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Elizabethans and the Armada

‘Triumphes and boastes’

In appropriating the triumph for England, Protestant polemic first denied it to papal Rome. For Biondo, the continuity between Rome’s pagan and papal triumphs amalgamated temporal and spiritual rule in a renuatio imperii. For Barnabe Googe, in The Popish Kingdome, or Reigne of Antichrist (1570), papal triumphs represent mere temporal presumption. Googe repeats Erasmus’s criticisms of the indecorous warrior demeanour and military triumphs of Julius II, which have transformed Christian shepherd into marauding wolf:

Thus glistering all in armour brave, with spoyle and pillage rife,
He closeth stately townes with trench, and threatneth losse of life
Unto his foes, with cannon shot he battereth downe a pace,
The loftie walles, or lying long doth cause them sue for grace.
And yelde for feare of famine up, their townes and goods withall,
Then puttes he whome he list to sworde, for wordes and trespass small.
And so to Rome returneth straite, his triumph with him ledde.¹

English triumphs follow Du Bartas in contesting and imbuing with Protestant militancy Catholic versions like Savonarola’s. Barnabe Barnes’s seizure of the triumph in his Divine Centurie of Spirituall Sonnets (1595) helps give his poem its powerful energy, which anticipates Donne’s Holy Sonnets by simultaneously exploding its matter into a vast cosmic spectacle and imploding it into the density of sonnet form.
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Barnes unseats the Virgin Mary from the place in the chariot that she occupies in Savonarola. Christ himself becomes sole triumphator, while his closest auxiliaries, riding beside his chariot like the triumphator’s sons, become the pre-eminent saints of Biblical Protestantism, the holy evangelists:

Armies of Angelles, Myriades of Saintes,
Millions of Emperours, and holy Kings,
Legions of sacred Patriarkes he brings,
Which his rebellious foes with feare attaintes.
Whose spirit at thy puissant spirit faintes,
(Great Lord of Lordes) whose sacred armis singes
Triumphant Peans, and new musicke brings
In glorious phrase, which thy sweete glorie payntes:
Whilst under thy triumphant chariot wheeles,
Rowling upon the starres, thy captives lye
In quenchlesse fiery lake, whose spirit feelees
An endlessse torment in captivitye:
When thy fowre sweete Evangelistes ride by
(Like corporalles) proclayming victorye.

Peopled by armies, legions and captives, Christ’s triumph is heavily militarized; even ‘sweete Evangelistes’ have warrior rank. Moreover, this militarization and its triumphal topoi serve a recognizably Protestant cause. The triumphal rhetoric of number discloses not only the magnitude of Christ’s battalions and empire but also the fact that it is the whole army of the elect – not the few whom Rome presumed to canonize – that constitute his ‘Myriades of Saintes’. ‘Triumphant Peans, and new musicke’ connote the liturgy of the reformed church, with its new repertoire of psalm chants and hymns. The prominence of emperors and kings in the sacred procession cancels papal primacy and acknowledges the monarch’s rank as supreme head of the English church. Barnes’s spiritual sonnet and its apocalyptic triumph proclaim a Protestantism girding itself for battle with the papal antichrist.

The queen herself was the principal actor in Elizabethan triumphs, actual and imaginary, but the role had its anomalies. For the Romans, a female triumphator was an impossibility: the function of a queen in their triumphal economy was to walk as a captive or, more nobly, to take her life. Livy praises Sophonisba, Horace Cleopatra, and Tacitus Boudicca for exercising this female version of virtus.³ Elizabeth was, moreover, a reluctant warrior. Writers of militant stamp could hope to