

William Byrd's codes in his elegies and lament songs

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Abstract:

From the monumental number of works written by the English Renaissance composer William Byrd, the elegies and lament consort songs seem to strike as revealers of all his cunningness. Each figure he reveres in the songs is conferred with an honorable homage, being individualized treated in both textual and musical means. In the meantime, Byrd is also implicating his faith and political views that could not be explicitly declared. Such implications may appear in the way the words of the text are disposed or in the relationship between words and motives within or in relation to other piece. This paper proposes to analyze the musical and textual elements of selected elegies and lament songs, (1) in order to verify how Byrd personalizes each individual in their songs and (2) to identify and attempt to decipher codes of possible hidden messages contained in them.

Keywords: William Byrd, English Renaissance, music and politics.

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From the monumental number of works written by the English Renaissance composer William Byrd, the elegies and lament consort songs seem to strike as revealers of all his cunningness. Each figure he reveres in the songs is conferred with an honorable homage, being particularized treated in both textual and musical means. In the meantime, Byrd is also implicating his faith and political views that could not be explicitly declared. Such implications may appear in the way the words of the text are disposed or in the relationship between words and motives within or in relation to other piece or pieces. This paper proposes to analyze the musical and textual elements of selected elegies and lament songs, (1) in order to verify how Byrd personalizes each individual in their songs and (2) to identify and attempt to decipher codes of possible hidden messages contained in them.

Before deepen into Byrd's elegies themselves, it is worth touching upon some more general aspects of the history of literary elegies in English renaissance. Pigman, in his book "Grief and English Renaissance," describes what would be the 'proper' way for the bereaved to think about and react before death, and poses an interesting view for a shift of trajectories in the sixteenth- and early seventeenth-centuries. In his understanding, the beginning of this period experienced a posture of defensiveness about the feeling of mourning. Grief was then pagan and therefore to be suppressed. The author recalls Jonson's poem 'Of death' to illustrate how and why such an attitude would be unchristian and evince lack of faith:¹

He that feares death, or mournes it, in the just,
Shewes of the resurrection little trust.

Moving forward in that same century, he notes that expressing sorrow before death becomes more and more sympathetic, and a shift of attitude can be observed. The reasons for such change are for him unclear, but the transition can be delineated through the way mourning is expressed in verse. The elegy for Sir Philip Sydney written by William Gager, for instance, asks for a new type of consolation: "not the kind which is usually read in books or head in the schools, the old comfort – that yes, to be sure, Philip died for his fatherland, and it is ordained that we all die

¹ G. W. Pigman III, *Grief and English Renaissance Elegy*, 1.

sometime. These are well enough known and too trite and are immediately defeated by my sorrow.” (Pigman III, 1985:58).

Sidney’s death in 1585, by the way, caused an outpouring amount of elegies. Relevant for the present discussion is that “the popularity of elegy as a form occurs at the very time that attitudes towards mourning are relaxing.”² William Byrd took part in this movement, and wrote several songs in the genre, and although these songs at times might have been written as a genuine demonstration of sorrow and admiration for the one who passed away, the political nature of his profile makes one wonder if he could have used this form as a pretext for other endings.

Two elegies for Sir Philip Sidney, d.1586.

Sidney died on 17 of October of 1586 after been wounded at Zutphen in the Netherlands.

Pigman notes that Sidney’s death “elicited an unprecedented amount of elegies, which reveals a much more tolerant attitude towards mourning”³, but he regards as a mistake to believe that they were all genuine expressions of grief. His funeral took place eight days after the execution of Mary of Scots, and was the most sumptuous public event thus seen in England. One widely circulated supposition is that the Queen Elizabeth might have manipulated the making up of a National hero to maintain unit in the country in the midst of all the controversy caused by Mary of Scots’ death.

On the other hand, Jeremy Smith points to a possible interest that Sir Philip Sidney’s death held to the recusant’s cause: one comes from his acquaintance with Edmund Campion in the years near his death, and the other, from his relations with Essex, who had Catholics as the bulk of his supporters and whose cause tilted towards the Catholic’s beliefs.⁴

The possibility of Byrd’s personal acquaintance with Sidney, as supported by John Harley⁵, is not a consensus amongst his scholars. The composer’s familiarity with his literary works, on the other hand, carries firmer evidence: Byrd wrote one song using Sidney’s poem ‘O you that hear this voice’, which interestingly enough is its first appearance in print.

William Byrd wrote two elegies in honor of Sidney, which were published in the 1588 volume of ‘Psalms, Sonets and Songs’. I believe that Byrd might have looked for more than just setting the words in homage to Sidney in those songs; he also might have attempted to capture Sidney’s aura through bringing the poet’s creative processes and techniques of rhetoric into the elegies.

Come to me, grief, for ever

This song was written in strophic form, and a very interesting feature here is that Byrd chose to model the metre of the text from a distinctive poem by Sidney: ‘When to my deadlie pleasure.’ In the cited poem, Sidney did experiments with hexameters, and so did Byrd in the song:

Cōme tō mē grīefe fōr ēvēr

Derek Attridge explains that “like its model, this poem is characterized by coincidence of stress and quantity in most lines, with the result that the musical setting can at the same time reflect the quantitative structure of the verse and meet the demands of the accentual pattern.”⁶

² Ibid, 3.

³ Ibid, 57.

⁴ Jeremy Smith, “A Newly Discovered Edition of William Byrd’s Psalms, Sonets & Songs: Provenance and Significance,” (*Notes*, December, 2005, 296).

⁵ John Harley, William Byrd: gentleman of the Chapel Royal.

⁶ Derek Attridge, *Well-Weighed Syllables: Elizabeth Verse in Classical Meters* (Cambridge, 1974), 210. I wish to thank Dr. Jeremy Smith for introducing me to this quotation.

The echoing of sounds, another of Sidney's techniques, is also somehow exploited here for instance in the words 'heart's tears' and 'country's courtised'. Sydney is dead" is repeated many times in the text. Verses 1 and 2 show feelings of grief; 3 and 4, bring words of praise to Sidney; 5, searches for consolation; and 6 finally embraces grief. It starts with an introduction by the viols all the lines of the verses are interspersed with instrumental passages. The music for each line of the verse in the voice has a downward motion: the phrases always end in notes that are lower than the beginning ones, even when the inner contour is overall ascendant.

O that most rare breast

The words are attributed to Edward Dyer and, as Duncan-Jones describes, the first 8 lines is a celebration to Sydney's princely virtues, his European fame and the fact that even his enemies bewailed him; lines 9 – 14 are a more personal tribute to Sidney as from a friend whose own life is desolated by his loss.⁷

The piece is through-composed, although the first 4 lines have almost the same music of the second 4 lines, and of great interest is Byrd's musical use of one of Sidney's literary techniques, namely his repetitive use of words with different meanings. Instead of words, the composer writes musical motives that are put into different contexts, having then different implications. Listening to the piece, one can notice his almost obsessive use of the ascending G-Bb head motive that is worked out in different manners. Just to cite a few: it first appears in the lower tenor viol in measure 2 and 3 and it is immediately imitated in the higher tenor viol sustained by a different harmony. Its first appearance in the voice, in measures 5, 6, is superposed by its recurrence in the treble viol, which is superposed by its recurrence in the bass viol. The sound quality of this motive, a minor third, is also worked out frequently, in different keys, in ascending or descending melodic direction, as well as harmonically. Byrd assigns to the name of 'Sidney' a motive formed by an ascending perfect 4th followed by a descending minor 3rd (the minor 3rd again!). It first appears in measures 23 and 24, and in the later appearances, always together with Sidney's name, it is only varied by transposition (measures 26- 27, 31-32, 33- 34). Dyer, the possible author of the text, also receives a motive: a descending whole step (measures 117, 121).

In the last portion of the song, the motive G – Bb is developed to form a longer motive that comes as a strongly marked event on the piece. The melodic contour of the motive is built on G – Bb – G – G and delineates the words 'O heavy time'. This motive is repeated and then transposed in the voice part. Another sonorous event that sounds striking in this section is when the Bb, that became a characteristic sound in this piece, starts to be confronted with the B \natural (melodically, never harmonically). Then, the voice part ends exactly on the B \natural after a long melisma on the word 'dieth'.

My mistress had a little dog

This song is not dated, and it would be certainly a challenging task to try to define it by tracing back its revered records. The mention of Edward Paston's Appleton Hall in the text hints us that it can only have been written after 1596, year of the completion of the Hall.⁸ Jeremy Smith has made the case that the publication of Byrd's Psalms and Sonnets and Songs "may have been designed to use the medium of print as a means to regain his former status"⁹ that once gave him access to the Royal presence. If so, the writing of a lament song to the Queen's dog seems to be a continuation of his attempt to fall back into her favor. (To follow up on this thought, though, I will

⁷ Katherine Duncan Jones in 'Melancholie Times': Musical Recollections of Sidney by William Byrd and Thomas Watson." *Miscellaneous prose of Sir Philip Sidney* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990).

⁸ This has been pointed out by Philip Brett, the discoverer of the song.

⁹ William Byrd Edition vol. 12, ed. Jeremy Smith (Introduction, ix).

have to make the assumption that Byrd did not cherish ‘Pretty Royal’ deeply and that his heart was not indeed shaking with grief for the dog’s death, as the song says). A word by word reading of this song demonstrates that Byrd was trying to show his solidarity to the Queen’s sorrow for the lost of her pet. The first words, “My mistress had a little dog/ whose name was Pretty Royal” acknowledge the higher authority of the song’s addressee and its subject. “Who neither hunted sheep nor hog / but was without a denial a tumbler fine” shows a gentle tone of humor as an attempt to cheer up the Queen, and points to the virtue of the dog.

The passage is playful and has rhythmic vitality. The bass supporting the harmonic progression has melismatic figures only once. Ascending melodic contours are followed by descending ones, giving a notion of balance to the melody. Cadences finishing in major chords are followed by still major chords – as opposed to minor, as we often see in Byrd’s writing. The verses rhyme in ‘ABAB’ form, then ‘ABB’.

The second section, starting at measure 19 has an entirely different tone. It sounds dark and sad because of slower paced notes, lower register in the voice, and prevalent use of minor chords. The text is about grief and it even carries a gruesome tone at the end: ‘My heart with grief doth shake/ This pretty dog was wounded sore/E’en for his mistress sake: A beastly man of manly beast/Knowck’d out his brains’. And finishes with saying ‘And so I rest, and so I rest’. There is a connection with “O that most rare breast” that is readily heard: ‘But out alas’ uses in the voice the exact same motive used in Sidney’s elegy to delineate ‘O heavy time’ (measure 102). Certain words receive motives that always outline them: ‘my heart’ is marked by an ascending 4th; with grief, by a descending half step; shake a short melismatic figure.

The piece is intermitted by an instrumental dance-like passage. The meter changes and the voice comes in talking about ‘a royal trial’, which is insistently repeated, as if people were in a public manifestation advocating it. And concludes by saying that the murderer of the dog deserved to be executed: ‘O yez! Ye hounds and beagles all/If ye sat in Appleton Hall/Would you not judge that out of doubt/Tyburn¹⁰ were fit/For such a lout?’ Laurence Dreyfus suggests that interpreting this song as a pure expression of condolences would be a mistake, and that Byrd is rather referring to the death of Robert Devereux, the second Earl of Essex, executed in 1601. Devereux was a promoter of his Catholic Faith – hence Byrd’s sympathy. Dreyfus also notes that he remained loyal to the Queen until the end, which is also the case of the subject of the song. The concluding strands would then be a mocking trial by hounds and beagles at Paston’s house, Appleton Hall. “A beastly man, or manly beast” is condemned to Tyburn. In the third section, the word ‘lout’ refers to Raleth, Francis Bacon and all of those who testified on the trial. Although, he does not note that there is a motivic relation between the words that delineates the words ‘fairy Queen’(measures 16, 17) ‘such a lout’(measures 74, 75). This may well be Byrd’s hint for who the ‘lout’ is.

If there is in fact an ambiguous message in this piece, Dreyfus reading seems to be a convincing one, however it would not annul the first reading, and Byrd wrote this song to criticize the Queen in very harsh lines under the cover of offering her an apparently naïve demonstration of sympathy.

Ye sacred Muses – Thomas Tallis, d. 1585

‘Ye Sacred Muses’ is an act of humble expression of devotion from the student, William Byrd, to the once his mentor, Thomas Tallis, dead in 23 of November of 1585. Without concerns of being moderate, Byrd equals Tallis’ life with the existence of the art to which he had devoted his days: ‘Tallis is dead, and music dies.’

The piece starts with a solemn solo in the tenor viol. One by one, the other instruments join in, until the voice entries seven measures latter, claiming the celestial entities to descend to the earth and meet with those grieving in sorrow. The name of Tallis is always followed by the words ‘is

¹⁰ Tyburn = the place of public execution in London.

dead' in the piece, and the whole phrase receives a melodic motive that is musically fairly unpretentious: an ascending minor third, filled in by stepwise tones, followed by a descending perfect fourth leap. The motive is foreshadowed in the instrumental parts in several ways before stated in the voice. This way, when it first appears it is already a familiar melody. Byrd incorporates figures of word-painting: 'come down' (measures 15, 16), 'to earth'(measure 21), and 'with tears' (measures 28 and 45) are musically illustrated by downward leaps; 'above' (measure 19), with an ascending scalar figure. An implicit musical illustration of the text is done in the accompaniment parts when the voice articulates its second incursion the phrase of 'Tallis is dead': all the instruments discourse in ascending scalar figures, as if telling that he ascended to Heaven (measures 32 and 33), in complement to what the voice is saying.

At the end, the bass viol brings 'Tallis is dead' motive inverted (measure 56). The word music, whenever appears, receives a melismatic treatment. This piece circulated only in manuscript during Byrd's lifetime.

Fair Britain Isle -Henry, Prince of Wales, d. 1612

Similarly to what happened to Philip Sidney, Prince Henry's death motivated an outburst of poems of lamentations in England. Henry is often acclaimed as the "hope of militant Protestantism," which would make him the second Protestant figure in William Byrd's elegies. However, Dennis Kay makes a persuading proposition that on the elegy by William Juxton's, from 1612, which was widely circulated at the time of Henry's death, the image of the Prince changed "from the hero of militant Puritanism into a Laudian saint." (262- Appendix D). Remembering that the abolishment of saints is an essential premise of the Protestant doctrine, and taking Kay's assumption as correct, Henry is thence posthumously transformed into a Catholic symbolism. It might be not far fetched to interpret Byrd's elegy in the same lines, when the words of his song compare Prince Henry with Henry, the Fifth, "who left behind renown to be divine." Another catholic-inclined thought would refer to the sore of the oppressed (recusants, perhaps?). [England] 'Sits all alone with sorrows sore oppressed': Analyzing the entire piece it is clear that the 'sorrow of oppression' is caused by Henry's death, but since the cited phrase comes before his name is even is mentioned, the reason of 'oppression' is momentarily left open to other interpretations, such as the one proposed.

Other than this, Prince Henry's elegy is laid on highly patriotic lines. The first words of exaltation go to England: 'Fair Britain Isle, the Mistress of the West, famous for wealth, but more for fertile soil'. The second verse exalts Henry as a noble prince that had so many virtues and was 'the hope of age of gold'.

Byrd asserts a special melodic motive for 'Henry our Prince' and another to outline 'Fair Britain Isle' (which is also used in Sidney's elegy "Come to me grief forever" (measure 11)).

The piece is built on one main compositional procedure: the presentation of motives and their subsequent imitation by another voice or voices in the same key or transposed. The viols make constant use of ascending stepwise figurations. The interval of minor third is constantly exploited: it appear 12 times in the voice part alone. Major and minor chords with the same fundamental note are constantly juxtaposed, as in measures 20 and 21. This sudden reversal of modes may call to a state of emotional uncertainty that is present in the feeling of grief that Byrd is trying of depict.

In angel's weed – Mary of Scots, d. 1587

This lament song appears only in manuscript. Byrd chose to honor Mary of Scots in a song, but never mentions her name in it, perhaps as a precautious act to not be accused of being directly associated with her. Mary fled from Scotland to England after being accused of her husband's death and forced to abdicate the throne; in England, she was accused for supposedly having taken part of a plot to murder Elizabeth. Mary was executed in 1587 at Fotheringhay Castle.

The song is short, only 47 measures, and talks about Mary being now in Heaven, but when on earth was unjustly accused of a crime. “By false suspect” is emphasized by being stated and then sequentially repeated two times.

Musically speaking, this elegy is nearly a compendium of motives of Byrd’s elegies:

- The initial motive of the bass viol delineates G – Bb – G (found in ‘O that most rare breast’, and ‘My mistress had a little dog’);
- The voice part that underlies the two motives of “In angel’s weed” in measure 4 and measures 6 and 7 also appears in the same sequence in Campions’ elegy (next song to be discussed) in measure 24 and 25, and in 26 under the words “An angel’s trump.” The second motive also appears in “O that most rare breast”, measures 19 and 20, in the voice part with the words ‘o sprite heroic’.
- “Above the skies” in measure 11 is built on the same motive of “Fair Britain Isle”, which is sequentially repeated (identically and transposed) in the instruments and then in the voice, from measures 1 to 6.
- “Crystal bright”, from measure 13 brings Tallis’ motive.

Why do I use my paper, ink and pen?

Paper, ink and pen, the requests of Jesuit Edmund Campion while imprisoned for standing up for his Catholic faith “become significant of the repression of a regime which denied expression to the deepest beliefs of its subjects.”¹¹ He was executed in 1581 and on his death Henry Walpole wrote “Why do I use my paper, ink and pen?.” The poem was widely circulated around Catholic circles in its manuscript version and occasioned tribulation for many of those who put their hands on it. Later on William Byrd set the poem into a song in which he was adequately cautious to leave out direct references to Campion. In any event, the writing of this piece in such circumstances strikes as evidence that Byrd was an active figure of the recusant causes in England.

Most melodic materials are treated here in imitative fashion among all parts. As it has been noted, this song is connected to Mary of Scot’s elegy through the unaltered exploit of two motives. Here, the motives are given an exceptional treatment by being never imitated –they each appear only once in the voice part alone. This compositional strategy turns the two motives into highly marked events in the piece. Even though the motives do not seem to underlie words that form the essence of this song, they somehow might be functioning to express a continuation of thought between Mary’ and Campion’s elegies.

From the rough look at these pieces proposed here, one can conclude that Byrd’s lament song style is not made up from any consistent use of specific idiomatic devices (such as a determined scale of rhythmic figure), but rather from a common compositional strategy. The most immediate one is the choice of text, which without fail brings words of praise to the person in question and expressions of grief. The other one is that he assigns determined roles to melodic motives. As the individual discussion of each piece attempted to sign, in the songs where the name of the deceased appears, with exception of “Come to me grief forever”, they are granted with a specific motive that will characterize them with certain uniqueness within the piece. In other cases, motives are used to connect ideas (Queen Elizabeth= such a lout in “My mistress had a little dog”). Finally, when different songs share motivic materials a sense of continuity and oneness seems to be achieved in the whole body of lament songs.

One further and final thought that we came to conclude is that in most cases, the device of elegies and lament songs used by Byrd are a vehicle of both homage and of expressing his own faith and politic views, but these will only be understood if the signs and codes he left to us are deciphered.

¹¹ Gerard Kilroy, Paper, inke and penne: the literary memoria of the recusant community, 95.

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