

DID SIR THOMAS PHILIPPS (FL. 1489-1520)
WRITE *I LOVE A FLOWER?*

AMONGST the freshest of early carols is one on the Tudor Rose, written for three singers and beginning ‘I love a flower of sweet odour’. Questioned on the charms of marjoram, lavender, columbine, marigold, primrose, violet, daisy, gillyflower, rosemary, camomile, borage, and savory, the first singer at length tells the others that his love is the rose red and white.

I love the rose both red and white.
Is that your pure perfite appetite?
To here talke of them is my delite.
‘Joyed may we be
Our prince to see
And roses thre!’¹

This delightful song survives with its music in London, British Library, MS Add. 5465, the ‘Fairfax Manuscript’ compiled in the first quarter of the sixteenth century and belonging to the musician Robert Fairfax (d. 1529), gentleman of the Chapel Royal.² The lyric has been popular with anthologists.³ Yet its authorship has remained unclear, even though the name ‘Sir Thomas Phelyppis’ occurs with it in the manuscript. Chambers and Sidgwick comment, ‘A certain Sir Thomas Philips or ap Philip was appointed Sheriff of Pembrokeshire in 1516, and a Thomas Phillippis, B.A., received a chantry at Woodstock on Jan. 9, 1518. He is probably the poet, as “Sir” is often, in the

¹ *The Oxford Book of Medieval English Verse*, ed. Celia and Kenneth Sisam (Oxford, 1970), 548.

² E. K. Chambers, *English Literature at the Close of the Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1945), 98; *The Early English Carols*, ed. R. L. Greene, 2nd edn (Oxford, 1977), 307.

³ Item 1327 in Carleton Brown and R. H. Robbins, *An Index of Middle English Verse* (New York, 1943), it appears in *Historical Poems of the XIVth and XVth Centuries*, ed. R. H. Robbins (New York, 1959), 91-3

case of a priest, the equivalent of the Cambridge *Dominus*, which indicates B. A.¹ Davies describes the song as ‘with music for three voices by

Sir Thomas Phillipps, who is otherwise unknown. The words may also be by him.² The Sisams treat the poem as anonymous. Greene is also sceptical, remarking that ‘No other composition by this Sir Thomas Phelipps is known.’ He regarded Chambers and Sidgwick’s identification of the author as the priest Thomas Phillipps as ‘doubtful’.³

Could Sir Thomas Philipps, sheriff of Pembrokeshire, thus have written the song? Philipps’s life is known in some detail. His family’s home was Cilsant, now a remote farmhouse in south Dyfed, six miles north-east of Whitland. He is described as having married Joan Dwnn, heiress of Picton Castle, near Haverfordwest, before 17 October 1491. Thereafter he prospered. He was esquire to the body of Henry VII and was appointed a steward of the lordships of Llanstephan and Oysterlowe (= Ystlwyf, west of Llanstephan, in south Dyfed) on 16 May 1509. On 7 September 1509 he was appointed coroner and escheator of Pembrokeshire and the lordship of Haverfordwest, in west Wales. In the French war of 1513 he commanded 100 men and was knighted; on 16 October 1516 he became sheriff of Pembrokeshire. He died before 8 December 1520, when his son John Philipps, server of the chamber, succeeded him in his offices.⁴

It is true these records do not suggest Sir Thomas Philipps, founder of the great Pembrokeshire family of Philipps, was a poet or musician. Yet he was also the patron of the Welsh bard Lewys Glyn Cothi (fl. 1447-89).⁵ In a surviving poem, Lewys praises Thomas and Joan for their hospitality at Picton, elaborately comparing them to the heroic figures of Welsh tradition, and

¹ *Early English Lyrics*, ed. E. K. Chambers and F. Sidgwick (London, 1907), 342.

² *Medieval English Lyrics*, ed. R. T. Davies (London, 1963), 361-2.

³ Greene, 480.

⁴ *The Dictionary of Welsh Biography* (London, 1959), 752-3.

⁵ *The Poetical Works of Lewis Glyn Cothi* (Oxford, 1837-9), 301-4; *Lewys Glyn Cothi (Detholiad)*, ed. E. D. Jones (Caerdydd, 1984), 51-2; cf. *Gwaith Lewys Glyn Cothi*, ed. D. R. Johnson (Caerdydd, 1995).

speaking of the wines of Mantes, Normandy, Bordeaux, La Rochelle, Speyer (near Mannheim), and Spain which they dispensed.¹ He also says,

Tomas fal tîm sy felys,
Tymyr i holl wyr y llys.
Ferfain yw'r gwr cryf arfawg,
Un o ras ei enw yrhawg.²

That is, 'Thomas is sweet like thyme, a nature for all men of the court. The strong armed man is vervain [used as a medicinal plant in the middle ages], his name one of grace for long to come.' The existence of a highly literate Welsh poem in Philipps's honour suggests he had some interest in poetry. It also allows us to date his marriage to 1489 or before, as Lewys almost certainly died that year.

The political allusions of the English carol provide firmer support for Sir Thomas Philipps's links with it. Editors agree that the white and red rose celebrates Henry VII's reconciliation of the Houses of York and Lancaster on his marriage to Elizabeth of York in 1486. It is possible the lines 'Joyed may we be / Our prince to see / And roses three!' refer to prince Arthur. He was born 20 September 1486 and was invested as prince of Wales with much pomp on 27 February 1490 (John Skelton writing a poem for the occasion), but died of the sweating sickness at Ludlow on 2 April 1502, aged 15.³

What we know of Sir Thomas Philipps accords with the dating of the English carol. His duties as esquire to the body of Henry VII locate him at the court at the right time: as a Welshman who profited by his fellow-Welshman Henry VII's political success, he would have reason to share his sovereign's joys. Given the attribution to Sir Thomas Philipps in the contemporary Fairfax Manuscript, we may associate poem and courtier with some confidence. Sir Thomas's literary interests were maintained by his grandson Richard Philipps, whose collection of Welsh proverbs, pedigrees, poems and tracts

¹ E. D. Jones, 'Lewis Glyn Cothi', in *A Guide to Welsh Literature*, ed. A. O. H. Jarman and G. R. Hughes, ii (Swansea, 1979), 243-61, at 258

² *Lewys Glyn Cothi*, 52.

³ Francis Jones, *The Princes and Principality of Wales* (Cardiff, 1969), 128-30.

on prosody and bardic privileges is now Aberystwyth, National Library of Wales, MS Peniarth 155.¹

Thomas Philipps's position at Henry VII's court means, then, that we can rule out the Woodstock priest Phillipps as author of the poem or composer of its music. The sole problem is the nature of the Fairfax Manuscript's attribution. Many of this manuscript's attributions (Cornish, Fairfax, Davy, Banistre, Newark, Sheringham, Tudor, Turges, and Browne) are to composers, not poets, though the composer may sometimes have written both words and music.² Hence it is more likely that Philipps wrote the music of *I Love a Flower* than its words. (Although the song may date from the 1490s, the ascription must also postdate 1513, when he was knighted.) We cannot be sure that Sir Thomas Philipps wrote the poem *I Love a Flower of Sweet Odour*, though it remains possible. Nevertheless, his recognition as probable composer of the music at least places him within a school of Welsh musicians (John Lloyd, Robert Jones, Philip ap Rhys, and John Gwynedd) active in early Tudor England, which in some aspects pointed the way to the achievements of Tallis and Byrd.³

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¹ *Dictionary*, 753; *Rhyddiaith Gymraeg: Detholion o Lawysgrifau 1488-1609* (Caerdydd, 1954), 60-4.

² Chambers and Sidgwick, 299; Chambers, 98; Greene, 307.

³ *Dictionary*, 582, 752; Glanmor Williams, *The Welsh Church from Conquest to Reformation* (Cardiff, 1962), 449.