

### Elizabeth I, Dido and Oxford: Staging Power in the University Drama

Recent studies of Elizabethan University drama, particularly those focused upon Elizabeth's visits to the Universities, have considerably advanced our understanding of why particular plays might have been selected as appropriate for performance. These ground-breaking studies have simultaneously arrived at a similar conclusion about the relationship of power between 'gown and crown': Sarah Knight has persuasively argued for the propriety of producing Sophocles as response to William Cecil's desire for the Universities to demonstrate "order and learning" in their drama, for example;<sup>1</sup> whilst Linda Shenk considers, in an articulate description of university drama as a learned product that contained strong courtly influences, how plays were often produced in such a way as to reflect perceived royal taste.<sup>2</sup> Siobhan Keenan highlights the opportunity for university men to offer counsel during Royal visits, although, as she concludes, the advice offered, either about continued religious reform or the advantages of marriage, apparently went unheeded and Elizabeth was always able to assert her dominance over proceedings.<sup>3</sup> This paper develops from this consensus, suggesting, through a case-study, how drama might well have been used to consider, rather than merely exhibit, both a particular image of the Queen and the particular potential of academic drama in performance.

On 13<sup>th</sup> May, 1583, Robert Dudley, Early of Leicester and at that time Chancellor of the University of Oxford, wrote to instruct the University authorities to prepare to host the Polish prince Albrecht Laski, who would visit at the Queen's suggestion between Monday 10<sup>th</sup> and Thursday 13<sup>th</sup> June. There have been various suggested reasons for the visit: Sarah Knight explains that the visit was part of a wider western European tour as ambassador for Poland, but also notes that the French ambassador (Michel de Castelnau) suspected he hoped to use the visit to try to persuade the English to stop selling arms to Russia:<sup>4</sup> Anthony Wood (in *The Histories and Antiquities of the University of Oxford*) simply writes that he came "to the English Court to see the Fashions and admire the wisdom of the Queen."<sup>5</sup> Whatever the motivation for Laski's visit, Dudley requested a programme of events similar to that laid on for the royal visit of 1566, which had included performances of *Marcus Geminus*, the two-part *Palamon and Arcite*, and *Progne*. The Queen herself did not accompany Laski to Oxford, but she sent him up the Thames to Oxford on the royal barge.

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<sup>1</sup> Sarah Knight, '“Goodlie Anticke Apparrell”? Sophocles' *Ajax* at Early Modern Oxford and Cambridge', *Shakespeare Studies* 37 (2009) pp. 25- 42.

<sup>2</sup> Linda Shenk, 'Gown Before Crown: Scholarly Abjection and Academic Entertainment Under Queen Elizabeth I', in *Early Modern Academic Drama*, eds Jonathan Walker and Paul Streufert (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008) pp. 19-44.

<sup>3</sup> Siobhan Keenan, 'Spectator and Spectacle: Royal Entertainments at the Universities in the 1560s', in *The Progresses, Pageants and Entertainments of Queen Elizabeth I*, eds Jayne Elisabeth Archer, Elizabeth Goldring, and Sarah Knight (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007) pp. 86-103.

<sup>4</sup> Sarah Knight, 'Baron Laski's Visit to The University of Oxford, 10 - 13 June 1583', in *John Nichols's The Progresses and Public Processions of Queen Elizabeth I: A New Edition of the Early Modern Sources*, eds. Elizabeth Goldring et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 168.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 175.

Once at Oxford, Laski was lavishly entertained, with disputations, and on his first night fireworks, on his second night the performance of a comedy, William Gager's *Rivales*, and on the third night Gager's tragedy of Dido. "Yesterday the stage offered you silly Mopsus, today it will offer a lofty tale. The comic slipper turns into the tragic buskin", as the Prologue tells us, adding that 'Crying is a very enjoyable thing, when nothing is actually wrong'.<sup>6</sup> This assertion of the fictionality of the story to be presented is juxtaposed with what we may take to be the realia of the performance space which connects the banquet Dido offers to Aeneas with the real hospitality offered by Christ Church to Laski in the Great Hall, which was where banquets were served and performances took place. Take for example this passage:

*Dido*                    Servants, clear it all away quickly. Meanwhile let this house resound with joyful music. We shall take a turn in the royal garden.

**Act II Scene iv:** Maharbal, Hanno

*Maharbal*            Hanno, how I fear all this hospitality will lead to disaster!

Presumably real music played, the Dido actor exited, the servants began clearing the tables; the guests were no longer in the fiction but in the reality, listening to music ... and then fiction crashed back in as Maharbal's speech at once draws the audience's attention back to the real hospitality it is enjoying, and reminds the audience that this represents the setting for an antique tragedy. The lavish staging seems generally to have been concerned to create spectacle and sensation in which the audience were involved, rather than an illusion of another world. Holinshed provides the following account of the entertainment:

a verie statelie tragedie named Dido, wherein the queens banquet (with Eneas narration of the destruction of Troie) was liuelie described in a marchpaine patterne, there was also a goodlie sight of hunters with full crie of a kennel of hounds, Mercurie and Iris descending and ascending from and to an high place, the tempest wherein it hailed small confects, rained rosewater, and snow an artificiall kind of snow, all strange, maruellous, & abundant.<sup>7</sup>

Presumably the storm of falling confectionary and rosewater occurred as Dido and Aeneas sheltered in a cave, but in the fictional world they occupy, the rain, hail and snow are harsh and elemental, not sweet rosewater. The organisers of the spectacle – including George Peele – prioritise the immediate sensual enjoyment of the audience over the evocation of the mythical world represented. Truly, 'Crying is a very enjoyable thing, when nothing is actually wrong'. The marchpaine pattern is particularly curious in this respect:

*Dido*                    But why is Ascanius looking down at his food rather sadly?  
*Cupid*                  An image of the city of Troy presented itself to me, and at the wretched sight grief crept into my heart. The tale which my father told you last night in fuller detail - *here* you may see it set in summary before your eyes.  
*Dido*                    Ascanius, I beg of you, tell the story of Troy's fate again.

<sup>6</sup> Quotations from Gager's *Dido* are from the unpublished translation by Elizabeth Sandis which was commissioned for the 2013 EDOX (Early Drama at Oxford) production Christ Church, directed by Elisabeth Dutton. The Latin text and an English translation by Dana Sutton are available at : <http://www.philological.bham.ac.uk/gager/plays/dido/index.html>

<sup>7</sup> Knight, 'Baron Laski's Visit', pp. 173-4.

*Cupid* Pretend this dish you see is Troy. This way the river Simois used to flow, here was the site of Mount Ida with its deep forests, on this road stood Tenedos, Cilla, Chryse, the circle of outlying towns which lie ruined from the war... Here, when part of the wall had been torn down, with the insidious trick of the horse, a mighty path opened up into the heart of the city. Here the slaughter began. Am I able to speak further? Only that, after all the burial ceremonies for the butchered bodies of our leaders, it was thus, through Sinon's treachery, and thus, by the burning torches of the Greeks, that the city was turned into weightless ash.

*Dido* Oh what an example of astonishing invention! Oh father blessed with noble offspring, and son born of such a parent. Ascanius, you must foster the divine talent that's in your nature.

When we tried to restage the play in 2013, we thought – with some anxiety – that we needed to supply an edible reconstruction of the city of Troy, until the Cupid actor pointed out that to do so might be to miss the point. The description of Troy's destruction flows from a familiar domestic question, asked by every mother of her child at some point: 'why are you just staring at your food? Why don't you eat up?' If the food in front of Cupid really were a detailed reconstruction of the city of Troy, the question would be unnatural; the point is that, until Cupid evokes Troy in the dishes on the table, Dido – and presumably the audience with her – sees instead a fine culinary treat. Cupid then, through his words, recreates for the audience the city of Troy and its destruction. Dido's exclamation on Cupid's 'astonishing invention' pays tribute to the evocative power of those words-- a moment of self-congratulation on the part of the playwright who had created the scene.

We had a plate of cakes brought in, decorated with sparklers to add to the spectacle and also anticipate the reference to Troy's burning. Cupid then rearranged the cakes on the table as he spoke, pouring sauce over then for the river Simois, and finally smashing the cakes with his hand at the city's destruction. The action made sense with the lines. So where did the 1583 performance incorporate a marzipan reconstruction of Troy? I suspect that the magnificent cake must have been brought in during Cupid's speech, as if evoked by imaginative powers or perhaps the mischief of the impish god: Dido's exclamation, "Oh what an example of astonishing invention!" – was then a compliment to the Christ Church master cake chef. Cupid's speech provides only a rather laboured excuse for a spectacular way to serve pudding – the spectacle offered to Laski is bigger and more important than the antique narrative – or perhaps the marzipan Troy creates a symbol, at once poignant and delicious, for what the university men have done with a classical tragedy, serving it up to their own ends, sweetened, with the tragic sting carefully removed from its tale. The banqueters who consume the cake then participate symbolically, by ingestion, in the fate of Troy, while 'internalizing key cultural hopes and desires' associated with the Trojan myth.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> The phrase is from Claire Sponsler, *The Queen's Dumbshows: John Lydgate and the Making of Early Theater* (Pennsylvania PA : University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014) p.154. Sponsler is discussing 'Edible Theater' from a century and a half earlier than Gager's *Dido*, but her discussion is suggestive: see also Patricia Fumerton, who discusses gastronomic art objects in renaissance feasts as symbolic pseudo-foods which emphasized both communality among those who participated in a feast and the social status of the host. Patricia Fumerton, *Cultural Aesthetics: Renaissance Literature and the Practice of Social Ornament* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991) pp. 125-6.

So what point does Gager's *Dido* make? This play combines passages of close translation from Virgil with moments of Senecan influence such as the appearance of the Ghost of Sychaeus: these portents are perhaps a compliment to Laski who was a patron of alchemists with an interest in the supernatural. It also provides 'advice to princes', alongside compliments to the Queen. The parallels between Dido, also known as 'Elisa', and Queen Elizabeth I are explicitly drawn in Gager's play. As the Epilogue states: 'Phoenician Elisa lies dead from a pitiful fate. But *our* Eliza lives'. Like Dido, the Epilogue explains, Elizabeth has borne 'many reversals of fortune' and gone on to found kingdoms: our first view of the Carthaginian Queen certainly presents her in an impressive light, brave, Stoically philosophical, pious, shrewd ruler identifying herself entirely with her city:

*Dido*                    If the Fates had not wished to destroy me in former days, so that I, exiled from one kingdom, was searching for a place to establish my own and said to be down on my luck, my Carthage would not be standing here now. A fall gives one distinction, and my happy fortune has been built *upon* my misfortune. Now I must decide how my position in the city can be made secure, and by what means I can ensure that the gods who have supported me thus far favour me always.

Like Dido, too, Elizabeth displays regal largesse in the 'generous aid' that she 'offers to strangers'. Yet Gager is careful to emphasise first Eliza's caution: she interrogates the Trojans carefully -- "Should I consider you guests or enemies? Or both? For the two are often wont to be confused" -- before welcoming them into her land and explaining that 'The newness of this kingdom forces me to pursue this policy'. Once she has welcomed the Trojans, however, she makes a highly loaded political statement:

I will make no distinction between the people of Carthage and of Troy; they shall live under equal law.

Carthage and Troy could represent here many divisions in Elizabeth's kingdom -- Catholics and Protestants, perhaps, or London's citizens and London's immigrant workers<sup>9</sup> -- but the monarch's duty is both to protect her kingdom, by admitting only those without enmity to it, and to offer to all those within her kingdom, whatever their background, the rule of law: Elizabethan England was to be a haven for Protestants from mainland Europe. The political equality which Dido asserts for her subjects provides a stark contrast with the assertions of difference which the Ghost of Sychaeus drags from the underworld to describe Dido and Aeneas: 'A prosperous woman, to marry this wretch? A pious woman to marry this infidel? A queen to marry an exile? A woman from Tyre a Trojan man?'

Finally, the Epilogue notes, Elizabeth is *unlike* Phoenician Elisa in one important point: *she* has not deigned to take any Sychaeus for a husband, and may no Aeneas

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<sup>9</sup> For discussion of sectarian and xenophobic attitudes among Londoners in the 1580s and 1590s, see I. Archer, *The Pursuit of Stability* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) and C.W. Chitty, 'Aliens in England in the Sixteenth Century' *Race* (1966). Religious refugees were regarded with sympathy by some, but with suspicion by others, notably the London Companies who saw the aliens as a threat where they competed for trade within the same market. Numerous bills presented to Parliament aimed at restricting alien economic activity. In the 1590s, when the economy was slow, apprentices posted flyers threatening uprisings against foreigners living in London, because they believed that alien craftsmen were taking work from natives and causing economic decline.

manipulate her mind.’ In Gager’s *Dido*, the powerful Queen, who has built up her realm, cedes control of her kingdom when she gives her love and her body to Aeneas, a foreigner with divine obligations to another nation. Aeneas himself is extensively flattered by the playwright in lines which are also compliments to the distinguished visitor, Laski, the Polish Ambassador: further lines of flattery are included in Mercury’s speech about the importance of Ambassadors as messengers of the gods. Nonetheless, as the play repeatedly observes, ‘foreign marriages rarely turn out well’: are the men of Oxford here presenting simply an argument against a – now almost dead in the water -- foreign alliance? Are they favouring instead the long-lived hopes of their Chancellor, Robert Dudley (who was probably in the audience), of Elizabeth’s hand?

Of course, one of the virtues of drama as a genre is its capacity to represent a number of different points of view sympathetically. Maharbal and Hanno, Carthaginian courtiers, discuss a possible alliance between Dido and Aeneas: Maharbal argues that such a marriage will unleash chaos, because the spurned Iarbas and other suitors would be turned against Dido. ‘Will the princes of Libya, whom she has spurned so many times, permit this guest to be received in her realm while those born in this land are treated with contempt?’ If ‘those born in this land’ looks like a reference to Dudley, Hanno’s reply challenges this perception: he dismisses the native suitors as ‘vacuous youths’ – an unlikely way for students to describe their Chancellor. The argument for a native marriage is picked up again only by the Ghost of Sychaeus, and even then only grudgingly: ‘if, Dido, you now desire a second marriage, has Libya not produced any princes worthy of your love?’ Hanno’s point is rather different:

if you consider... that our queen, rich and powerful, in the prime of her life, should make a lawful marriage, would you rather she wed according to your wishes or her own? Or rather Iarbas? If I were minded to become king on such a principle, let me die. I don’t want her taken as a wife only to be thrust aside so that he may rule in her place.

The danger for a Queen in taking a husband is that she become subject to him. Nonetheless, his argument is not that Dido should not marry, but rather that she should be free to decide for herself to marry Aeneas, since with him at the head of her armies she need not fear Iarbas. Maharbal’s reply, that Theseus and Jason are examples of foreign men who abandoned women, and his proverbial-sounding conclusion - Desertion by a foreigner is a commonplace – are pragmatically dismissed by Hanno: ‘the sins of two men should not convict them all’ - and the idea that alliance with Aeneas will strengthen Carthage is then forcefully argued by Anna to Dido in the ensuing scene: ‘With Trojan soldiers marching at our side, think how Punic glory will lift up your name across the world!’

Anna’s arguments add personal considerations to the political, however. Her primary point is that Dido should experience love and children. In the midst of listing Carthage’s bellicose neighbours, Anna demands: ‘Are you really going to fight against the God of Love, all on your own?’. Fighting against other nations to defend Carthage, and fighting against Love, are curiously equated in Anna’s rhetoric; Anna seems to ignore the difficulty that she is counselling her sister to do the one and not the other. Yet the Chorus then tells us that it is the ‘madness’ of Dido’s ‘disease’ – Love – which immediately slows the building of her City: ‘the towers once begun are no longer rising’ (Chorus, end of II.v) The battle against the God of Love is one in which Dido should not have laid down her arms.

Strangely, the towers do seem to be rising where Aeneas is at work, since Mercury then reprimands the hero for 'laying down walls for a mighty Carthage... in obedience to your wife.' Aeneas has, according to Mercury, forgotten his own destiny, his own future kingdom, while helping Dido build hers: in no uncertain terms Mercury tells Aeneas that he must set sail. The problem, for both Dido and Aeneas, is that love distracts from destiny, and from the job of ruling. Or rather, sexual love does. For great men – and women – love must be bigger.

As Aeneas leaves Dido, he declares: 'Now Italy is my country, my wife, my empire, my salvation' -- a declaration which might recall Elizabeth's own declaration, to the Lower House when urged to marry:

When I received this [coronation] ring I solemnly bound myself in marriage to the realm (1559)<sup>10</sup>

Dido and her City of Carthage are not even permitted second place in Aeneas' priorities, for his instinctive, enduring desire is for his homeland:

If the Fates were to allow me to lead my life under fresh auspices and manage my concerns as I wished, I would live in what is left of Troy, and Priam's houses, exempted from ruin, would still be there. I would give my native land its *own* name back, give it back to the Trojans who have been overthrown, and I would gather up our scattered citizens and lead them *back* to Hector, to Priam, to myself.

Aeneas' speech here is powerful in its mourning, its longing, its conviction, its vision. Gager's tragedy is not just of Dido, but of Dido and Aeneas, and he is careful to mark the parallels between the two. As Aeneas declares: 'If Carthage, your new city, has a claim on you... do you object to Latium for me?' Gager portrays the clashing destinies of two great princes.

Read in this way, Dido's personal tragedy is needless, as Anna points out: she could simply let Aeneas go, and return to the building of her empire, her own destiny intact. Dido's fears of loss of reputation are needless, once Aeneas has gone:

*Anna*           Who is going to accuse you of having compromised your chastity?  
*Dido*            You ask that? He who plundered it.  
*Anna*            He is an exile searching for an unknown world.

But Dido cannot free her mind from him, and refuses the words of Anna which may seem to the audience entirely sensible; it is perhaps at this moment that the heart of the issue is exposed, for Dido openly declares: 'Trivial is a love that can heed advice'.

Dido and Aeneas are both repeatedly given advice, by the gods, by their courtiers, by their friends, and much of the advice seems good, both on the side of their marriage and against it. So is the play simply trying to argue, as Hanno does, that the monarch should have free choice? Perhaps not. The ability to surround oneself with good counsellors (such as the young Oxford men in the audience, perhaps) and to pay

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<sup>10</sup> As quoted in *The Sayings of Queen Elizabeth*, ch. 7, by Frederick Chamberlin (1923). Said "to the Speaker, Knights, and Burgesses of the Lower House who [in 1559, the second year of her reign] laid an address before her in the great gallery of Whitehall Palace urging her to marry."

heed to their advice, was essential to the Tudor ideal of kingship. Here Gager portrays a Dido whose problem is not whether or not to be married, or to whom, but that love drives out her capacity to listen to good advice, and so deprives her of her capacity to govern well – in effect, it makes her a tyrant. ‘Trivial is a love that can heed advice’, but the failure to heed advice is tyranny.<sup>11</sup>

Aeneas, by contrast, knows both how to dispute and to take advice. When Ilioneus emphasizes to him the claims of his hostess, he does not deny those claims, but rather balances them with his other obligations: the dialogue sounds like an academic disputation, and produces a sophisticated legal and moral argument about the nature of guilt:

*Ilioneus*                   The death of Paris shows the contract of hospitality is not to be ignored.  
*Aeneas*                    But Paris yielded to uncontrolled desire. I am obeying the authority of the gods at their command.  
*Ilioneus*                The crime of Paris and your own is one and the same.  
*Aeneas*                    The intention is not the same: it is the *wanting* to commit that defines a crime. He is called guilty who does wrong willingly. I depart against my will. I am resolved to obey the command of Jupiter. Our escape is not to be delayed by any further discussion.

When Mercury brings Jupiter’s message that he must leave Carthage, his struggle is not knowing what he must do, but knowing how to perform his role. He sounds like an unhappy actor:

I am happy to go, to forsake these lands and flee. Yet... with what speech can I possibly approach you, Dido? While you are venting your fury... What expression should I put on? How should I begin my speech? What is an adequate excuse? I haven’t made up my mind, I’m swerving in different directions

Aeneas’ predicament is an artistic one: how should he approach Dido, speak, look? -- this is the nature of his difficult decision, and it is one which draws attention again to the nature of the performance in hand, and to the political roots of rhetoric that insisted that speaking well, a good performance, made ideas powerful, or at least palatable. If the men of the University of Oxford were asked to entertain, they could do so, with marzipan Troys and showers of rosewater. But maybe these entertainments, by drawing attention to the nature of the plays that were served up – self-conscious fictions, with foregrounded disputation and debate – also served to remind Elizabeth of the function of the men who staged them. If Aeneas here is an actor, then perhaps he stands for the university men who have been temporarily made actors by the Queen’s requirements of them: they are not just actors, they are royal advisors in the making. The importance of this distinction, as Linda Shenk has argued, is evident in the Cambridge Vice Chancellor’s response to the Queen’s 1592 request that the men of Cambridge provide Christmas entertainments at court: Vice Chancellor still believes that such a request is ‘nothing beseeching our Studentes’, who can only appropriately present drama in an academic setting, and preferably in Latin.<sup>12</sup> But how does one approach a Queen?

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<sup>11</sup> See Greg Walker, *Writing Under Tyranny: English Literature and the Henrician Reformation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), esp. Ch. 1, ‘The Long Divorce of Steel’.

<sup>12</sup> Shenk, ‘Gown before Crown’, pp. 19-20.

The answer, for Aeneas and for Gager, was cautiously, and with great flattery. Perhaps luckily for the men of Christ Church on that night in 1583, there was no real Queen for them to approach. Elizabeth wasn't there, and her absence left space at the High Table for Elissa, Dido, to sit at the Polish Ambassador's side. The Epilogue is concerned to assert that the play offers advice, but that that advice is for 'each spectator', and he proceeds to draw some rather general observations which range from the aspirant to the xenophobic to the bathetically sexist: 'It is royal to give trust and help to the wretched, and great hospitality ennobles a distinguished house... Foreign marriages rarely turn out well; the power of Love is great; the heavier passion tends to seize hold of women, the lighter one kindles the men.' Finally, the Epilogue seems to condemn his own play for its melodrama: 'our era has witnessed few Didos. I think women have grown wiser: I doubt any would be about to die for a difficult love affair' – or maybe this too is a compliment to the Virgin Queen whose approach to the question of marriage was so politically pragmatic.

The question of intention is necessarily, and I would argue, deliberately problematized by the choice of Dido as much as by the treatment of her narrative that the play provides. As Deanne Williams suggests, 'the long tradition of contested interpretations of Dido lent itself to the unresolved discussion of the Queen's marital status.'<sup>13</sup> Williams goes on to argue that Gager's play serves to yoke together 'the queen's chastity and England's imperial power'<sup>14</sup> which is to argue that Dido is intended to serve almost as cipher for Elizabeth; but, as I have argued, Dido, within the narrative, is at the very least demonstrated to be fallible as ruler in her inability to accept advice. In a famous apostrophe addressed to Elizabeth, Gager writes 'Hail, Queen, strong in spirit, heroic in virtue, prudent in counsel, pious in religion'<sup>15</sup> – and I think we are to assume that 'prudent in counsel' suggests an ability to accept rather than give advice. If Queen Dido demonstrates imprudence, it would cause us to consider whether the play is quite as 'conformist and ordered' as it would first appear: through a negative exemplum dangerously compared to as well as contrasted with the Queen, a warning is offered along with entertainment and flattery. That the Queen was not in the audience, but that Laski and perhaps Dudley were, might make such a performance easier, but perhaps also more subversive. And with a consideration of the royal ability to heed advice at its heart, rather than just an impetus to offer it, Gager's play simultaneously seems to consider not just its subject, but also its ultimate function. The men of Oxford were self-consciously training to be not commercial actors, but professional advisers, working not for entertainment and financial gain, but for political power and the royal ear.

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<sup>13</sup> Deanne Williams, *Dido, Queen of England*, in *ELH*, Vol. 73, No. 1 (Spring, 2006), pp. 31-59 (p. 38).

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.

<sup>15</sup> William Gager, 'Apostrophe to the Most Serene Queen Elizabeth', cited at <http://www.philological.bham.ac.uk/gager/poetry/pubpoems/trans.html>