Quam pulchra es

Henry VIII (1491–1547)

Edited by Jason Smart

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Translation

How beautiful and fair you are, dearest, in your delights. Your stature is like the palm tree, and your breasts are like clusters of grapes. Your head is like Mount Carmel, your neck like a tower of ivory.

Come, my beloved, let us go into the fields and see if the blossoms have borne fruit, and if the pomegranates have flowered. There will I give my breasts to you.

Function

In the Use of Sarum, Quam pulchra es et quam decora was one of the antiphons sung during Trinity at the processions after Vespers on Saturdays and before High Mass on Sundays. It was also sung during the weeks of Sexagesima and Quinquagesima when these fell before the feast of the Purification of the Virgin (2 February). During Trinity the antiphon ended with an Alleluia; its absence in the present setting may indicate that it was composed for performance during votive memorials, or perhaps for performance outside the liturgy. The setting uses the proper plainsong, freely ornamented, as a migrant cantus firmus. It appears mostly in voice I, but occasionally in the other two voices. The chant is given below for comparison.

Authorship

This composition survives only in a late sixteenth-century copy by the Windsor lay clerk John Baldwin. His attribution must be treated with scepticism. If the work really is by Henry, it would have to be a mature work, for the technique is by no means incompetent. Yet the style of composition employed was already old-fashioned when Henry was born. It seems to belong to the mid fifteenth century and is suggestive of a composer of the generation of John Plummer and Walter Frye. The cantus firmus treatment is similarly old-fashioned. Against this, however, the scoring, for two voices of more or less equal compass over a lower-range tenor, is rare in fifteenth-century England, and the distinguished scholar David Fallows accepts Henry’s authorship.

Editorial Conventions

The original clef, staff signature, mensuration symbol and first note of each part are shown on the prefatory staves. Subsequent mensuration and proportion symbols are shown above the staff.

Editorial accidieus are placed above the notes concerned.

Ligatures are denoted by the sign ＿, coloration by the sign ＿.1

Source


(1) f.166 at beginning: iij: voc: rex henricus: octauus:—
(II) f.166’ at beginning: secundus contra: tenor:—
at end: rex: henricus: octauus:—
(III) f.167 ——— ———

Notes on the Readings of the Source

In the notes below, each reference to a bar or group of bars is separated by an oblique stroke. Within these references multiple readings in the same voice are separated by commas and readings in different voices by semicolons. The order within each entry is: 1) bar number; 2) voice; 3) reading of the source. For extended references subsequent bar numbers are in brackets. Pitches are in capital letters, preceded by a number where necessary, e.g. 1B = second note B in the bar. The symbol + denotes a tie.

Accidentals

2 III ὑ for B is pre-placed at beginning of staff (as shown on the prefatory staff)/ 22 III new line in source with no staff signature begins with SA / 116 II ὑ for 2B /

Underlay


Other Readings

48 III ‘2’ below G / 54 III ‘2’ below G / 59 III ‘2’ below A / 64 III mensuration sign Ç before A, proportion sign ‘23,’ below ligature / 69 III mensuration sign Ç above ligature, but applies following E / 70–72 II no dots of division or color to indicate where the necessary imperfection lies / 75 all parts mensuration sign Ç / 84 III mensuration sign Ç restated before rest / 122 all parts proportion sign Ç at start of bar / 126 all parts mensuration sign Ç at start of bar /

Quam pulchra es et quam de corra carissima in delectibus. Statura tua assimilata est palmæ, et ubera tua botris, caput tumum ut Carisius colulum tumum sicut turris eburnea. Venini dilecte mi, egregia cum in agrum; vides armus si flores fructus parturient, si floreunt malapunica. Ibi dabobe ti-bi ubera mea Alleluia.