VINTAGE

TREASON IN TUDOR ENGLAND: POLITICS AND PARANOIA

LACEY BALDWIN SMITH

CONTENTS

ABOUT THE BOOK

Tudor England abounded with traitors great and small, whose ill-timed, self-defeating and irrational antics guaranteed their failure. Yet from the inept and calamitous intrigues of ‘Sweet-Lips’ Gregory Botolf in 1540 and Lord Admiral Thomas Seymour during the reign of Edward VI, to the bungling efforts at a palace coup by Robert Devereux, second Earl of Essex, during the final years of Elizabeth’s reign, treason didn’t prosper. Modern historians tend to dismiss the wave of political disasters as the works of men of unsound mind. Here, Lacey Baldwin Smith re-evaluates this mania for conspiracy in the light of psychological and social impulses peculiar to the age.

Tudor England accepted unquestioningly the conspiracy theory of history; it assumed the existence of evil; and it instinctively believed that a greater and usually malicious reality lay behind outward appearance. Sensible men were for ever on guard against their Iago, dedicated to evil for its own sake, who lurked under the guise of a trusted friend or servant. Father’s advised their sons, ‘Love no man: trust no man’; contemporary literature and drama reflected and reinforced this belief, as did the essentials of Tudor education which taught students how to dissemble convincingly upon a public stage.

By looking at the behaviour of the flamboyant Robert Devereux (who bore all the hallmarks of paranoia) as a case study in political hysteria, Lacey Baldwin Smith examines the ways in which insecurity in the midst of political and religious revolution was obsessive and self-perpetuating, and produced throughout the kingdom a state of hysteria that was unique to the sixteenth century.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lacey Baldwin Smith was Professor of English History at Northwestern University, Illinois. The recipient of M.A. and Ph.D. degrees from Princeton University, he has been a Fulbright Scholar, a Guggenheim Fellow, a Senior Fulbright Fellow at the University of London and a Senior Fellow of the National Endowment for the Humanities.

TREASON IN TUDOR ENGLAND

Politics and Paranoia

LACEY BALDWIN SMITH

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

To Jean
Without whose devotion,
critical sense and manifold
skills, this book would
neither have been
conceived nor completed

IN THANKS

Scholarship, almost by definition, is a collective enterprise: the product of ideas gleaned from a host of unlikely sources, tested upon a myriad of long-suffering friends, and nurtured in a very special environment. I am grateful to my colleagues in the History Department who individually and collectively have supplied — sometimes knowingly, sometimes inadvertently — that intellectual atmosphere and challenge which are the indispensable conditions for scholarship. And I am indebted to Northwestern's College of Arts and Sciences and the National Endowment for the Humanities for their generous support.

June 1985 L.B.S.

I

‘TREASON DOTH NEVER PROSPER’

> Treason doth never prosper, what’s the reason?
> For if it prosper, none dare call it treason.
>
> Sir John Harington, *Epigrams*

Sir John Harington’s terse lines not only contain a grim-fisted truth — success writes its own history and imposes upon sedition a self-fulfilling dynamism whereby treason, by definition, is branded failure — but the rhyme also goes to the core of the Tudor political mentality and poses a question that has baffled historians over the centuries. Why did traitors indulge in a variety of sedition so unbelievably bungling and self-defeating in character that it is difficult to believe they were totally sane or that their treason, as perceived by the government, actually existed at all? If sedition had been nothing more than an occasional aberration upon the normal graph of Tudor political activity, the question might not be worth the asking. The century, however, was a veritable graveyard of unsuccessful intrigues, machinations, complots, and conspiracies. The grisly skulls decorating London Bridge and the mutilated corpses displayed throughout the kingdom were evidence enough that men risked their lives for reasons noble and ignoble, and that they knew the unpleasant consequences of failure. ‘To confess the truth’, sighed one observer in 1541, ‘it is now no novelty among us

to see men slain, hanged, quartered or beheaded ... Some for one thing and some for another.'[1] Seventeen years later, Étienne Perlin, whose French distaste for all things English is transparent, reported in his journal the existence of a macabre jest: in order to achieve gentle status, an English family had to have at least one head impaled upon London Bridge.[2] So why then did traitors by their conduct play into society's hands and get caught, and conversely why did society see in such performances motives and actions dangerous to all established order, both human and divine?

Tudor England had a straightforward answer at least to the first half of the question: traitors reckoned with God as well as man. Their treachery could not long remain hidden, for 'God will have that most detestable vice both opened and punished'.[3] It was clearly and logically written: 'The spirit of the Lord fills the world, and that which embraces all things knows all that is said ... A jealous ear hears everything ... So beware of useless grumbling.'[4] Every Englishman knew the words of Ecclesiastes reiterated in endless official admonitions concerning rebellion: 'Wish the king no evil in thy thought, nor speak no hurt of him in thy privy chamber; for the bird of the air shall betray thy voice, and with her feathers shall bewray thy words.'[5] It is little wonder that society believed God loved and protected the prince and detested and destroyed the traitor, for the malcontents of the century entered into sedition with such abandon, naivety and babbling indifference to the most elementary principles of secrecy, and seemed to believe that almost any scheme was possible simply by willing it into existence, that even the humblest sparrow was quite capable of frustrating their evil designs.

Our own age is less willing to accept the deity either as a detective agency or as an instrument of vengeance, and it suspects that God more often than not leaves men to arrange for their own destruction and punishment. Even the sixteenth century acknowledged that the 'bird of the

air' had considerable help from the fear of judicial interrogation with benefit of rack and dungeon and from the terror of the traitor's agonizing and humiliating end — hanging, castration, and disembowelment. Erasmus, as was his wont, hedged his bets and warned in words memorized by schoolboys all over Europe that 'kings have many ears and many eyes … They have ears that listen a hundred miles from them; they have eyes that espy out more things than men would think. Wherefore, it is wisdom for subjects not only to keep their princes' laws and ordinances in the face of the world but also privily … for conscience sake.'[6] Sir Walter Raleigh was considerably more secular and forthright in his approach to treason. He also did not doubt that 'the evil affection of men may be oftentimes discovered' by inquisition and punishment, but he added a third factor to the formula for discovery: the possibility that the inner logic of treason itself, what he called 'destiny', and not some interfering and righteous deity, determined failure.[7] Tudor conspirators were defeated by a logic that was written indelibly upon the tablets of time: traitors were born incompetent. Caught by an inescapable destiny, they were driven to desperation because they could not make the political system work for them, but the same stupidity, egotism, and greed that led them into sedition in the first place guaranteed their failure, and they sacrificed themselves upon the altar of their own infantile dreams. The intelligent, the lucky, and the ruthless seldom had need for treason; only the inept, the ill-starred, and the weak travelled the inevitable road to Tyburn and Traitors' Gate. Desperation might drive a man to rebellion, and the 'artificial nourishing and entertaining of hopes' were advised as 'the best antidotes against the poison of discontentments', but it was invariably assumed that traitors were basically unthrifty types who 'having consumed their own, seek by violence to possess themselves of other men's goods'.[8] Disloyal subjects

without fail, said William Cecil, fell into three categories: those who were unable ‘to live at home but in beggary’, those who were ‘discontented for lack of preferments’, and those who were ‘bankrupt merchants’.[9]

Cecil’s cynical limiting of the causes of treason to personal greed and simple-minded political and economic ineptitude made no allowance for ideology or governmental policies that could drive a man to sedition. And he totally ignored both the frequency and style of the endless efforts to overthrow the existing order. Tudor treason was protean, but whatever face it assumed — feudal, religious, political, economic, or personal — it tended to be not only unbelievably maladroit but also ‘more wildly fantastic than any fiction’.[10] Embedded in this current of deviant malcontent was a self-destructiveness and hysteria that far exceeded mere artless mismanagement and bordered upon the neurotic.

Much of the treachery of the century appears so absurd and so juvenile that some scholars have suggested that many of the plots were, in fact, fictitious. They never existed at all but ‘were more or less bogus’ figments in which ‘agents-provocateurs were sacrificed to the exigencies of party politics’.[11] Historian after historian has echoed those words in one form or other, and has questioned such conspiracies as the Ridolfi plot in 1570 to unseat Elizabeth and replace her on the throne with a partnership of Mary Queen of Scots and the Duke of Norfolk, and Thomas Stafford’s ‘hare brained and provocative’ invasion of England in 1557 with a tiny army of no more than a hundred followers.[12] Certainly contemporaries, especially Catholics under Elizabeth, had their doubts, and although Jesuit special pleading is obvious, their point that, after thirty years of listening to Tudor propaganda, the world was growing ‘over well acquainted with these tales of Queen-killing’ is well taken.[13] If care is maintained in selecting the evidence, it is quite

possible to argue that such plots as the Lopez, Moody, Squire, and Stanley schemes to assassinate Elizabeth by a variety of unlikely means, including deadly perfumes, balls of fatal incense, poisoned potions, and silver bullets, were carefully orchestrated trumperies in which relatively innocent, albeit not overly bright, political small-fries fell victim either to deliberate government efforts to demonstrate the existence of treason or to the political machinations of court factions. Nevertheless, to dismiss such performances as calculated fabrications is to misunderstand the pressures under which traitors themselves operated, the hysterical response their treason generated, and the mentality that could translate real or imagined sedition into a fundamental threat to all good order on earth and throughout the universe.

The evidence dealing with treason is mountainous, and the Tudor archives are filled with information relating to behaviour which the authorities regarded as deviant at best and downright seditious at worst. But three examples of sedition — Gregory Botolf's scheme to betray the port of Calais in 1540, Dr William Parry's so-called plot to assassinate Elizabeth in 1585, and Sir Thomas Seymour's efforts to overthrow his brother, the Lord Protector, in the winter of 1548–49 — will be sufficient to introduce the social and psychological complexities embedded in so much of Tudor treason.

Sweet-Lips Gregory

The Botolf conspiracy was the figment of the facile imagination of a gentleman by the name of Gregory Botolf, better known to his contemporaries as 'Gregory Sweet-Lips'.[14] Sweet-Lips belonged to the most socially restless, economically unstable, and demographically prolific element within Tudor society — the lesser gentry.[15] Born a

younger son, he suffered the double affliction of his kind: over-education and under-endowment. Translated into human terms, this meant that Gregory was fated, like the hundreds of other hangers-on at court and in the houses of the great, to a life of boredom and relative poverty. He and his two privy associates in treason, Clement Philpot and Edward Corbett, were grist for the moralists' mill — 'beware of idleness' — and evidence for those educators who warned against too much education. Destined to scrape along on expectations never realized, hopes constantly deferred, and rewards that were always too small, they lounged about the ante-rooms of the mighty, ran messages and did favours for those in command, bowed and scraped before their betters, and took out their frustrations in violence, drink, and bad temper.[16]

Botolf first made his appearance in history in mid-April of 1538 as Sir Gregory Buttoliff, chaplain to my Lord Lisle, the Deputy of Calais who, as a pleasant, if rather ineffectual, scion of fifteenth-century royal fecundity, was Henry VIII's 'illegitimate' uncle. Arthur Plantagenet Lord Lisle and his wife Honor seem, even in the teeth of overwhelming evidence, to have been taken in by the Latinate tongue, gracious manners, and expensive tastes of the convincing Mr Botolf, for Lord Lisle enthusiastically endorsed his chaplain as a man 'of sufficient literature', 'good discretion', and 'honest behaviour'. Except for the 'sufficient literature', the good lord totally misjudged Sweet-Lips who, according to one of his clerical colleagues, was 'the most mischievous knave that ever was born' and thoroughly deserved to be hanged. Constantly in debt, a consummate liar, and a confessed thief of ecclesiastical property, Botolf's fertile mind and golden tongue concocted a plot that ended at least one of his friends at Tyburn, but for which nimble Sir Gregory appears to have got off almost scot-free.

Gregory Botolf was of the papal persuasion, yet there is not a scrap of evidence to indicate that he was a religious fanatic. He obviously delighted in theological debate and dreamed heroic dreams of striking a blow — appropriately rewarded by money and honour — for God and the Pope, but he was equally at home at the dicing table and was a master of the tavern-room yarn. Moreover, Botolf's decision to decamp to Rome may have had more to do with worldly matters than with any concern for his immortal soul, for evil reports of Sir Gregory's past were being spread about Lord Lisle's household, and he feared that if he 'tarried a day longer' he would be charged with felony. Nor were his two closest associates religious extremists. Clement Philpot was 'a proper young man' who is described as 'the third and wisest' of the sons of Sir Peter Philpot, a Hampshire gentleman and family friend of the Lisles, who had sufficient means and status to consider Lord Lisle's stepdaughter as an appropriate match for his youngest offspring. And it was partly for reasons of matchmaking that he placed his son in April of 1538 in the Deputy's Calais household. Clement was an impressionable youth of 'gentle conversation' who stood to inherit an income of 500 marks a year, an amount which, along with his innocence, may explain why Gregory Sweet-Lips cherished him as his friend and bedfellow. Edward Corbett, genealogically speaking, is a far more shadowy figure. He was a close friend of Clement and was equally well educated. What made Corbett so useful to his colleagues was that he acted as a messenger-cum-secretary for His Lordship and was willing to trick Lord Lisle into signing almost any document, especially those essential passports that permitted the seventy or so members of the Deputy's household to travel and live abroad. Like Philpot, he held an ambiguous position — part retainer, part personal servant on 'petty wages', and part preferment seeker waiting for a vacancy in the Calais Spears, those

prestigious and politically determined officers of the Retinue. As a collaborator in and witness to the events that followed, Corbett, one of his interrogators remarked, was ‘a man of sense’, and his statements, unlike most of the others, have the ring of verisimilitude about them.

Botolf’s plan was predicated upon the role of Philpot and, to a lesser extent, of Corbett as Trojan horses inside England’s last toe-hold on the Continent, the Calais pale. The port city with its 120 square miles of surrounding marches was a religious-political weather vane exposed to all the doctrinal and diplomatic winds of the Reformation. Caught between two worlds, a decaying Catholic and medieval past when England had been a great European power and a future that was not yet Protestant and insular, Calais was a sink of spying, railing, and informing. Each side, Protestant reformers and Catholic conservatives, struggled in the hot-house environment of a beleaguered military bastion and panicked every time Henry’s government sent over inspectors to observe and report on the condition of the defences, the state of religion, and the loyalty of His Majesty’s officials. As Catholic Europe in 1538–39 talked more and more loudly of joining together in a crusade to punish schismatic England, the denizens of Calais lived in a constant state of agitation, made more frantic by the knowledge that religious informing for profit and political preferment had become a way of life. John Foxe’s description of the city in the spring of 1540 is laden with Protestant exaggeration but it is probably an accurate picture of the atmosphere in which Sweet-Lips and his friends lived and out of which the Botolf conspiracy emerged: ‘Such fear and distrust assaulted all men, that neighbour distrusted neighbour, the master the servant, the servant the master, the husband the wife, the wife the husband, and almost every one the other …’[17]

What triggered Botolf’s decision to go over to Rome is not known; possibly it had something to do with his ill-

advised and alcoholic confession to his ‘friend’ and fellow chaplain, Sir Oliver Brown, that a number of years before he had ‘liberated’ church plate belonging to the Chantry House of St Gregory in Canterbury. Sir Oliver proved to be of Sir Gregory’s own ilk, for he immediately used this damning information as a weapon in the ceaseless domestic rivalry and backstairs warfare that beset most lordly establishments, and by February of 1540 Sweet-Lips felt that he had too ‘many foes’ for his own good. By the 5th of the month he had found the necessary funds for a whirlwind trip to Rome, where, as he later boasted, he, His Holiness and Cardinal Pole met ‘no more but we three together in the Pope’s chamber’ and worked out plans to betray Calais to French and papal forces. Rewarded with 200 crowns and the advice to leave Calais as soon as he could arrange to get Lord Lisle’s licence to go as a student to the University of Louvain, Botolf returned on March 17th. He remained in town scarcely forty-eight hours — just long enough to settle his affairs and indulge in a violent row with Sir Oliver and others over seating precedence in the great hall — and took himself to Bourbourg, immediately over the Flemish border. Safe in imperial territory, he wrote to Corbett asking him to do a series of favours and to arrange for Lord Lisle to sign his licence for travel to Louvain.

At Bourbourg on Good Friday, March 26th, 1540, Clement Philpot met Sir Gregory and was introduced to his grand design. The two friends had missed each other in Calais, for Clement had been away in England, and their reunion at Bourbourg was fervent: ‘My most joy of the world, welcome as my own heart!’ cried Botolf, ‘for you are he that I do put most trust and confidence in … And there is none on earth that I dare trust so well as you … I dare no less disclose the secrets of my heart to you as to God.’ It was a fatal disclosure, and never was friendship bought at a greater price. ‘Gold’, Sweet-Lips assured Clement, ‘ye

shall have plenty. And whereas we now be inferiors, we shall be superiors. The world shall be ours.' Having whetted the appetite and excited the imagination, Sir Gregory then proceeded to details. He had, he explained, already been given 200 crowns; shortly he expected to travel to the imperial court at Ghent where the papal ambassador was residing, and there he would receive still more money. The betrayal would be planned for 'the herring time' when, between September 29th and November 30th, Calais was crowded with herring buyers and sellers, and when, as a consequence, the guard on the Lantern Gate, located just off the market square, would be greatly reduced. Philpot 'with a dozen well appointed' followers would seize the gate in the dark of the night, and defend it from within while Botolf scaled the outer walls of the city with 500 to 600 men.

When Philpot questioned whether he could possibly capture the gate or whether 600 men could take and hold the entire port, Botolf countered with two other pieces of information. First, he explained that 'we shall have aid, both by sea and by land within a short space'. 'Put no distrust,' he assured Philpot, 'all shall be handled after the best' and most politic fashion 'that is possible to be devised by man's wit'. Second, money would shortly be made available for Philpot to purchase, 'even if it cost a thousand marks or more', the Captaincy of Rysbank, an office that would make it possible for him to seize the Lantern Gate. In the meantime Philpot was to be 'sad and discreet [so] that there may appear such towardness in you that it may be thought that ye are a man meet for such a room'. Finally, in proper conspiratorial tradition, Botolf informed Philpot that he had given Edward Corbett ten gold pieces and he wanted them melted down into three rings, one for each of them, as tokens of their undying friendship, with each ring containing '3 letters — a P for Philpot, a C for Corbett, and a B for Botolf!' Oddly enough the manufacturing of these

rings was probably the only sensible suggestion in the entire caper, for the coins were papal crowns and Botolf wisely sensed that it would not do for the conspirators to be found with enemy currency in their possession.

Such was Sweet-Lips's plot. How much was based on truth, how much upon wild imagination is impossible to say. How 600 mercenaries were to be hired and brought unbeknown to the walls of Calais; how an inexperienced Philpot expected to purchase the Rysbank Captaincy and where the money was coming from; or how 'aid both by sea and by land' could be organized without alerting the English authorities were trifles that were never explained. If this constituted the best 'that is possible to be devised by man's wit', then the comment of the editor of the *Lisle Letters* that the conspirators seem to have been afflicted with 'almost unbelievable light-headedness'[18] is the understatement of a story that ground to its tragic and ironic conclusion with surprising speed. The moment Botolf took off for Ghent, Clement Philpot proved the truth of Sir Walter Raleigh's observation 'that dangerous enterprises, the more they be thought upon, the less hope they give of good success; for which reason conspiracies not suddenly executed are for the most part revealed or abandoned'.[19] Philpot fell prey to attacks of bad conscience, hysterical alarm, and growing panic, but unfortunately he kept his mouth shut just long enough to make it impossible for him to play convincingly the role of loyal informer.

If Philpot's conscience proved his downfall, Botolf's wagging tongue and indiscretions contributed to the final fiasco. Accompanied by Edward Corbett's servant, John Browne, Sir Gregory set off for Ghent, but on the way he had the misfortune of encountering Frances, one of the government couriers, in company with Sir John Mason who was travelling on diplomatic business to Ghent. Both men proved to be exceedingly curious about a chaplain of Lord Lisle travelling with someone else's servant, purportedly to

the University of Louvain. When Botolf arrived at Ghent, he sent Philpot a letter by ‘Frances the Post’ and a Mr Gresham; both of whom were returning to England via Calais. The stupidity of this act seems to have dawned upon Sweet-Lips too late, for he tried unsuccessfully to retrieve the letter for fear that it would be opened by the English Ambassador at Ghent, as indeed it appears to have been. In growing alarm, Botolf sent Browne back to Calais with a second letter to Philpot, alerting him to be on the watch for his first letter in the diplomatic pouch. Browne arrived in Calais after a terrible trip, but because the dates are unclear we do not know how long before the official post Browne arrived or whether Philpot had already turned king’s evidence and confessed all. Certainly by April 8th Philpot, Corbett, and a handful of others had been imprisoned and closely interrogated.

Once treason was out, no one could say enough, and by the 17th the government in London knew the complete story and had taken steps to apprehend the elusive Mr Botolf. The Privy Council ordered a shield of absolute secrecy and instructed Philpot to write a carefully penned letter to his erstwhile friend to lure him back to Calais. If Sir Gregory ever received this letter, he did not take the bait, for he settled down at Louvain ‘under the colour of a student’ until his past and the long arm of the English government caught up with him. The Council wanted Botolf badly — especially if Lord and Lady Lisle could possibly have been involved in his treason — and it sent a courier to inform the Mayor of Louvain and the University scholars that Sir Gregory was a thief, having stolen church property, and should be imprisoned and extradited. The English government was not completely successful. Botolf was jailed but apparently papal influence saved him from trial and, worse, extradition, for he disappears from the records, presumably a free, if not wiser, man. Clement Philpot, however, paid sorely for his idiocy in as painful and

degrading a way as Tudor vengeance could devise. On August 4th, 1540, he and four other named traitors were ‘drawn from the Tower of London to Tyburn … and with six persons more, were there hanged, drawn and quartered’. As an added touch, his father, four days before his son’s execution, wrote him out of his will. As for Edward Corbett and his servant John Browne, we know nothing. It would be comforting to think that they were not included in those ‘six persons more’.

‘The wicked and intended treason’ of Dr William Parry

Botolf and his brothers in treason were small fry, petty villains operating in a sensitive outpost of English authority but nevertheless far from the centre of real power, and they were tracked down and punished as much for reasons of example as for revenge. The case of Dr William Parry was different: his treason was directed against the person of the Queen herself, and the government was determined to extract from it every possible ounce of propaganda value. The official account of the William Parry conspiracy as recorded by John Stow is a marvellous piece of melodrama replete with suspense, fiendish plotting, two-timing, and an arch scoundrel — Dr William Parry, ‘a man of very mean and base parentage, but of a most proud and insolent spirit’.[20] Tudor villains were usually cast as malcontents eaten up with pride and envy who were unwilling to accept that station in life for which God had destined them. Parry played the part perfectly. ‘This vile and traitorous wretch’, according to Stow, was one of the sons of a common alehouse keeper, a Welshman named Harry ap David, and of a mother who ‘was the reputed daughter of a priest’. He was put out to service with ‘a poor man’ who ‘professed to have some small skill and understanding in the law’, and

who kindly permitted young William ‘to go to grammar school where he got some little understanding in the Latin tongue’. The ungrateful lad, however, being of a ‘villainous and dangerous nature and disposition’, attempted on numerous occasions to run away from his master and, for his disobedience, was ‘chained, locked and clogged to stay his running away’. Imprisonment was in vain, for he eventually escaped to seek his fortune in London.

In the capital William moved ‘from service to service and from one master to another’, aspiring to ‘the name and title of a great gentleman’ and forgetting ‘his old home, his birth, his education, his parents, his own name and what he was’. Eventually the impudent fellow changed his name to Parry and asserted kinship to families of ‘great worship and behaviour’. Parry lived a ‘wasteful and dissolute life’, for he was constantly in debt and survived only by living off unsuspecting women who fell victim to his hypocritical tongue and false manners. Using the ‘wealth and livelihood’ of a silly wife, who was old enough to be his mother, to maintain himself as ‘a man of very good behaviour and degree’, he wormed his way into the respect and confidence of the great and mighty, and in 1570 was actually ‘sworn her Majesty’s servant’. During the next decade he went through the inheritance of two wives, deflowered his stepdaughter, attempted to murder one of his many creditors, was committed to Newgate prison and was tried and condemned to hang. Justice, however, was staid by the inestimable clemency of the Queen who pardoned Parry. Whereupon he ‘left his natural country’ and, because he mistrusted ‘his advancement in England’ and feared debtors’ prison, fled to Europe, there to continue his nefarious career by plotting with exiled English Catholics to assassinate his sovereign. His proposal to kill the English Jezebel was ‘commended and warranted’ by the Pope himself, who absolved him of all sin and assured the hero a hearty welcome in heaven.

In late December of 1583 Parry returned home determined to rid the kingdom of its usurping and excommunicated Queen and to time her death with a proposed invasion by a Scottish army, twenty to thirty thousand strong. Partly to shore up his flagging courage, partly to arrange for Mary of Scotland's safety once Elizabeth was dead, Parry posed as a loyal-hearted informer. He cleverly revealed to the Queen that he had been sent over by Catholic malcontents to murder her and went so far as to prove his story by displaying a letter from Cardinal Como, the papal Secretary of State, assuring him of the Pope's blessings. During this period Parry was presumedly deeply troubled by his conscience. More than once he had taken the Oath of Supremacy, and his perjured soul cried out in anguish at the thought of murder and regicide, so much so that once, when he actually had the opportunity to strike the Queen down with a dagger, he became wonderfully 'appalled and perplexed', for he saw 'in her the very likeness and image of King Henry the Seventh', and he broke into tears at the thought of what he contemplated.[21]

Despite the treason that lay hidden in his heart, the rogue had the audacity to demand the mastership of St Catherine's Hospital as payment for his information, but much to his chagrin he was refused. 'Utterly rejected, discontented' and careless of life, he left the court in July and returned to London where he contacted his eventual betrayer, his 'cousin' Sir Edward Neville who, according to Parry, 'came often to mine house, put his finger in my dish, his hand in my purse and the night wherein he accused me, was wrapped in my gown'. For six months the two friends discussed the moral imperative of regicide, and dreamt up ways and means to rescue Mary Queen of Scots, raise the Northern shires in her favour, and seize Queenborough Castle on the Kentish side of the Thames Estuary, as a base of operations for rebellion. Then, taking an 'oath upon a

Bible to conceal and constantly to pursue the enterprise for the advancement of religion', they fell to discussing methods of dispatching Elizabeth. Their proposals were more detailed and more realistic than Botolf's plans to betray Calais because their task was easier — Gloriana was notoriously negligent about her safety. Nevertheless, the same optimistic aimlessness, ineptitude, lack of attention to details, and disregard for planning prevailed. Parry seems to have favoured striking the Queen while she walked 'very privately' in the gardens of Whitehall Palace, the conspirators making their escape by barge to carry them 'with speed down river where we will have a ship ready to transport us if it be needful', but, he added, 'upon my head, we shall never be followed so far'. Another possibility was to attack the Queen in her carriage as she drove to St James's Palace. 'Let us furnish ourselves in the mean time with men and horses fit for the purpose. Nay, each of us [can] keep eight or ten men without suspicion … I shall find good fellows that will follow me without suspecting mine intent.' Parry was certain that not even an escort of 100 guards could save Gloriana if Neville 'on the one side and I on the other' discharge 'our dags [pistols] upon her', and 'if we should both miss her … I shall bestir me well with a sword ere she escape me'. Such a 'villainous and damnable enterprise' was too much for loyal Sir Edward, who on February 9th, 1585 went to court and 'laid open' his friend's 'most traitorous and abominable intention against her Majesty'.

Parry was immediately apprehended and a delicate cat and mouse game ensued. Elizabeth, still merciful and believing in Parry's loyalty, ordered that he be told that a conspiracy had come to light against her life and asked whether he knew anything about it or whether he could have inadvertently done anything to associate his name with it. Parry 'with great and vehement protestations denied it utterly'. He was then informed that a man of

quality ‘better than himself and rather his friend than enemy’ had in fact accused him. Parry still denied that he was ever ‘party or privy to any such motion, enterprise or intent’. The following morning, however, he had second thoughts and ‘declared that he had called to remembrance’ that he had indeed spoken to Neville about the theory of regicide but nothing else. Finally, when confronted with Sir Edward, he voluntarily confessed in a written statement his ‘wicked and intended treason’, which he repeated first in a letter to the Queen and then in an appeal for mercy addressed to Lord Burghley and the Earl of Leicester. It was, he admitted, ‘the dangerous fruits of a discontented mind’ for ‘a natural subject solemnly to vow the death of his natural Queen’.

Retribution was swift and dramatic. Parry was arraigned on February 25th, 1585 and willingly pleaded guilty to the charges. This, however, did not suit the purposes of the Crown which wanted to extract full propaganda value from Parry’s confession and requested that judgment be deferred until his statement to Burghley and Leicester and the letter from Cardinal Como had been read and submitted as evidence. The government also wanted it recorded that the culprit had ‘freely and willingly’ confessed ‘without any constraint’. Parry was extremely co-operative, even offering to read his confession out loud.

Up to this point the Crown’s case proceeded according to plan, but then Parry ‘prayed leave to speak’, and suddenly the carefully orchestrated trial fell apart, for the traitor now categorically announced that he had never intended to harm the Queen. ‘This is absurd,’ shouted Christopher Hatton, who was presenting the government’s case. ‘Thou hast not only confessed generally that thou were guilty … but thou also saidest particularly that thou were guilty … Sayest thou now that thou never meantest it?’ Parry countered that fear of torture had made him confess. Hatton assured the court this was a lie; ‘no torture

or threatening words' had been 'offered him'. In considerable irritation the Lord Chief Justice lectured Parry for using 'such dark speeches', and finally delivered the awful sentence. 'Thou shalt be had from hence to the place whence thou didest come, and so drawn through the open city of London upon a hurdle to the place of execution, and there to be hanged and let down alive, and thy privy parts cut off, and thy entrails taken out and burnt in thy sight, then thy head to be cut off, and thy body to be divided in four parts, and to be disposed at her Majesty's pleasure; and God have mercy on thy soul.' Execution followed within the week. On March 2nd Dr William Parry was drawn from the Tower to the courtyard at Westminster Palace where he died 'most maliciously and imprudently', still claiming that his only offence had been to enter into 'conference with his kinsman and friend (as he took him) Mr Neville, and in concealing what passed between them'. He died, he said, 'a true servant of Queen Elizabeth; for any evil thought that ever I had to harm her, it never came into my mind … I know her to be the anointed of God; and therefore not lawful for any man to lay violent hands on her.'[22]

At best, the line between historical fact and governmental fiction is cloudy; in cases of treason it tends to vanish entirely. The case for the Crown is not inaccurate: most of what the authorities said appears to have been true. It is what Christopher Hatton and the others failed to mention that is so disturbing; and although the expurgated material does not put Parry's actions in any better light or make any better sense of them, it does cast doubt upon his guilt.

On closer inspection Dr William Parry turns out not to have been a base-born rogue; he was instead a gentleman-born rogue. His father was of excellent Catholic gentry stock and his mother was the daughter of a highly respectable archdeacon and rector of Northop, Wales. William was, he later maintained, one of thirty children (by

two wives) of a father who died in 1566 at the age of 108, but Parry's love of hyperbole and delight in fabrication make these statistics somewhat suspect.[23] He had a solid grammar school education and actually received a degree in law from the University of Paris in 1583.[24] Moreover, there is little doubt that he was socially well connected, for he found employment in the household of William Herbert, first Earl of Pembroke, and had influential friends at court. The Crown's scandalous tales, however, of womanizing, con-artistry, and would-be murder and theft are substantially correct. Parry went through the fortunes of two wives; there is independent evidence that he 'abused' the daughter of his second wife;[25] he was certainly in debt and would have been hanged for attempted murder in 1580 except for the Queen's pardon; and he did in fact leave the country in July of 1582, but not solely, as the government suggested, to escape his creditors. He had been in Europe earlier and was without doubt in the employ of both Lord Burghley and Sir Francis Walsingham as a government agent paid to send back information about conditions on the Continent in general and to spy upon the exiled English Catholic community in particular.[26] Parry seems to have been a Gregory Sweet-Lips writ large — a gentleman hanger-on at court with no visible salary or exact duties who, like so many others, went bankrupt in order to maintain the costly role of courtier. Ten thousand marks,[27] he later confessed, he had wasted. The money had purchased him friends and given him access to the Queen, whose favour he retained to the very end, but it had failed to gain him one of those advowsons, monopolies, deaneries, annuities, or reversions so necessary to a courtier's financial well-being. All that the money had won him was a host of creditors, in particular Mr Hugh Hare, 'a cunning and shameless usurer', to whom he owed the sum of £600 and whom he attempted to rob and murder.[28]

While in Paris and later at Lyons, Parry played the perfect spy. He possessed all the healthy paranoia of his kind, complete with appeals not to believe the ‘malicious reports of his enemies’, letters ending ‘read and burn’, and warnings to Burghley to ‘be careful of me’ and to Walsingham that intercepted letters ‘may cost me my life’. Before long he was reporting that ‘my credit amongst the malcontents is such as it should be’ and that he ‘doubted not in [a] few months to be well able to discover their deepest practices’, especially if Burghley would send him money for a few ‘trifling gifts and friendly entertainment’.[29] What can never be answered is whether Parry was playing a double game; whether his reconciliation to the Roman Church, after not having gone to mass for twenty years, and his offer to assassinate Elizabeth were part of an elaborate confidence game and cover to win his way into Catholic circles both in England and abroad; or whether they were evidence that a man in mid-life, whose career as a courtier was in ruins and who was hounded by creditors, experienced a religious conversion and became the willing instrument of militant Catholicism.

Whatever the truth, Parry returned home ‘with some matter of importance’ that he insisted upon delivering to the Queen in person. He was ‘welcomed with fine speeches’, granted a ‘liberal pension’, and sent in November 1584 to Parliament as a member for Queenborough, Kent.[30] A month later, he outraged a hysterically anti-Jesuit House of Commons by speaking out against a bill ordering all Jesuits and seminary priests to depart the kingdom within forty days on pain of high treason and making any attempt to harbour or abet them a felony. ‘In very violent terms’, he denounced the proposed law as ‘full of blood, danger, despair and terror’ to all subjects of the realm, and he hoped it would be vetoed by the Queen, to whom, he said, ‘he would reserve his reasons of his negative voice against the bill’.[31] Such words were

guaranteed to produce an explosion, for the kingdom was still reeling from the shock of the Throckmorton plot of 1583 to invade England and replace Elizabeth with Mary of Scotland, and from the assassination in July 1584 of the leader of the Protestant forces in the Lowlands, William of Orange. With scarcely a dissenting voice, the Commons voted to place Dr Parry in the custody of the Sergeant of the House. Again, however, the long protective arm of the Queen intervened, and Elizabeth begged her loyal Commons to forgo punishment since Parry had reserved his explanations to herself and, now that her Council had heard them, she thought the House, after receiving his humble submission, could pardon him. With some reluctance the Commons obliged, only to receive two months later the news of Sir Edward Neville's awful revelation of Parry's intended treason. Unseating such a devil as Parry was not sufficient, and the House asked Elizabeth's permission to devise a death even more excruciatingly painful and humiliating than that prescribed by law. The Queen refused, and Dr William Parry died a 'normal' traitor's death.

Parry's treason, however, was far from normal; he himself described it as 'rare and strange'.[32] One school of historical thought tends to see his execution either as a monstrous cover-up job — the destruction of 'the spy who knew so much and who could no longer be trusted' — or as a cold-blooded plot on the part of Burghley and Walsingham 'to keep the Queen and the realm under the impression that they were threatened by a great religious conspiracy'.[33] Other scholars favour the thesis that Parry's extraordinary parliamentary outburst and devious conversations with Neville were part of his elaborate 'cover' to maintain credibility in extreme Catholic circles. The unfortunate man, however, became so completely entangled in his own espionage that he began to confuse reality with illusion, and in the midst of national hysteria

not even Elizabeth dared save him.[34] Finally, there is the argument that Parry had in fact turned double agent and was contemplating treason in thought, if not necessarily in deed.[35]

In the midst of such confusion, one point is certain: Sir Edward Neville was the Judas of the piece. Parry was unimaginably idiotic to have trusted his ‘familiar friend’ and ‘cousin’, as he called Neville, for the two men were, with one important exception, like two peas in a pod. Sir Edward was a well-born but impecunious ne’er-do-well who claimed to be the rightful heir to his late great uncle, Henry Neville, fourth and last Lord Latimer, and who also aspired to the ‘land and dignity’ of the earldom of Westmorland. He lived most of his life in Europe where, like Parry, he operated in that never-never-land of the double agent whose true loyalties were questioned by both sides. Parry and Neville obviously knew one another, but who approached whom first is unclear; not surprisingly their confessions disagree on this point. Both men purported to be devout Catholics; both claimed to have grievances against the Queen — Parry because he had been refused the mastership of St Catherine’s and Neville because he was unable to get a hearing for his claims to the barony of Latimer — and neither was particularly truthful. What, however, set Neville apart was the excellent reason he had for betraying his friend and kinsman. As the sole male heir to the Latimer estates, he was a serious threat to the claims of his cousin Dorothy, daughter and co-heiress of the last Lord Latimer and Lord Burghley’s daughter-in-law.[36] The Lord Treasurer obviously had reason to keep close watch on the potentially dangerous Mr Neville who, knowing himself to be under surveillance, had excellent cause either to ingratiate himself with Burghley by revealing the existence of a dangerous plot or to embarrass His Lordship and weaken his position at court by proving that one of the Lord Treasurer’s most trusted spies was a

traitor. Either way it was to his advantage to betray his associate whose idle and boasting tongue and fertile imagination had placed him at Sir Edward's mercy. Given the circumstances, it is understandable that the behaviour of Dr Parry, indeed his entire career, has puzzled modern historians,[37] and persuaded contemporaries that only divine interference saved the Queen's life — 'it was the Lord that revealed it in time'.

'So great a flame' — the Case of Sir Thomas Seymour

Botolf and Philpot had operated as minor malcontents outside the gilded focus of power about the sovereign; Dr Parry, whatever the truth of his undertaking — inept and fatal counter-espionage or religiously inspired fanaticism — was a predictable hazard in an era of ideological hypertension. In contrast, Sir Thomas Seymour's abortive palace revolution during December and January of 1548–49 to unseat his brother Edward, the Lord Protector, struck at the aristocratic core of political authority, placing in doubt the entire educational and cultural systems upon which Tudor society rested.[38]

Thomas Seymour ricocheted from relative obscurity into political prominence when he found himself in late January 1547 the uncle of a reigning king, 9-year-old Edward VI, and the younger brother of a ruling Lord Protector who had succeeded in monopolizing most of the titles and honours of the new reign. There but for the accident of primogeniture might have ruled Thomas, not his brother Edward, who styled himself: 'Edward by the grace of God, duke of Somerset, earl of Hertford, viscount Beauchamp, lord Seymour, uncle to the most noble prince Edward … governour of his highness' person and protector of all his realm, dominions [and] subjects, lieutenant general of all his Majesty's arms both by land and sea … and Knight of