip Sidney written in honor of Queen Elizabeth.

²⁶ See Ian Spink, ed. 'Catches.' in The Works of Henry Purcell. Volume 22A. Novello: London, 2000, p. 25.

of Mexico Amexia and her rival, the usurping Indian queen Sempoalla who happens to be uncommonly beautiful as well as the mother of an only son. This is, of course, a reproduction of the story of Elizabeth Tudor and Mary Stuart. Purcell employs all the vocal and instrumental forces at his disposal in order to praise Sempoalla, whose beauty 'outshines the luster of glory.'²⁷ This probably means that the Indian queen's glory is based solely on her good looks. Throughout the play, we witness Sempoalla plotting unceasingly against Amexia who remains patient and vigilant. In the final scene the usurper is brought before the lawful queen and there is a dialogue between the two women. This is where myth seeks to correct history. We know that in Elizabeth's time, the execution of an anointed queen was nothing short of a crime as princes were answerable only to their maker. It is well-known that the English queen had always been reluctant to sign Mary's death warrant for fear of stirring up unwanted trouble on the predominantly Catholic Continent. However, she had finally signed it and by doing so she had sent a queen to the block. In the play this error is avoided. Amexia is magnanimous and wishes to pardon Sempoalla who curtly declares that she is no longer interested in this world and rids Amexia of having to kill her by taking her own life.

Thus, it is obvious that in Stuart England Elizabeth's afterlife wants her free of faults and errors of judgment. The Restoration playwrights, poets and composers cannot rely merely on facts as they are forgotten by now. The passage of time envelops the maiden queen in layers of myth. Certain episodes in her life are still remembered and used. However, the numerous gaps are filled in by thoughts, feelings and reactions which constitute a character sorely missed in this new post-Commonwealth era. The English who have been ravaged by war, plague, fire and a series of incompetent rulers seek refuge in works of art reminiscent of *Astrea* and the years of Great England's Glory.²⁸

²⁷ See Henry Purcell. The Indian Queen. London: Novello, 1994, pp. 41-43.

²⁸ I have not referred to specific page numbers in books where, due to the format, page numbers were absent.

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