

THE BARD OF GREEN SPRING

“it would afflict him strangely if any should be
thought
to loue his Prince better then hee;”

The Lost Lady Act I, scene i

In 1662, the newly-restored Royal Governor Sir William Berkeley penned A Discourse and View of Virginia, describing the state of the colony for an English readership. In this work, staunch royalist Sir William made use of both his Oxford education and his first-hand knowledge of Virginia to astutely analyze her strengths and weaknesses.

The role of author was no new one for Sir William. Before he sailed from England to take up his post as Royal Governor of Virginia in 1642, the young courtier had gained the approval of no less a personage than Queen Henrietta Maria for his literary abilities.

Sadly, all of Sir William’s poems and four of his five plays have disappeared. Only one play survives: The Lost Lady: A Tragy Comedy, published anonymously in London in 1638.

In February of that year, George Gerrard reported in a letter to Thomas Wentworth, Lord Strafford that

Two of the King’s Servants, Privy-Chamber Men both, have writ each of them a Play, Sir *John Sutlin* and *Will. Barclay* [sic], which have been acted in Court, and at the *Black Friars*, with much Applause.”

The Lost Lady, replete with poisoning and puns, espionage and exotic ladies, rebellion and rivalries, was written, as its title suggests, to make an audience both laugh and cry. The twists and turns of the plot guaranteed to keep playgoers on the edge of their seats. The play saw several revivals, one of which diarist Samuel Pepys attended:

“And here [at the King’s Theatre during a performance of The Lost Lady] I sitting behind in a dark place, a lady spit backward upon me by a mistake, not seeing me, but after seeing her to be a very pretty lady, I was not troubled at it at all.” (Pepys’ Diary, 28 January, 1661)

With its small cast and simple sets, the play was popular with amateur thespians. In a letter to her husband, Dorothy Osborne revealed in 1654 that “. . . they will have me act my part in a play, ‘The Lost Lady’ it is, and I am she.’

As were so many of his era, Sir William Berkeley was a multi-faceted, multi-talented individual and should be remembered for his roles as statesman, agriculturist and industrialist. And although Sir William dabbled in drama, he is best known for his real-life theatrical clash with the rebel Nathaniel Bacon in 1676,

And let us not forget his literary abilities. Although the Bard of Avon need not fear for his laurels, Sir William Berkeley’s Lost Lady has an antique charm and appeal which make it worthy of revival today.

This material is based on a paper by Park Ranger Lee Pelham Cotton.