

The Triumphs of Oriana: Arcadian Encomia *Par Excellence*

With the delightful revelry of sylvan deities, nymphs and swains, and even Diana, the Italian goddess of the forest and of childbirth, Thomas Morley's anthology of 25 madrigals by 23 composers¹ continues to laud the virgin queen, Elizabeth I (1533-1603). Since the first publication in 1601, *The Triumphs of Oriana* has enchanted singer and listener alike with all the elements that make madrigals so satisfying.

Among English madrigal composers, Thomas Morley (c.1557-1602) was, as Joseph Kerman notes, "the first, the most prolific, the most popular and the most influential composer of this school."² The Italian madrigal served as both inspiration and exemplar for Elizabethan composers, among whom Morley was perhaps the greatest *devotee*.

The first printed collection of Italian madrigals with English words was *Musica Transalpina*, published in London in 1588. *Musica Transalpina* proved to be enormously influential among English composers. A second volume appeared in 1597. Nicholas Yonge (c.1560-1619), who edited the collection, "Englished" the Italian madrigals, a term used to describe the process of translating or otherwise making English in character.

Among the madrigals included in the second volume of *Musica Transalpina* is Giovanni Croce's "Ove tra l'herb'ei fiori," or "Hard by a Crystal Fountain." In the original Italian, "Ove tra l'herb'ei fiori" concludes with the couplet "Poi Concorde seguir Ninfe e Pastori, viva la bella Dori." Yonge "Englished" this couplet as, "Then sang the shepherds and nymphs of Diana: Long live fair Oriana." Interestingly, the "Oriana" refrain was quickly incorporated into two English madrigals by John Holmes (1597) and Michael Cavendish (1598), both of which were later included in *The Triumphs of Oriana*. Morley would later enlarge and reset Croce's madrigal — a form of parody common during this time — for inclusion in *The Triumphs of Oriana*. It is worth noting that Croce's madrigal appeared in an earlier Italian anthology entitled *Il Trionfo di Dori*.

Il Trionfo di Dori was published in 1592 and is a set of twenty-nine madrigals by various composers all ending with the same refrain, "Viva la Bella Dori." *Trionfo* was commissioned by a wealthy Venetian nobleman and member of the *Consiglio dei Pregadi*, Leonardo Sanudo (1544-1607). Sanudo sought to honor his bride through, as David Hurley notes, "the alter ego of the sea-nymph, Dori, the daughter of Oceanus, the divine personification of the sea..."³ Morley's anthology, *The Triumphs of Oriana*, followed the pattern of *Il Trionfo di Dori* by employing in each madrigal the closing couplet, "Then sang the shepherds and nymphs of Diana: Long Live fair Oriana."

Among the several honorific appellatives given to Elizabeth I, including Pandora, Gloriana, Cynthia, Belphoebe, and Astraea⁴ is the name Oriana, which refers to the "chaste and beautiful"⁵ daughter of Lisuarte, king of Great Britain in the chivalric romance *Amadis de Gaule*. The earliest surviving edition of the text by the Castilian author, Garci Rodríguez de Montalvo (c.1450-1505) was printed in 1508. Due to the enormous popularity of *Amadis*, writers in the sixteenth century referred to ladies as Oriana. In England, Oriana especially befitted the cult of the virgin queen.

Thomas Morley was evidently a devoted subject, perhaps not least because Elizabeth I granted him a monopoly to print music in 1598. By 1601, The Queen was nearly 70 and in poor health. She was also in a doleful condition as a result of the rebellion and subsequent execution of her favorite, Robert Devereux, Earl of Essex (1565-1601), who led a failed *coup d'état* against the government and was executed for treason in February of 1601. It was in the midst of the sad

realities of life that Morley undertook the ambitious plan to laud and cheer the Queen. With a sincere wish, if not fleeting a hope, Morley and his colleagues depicted an ageless queen ruling over an idyllic, pastoral Arcadia in which even the nymphs and shepherds of the goddess Diana show favor by singing, “Long live fair Oriana.”

Morley dedicated *The Triumphs of Oriana* to Elizabeth’s cousin, Lord High Admiral Charles Howard (1536-1624), Earl of Nottingham, who led the defeat of the Spanish Armada. It was Howard who later defeated Essex and served as a commissioner at Essex’s trial. Morley’s decision was both imminently practical and quite clever. As David Starkey observes, “Dedications were a polite way of asking for money, and Morley could scarcely ask the Queen for further favours.... Howard, moreover, was caught. He could scarcely refuse to play the patron, as any refusal could be interpreted as a slight on Elizabeth.”⁶

The Triumphs of Oriana is organized into two sections: 14 five-voice madrigals and 11 six-voice madrigals. The composers range from the important and well-known (the absence of William Byrd being noteworthy) to the obscure. Although several of the madrigals seem to unfold various elements of a story, leading some to theorize that they were included in a masque,⁷ or fête of some kind,⁸ no concrete proof exists. Yet, the best of the *Oriana* madrigals are something of a triumph in their own right, both of the culture that produced them and of the genius of the composers themselves.

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¹ A 26th madrigal by Thomas Bateson (c.1570-1630), “When Oriana walked” arrived too late for inclusion, but was eventually published in Bateson’s, *The First Set of English Madrigals* in 1604.

² Joseph Kerman. “Morley and ‘The Triumphs of Oriana’,” *Music and Letters* 34, no. 3 (1953): 185.

³ David Hurley, liner notes for *Il Trionfo di Dori*. The King’s Singers. Released June 4, 2015. Signum SIGCD414, compact disc, 4.

⁴ Roy C. Strong. “Queen Elizabeth I as Oriana,” *Studies in the Renaissance*, vol. 6 (1959), 251.

⁵ *Ibid*, 253.

⁶ David Starkey, liner notes for *The Triumphs of Oriana*. The King’s Singers. Recorded March 9-12, 1998. Westdeutscher Rundfunk Köln, 7.

⁷ Strong, 257.

⁸ E.K. Chamber. *The Elizabethan Stage*, vol. 1 (London: Oxford University Press, 1923), 122.