CHAPTER 2
PRINCESS CECILIA’S VISITATION TO ENGLAND, 1565–1566

Nathan Martin

In 1565, princess Cecilia, a younger sister of king Erik XIV of Sweden, travelled to England to visit Queen Elizabeth, with whom she had established a friendship. The motivations for her visit serve as a clear example of the fundamental principle of Anglo-Swedish relations during the late 1500s, which was based upon personal royal relationships, reciprocity, and gift-giving. For Cecilia, Elizabeth was the ultimate European female role model, whose royal person itself was the siren song that compelled Cecilia to visit a monarch who was already being referred to as a real life female Solomon. For her brother, King Erik, however, Cecilia played an important role in the larger context of Swedish international relations. He wanted Cecilia to keep Elizabeth on friendly terms with him as he was at war during this time with Denmark and Poland. Important to notice, however, is that, from the available records, Cecilia did not participate in political discussions: her presence was sufficient to meet Erik’s diplomatic aims. Thus, this episode in Anglo-Swedish relations must be understood as a dualistic experience—one with both prosopographical and diplomatic significance.

While she was resident in England, Cecilia engaged in social activities with important individuals connected with Elizabeth’s court, gave birth to a son, and learned the English language. Upon leaving the country, Cecilia was memorialized in the prose work Queen Elizabeth and a Swedish Princess by James Bell. Cecilia’s stay in England, however, was not necessarily a wholly positive experience: she incurred debt, became fairly unpopular, and took great exception to the behavior of a number of people connected with Elizabeth’s royal court. Ultimately, it was the negative press that Cecilia’s visit
engendered that reveals the significance of this rather provocative cultural exchange between the English and Swedish royal courts, each with its own particular relationships, protocols, and hierarchies. Nevertheless, for better or worse, at the conclusion of her ultimately disastrous visit, Cecilia was instrumental in bringing to the Baltic regions of Europe a personal and realistic account of the fabled English virgin queen and her royal court.

There has been a temptation by some historians to regard Cecilia’s trip as part of her brother’s lengthy marital negotiations with Elizabeth. This flawed view has been espoused by some for basically two reasons: a scarcity of good English sources on the matter and a desire to link Erik’s failed proposal, a major project, with all other aspects of Anglo-Swedish relations during his reign. As a consequence, a popular misrepresentation of Cecilia’s trip has emerged. It is clear that Cecilia’s coming to see Elizabeth was not a part of the marriage talks between Erik and Elizabeth, and it should not even be seen as an extension of the talks; Cecilia came to England for personal reasons. Historian Ingvar Andersson notes the lack of political discussion between Cecilia and Elizabeth. He writes: “Cecilia’s visit there, rich in happy, pitiful, and tragic episodes, did not generate anything in the matters of the proposed marriage, but left, in another sense, a certain exchange.” The Spanish ambassador in Elizabeth’s court, Don Guzman de Silva, reported that Cecilia had done nothing to advance her brother’s suit for marriage, and, in fact, Cecilia does “her best to urge Leicester’s suit… praising him highly… no doubt because she thinks it pleases the Queen.” De Silva would have been keenly aware of the possibility that Cecilia would attempt to revive or continue her brother’s negotiations with Elizabeth since his king, Philip II, also had an interest in her. Additionally, it appears that Erik gave no instructions to Cecilia to promote his interest in Elizabeth.

However, while Cecilia’s trip should not be considered as an element of Erik’s negotiations, it was very much a consequence of them. The marriage talks had opened up diplomatic dialogue between Sweden and England, two countries that had had only sporadic contact before 1557. Consequently, the Swedish understanding of the English court had been enhanced and a cadre of ambitious middlemen developed. Many of these were merchant-class Englishmen who were interested in gaining new fortunes in Sweden and had gained the confidence of the Swedish ambassador in England, Nils Gyllenstierna, from 1561 to 1562. Notably among these were John