

I. The Execution of Raleigh (1618)

Sir Walter Raleigh was beheaded in Westminster Palace Yard on 29 October 1618. Raleigh had been sentenced to death for treason in 1603 (see Section B) but had languished for over a decade in the Tower of London until the temporary reversals in court politics following Somerset's fall paved the way for his release in March 1616. By August 1616, Raleigh had obtained a royal commission to command an expedition to Guiana and, a year later, he sailed west once again. The voyage, intended to bring riches to the impoverished English Crown, was an unmitigated series of disasters and mis-steps, culminating in an attack on the Spanish settlement at San Tomé. Under pressure from the Spanish ambassador Gondomar, James I had an arrest warrant issued for Raleigh on his return to England in June 1618. Unable to defend himself effectively or to pull off a planned escape to France, Raleigh was escorted back to London and recommitted to the Tower of London in August. The King appointed a six-man commission to investigate whether Raleigh had struck a secret and treasonous deal with the French, and to assess both the charges arising out of the Guiana fiasco and the incriminating reports of his behaviour since his return to England. Having weighed the new charges, the commissioners concluded that the only legal ground for executing Raleigh now was the sentence passed on him in 1603. On 28 October Raleigh was taken to the court of King's Bench, where the sentence of death was formally reissued. As Lord Chief Justice Montagu asserted, "new offences have stirred up His Majesty's justice, to remember to revive what the law hath formerly cast upon you" (qtd. in Trevelyan 543).

The following day, before a large crowd gathered to watch him die, Raleigh delivered a spellbinding and transformative final performance. During a brilliantly devised, forty-five-minute long, "last dying speech", Raleigh successfully repudiated the charge that he had made a deal with France, denied he had ever spoken disloyally of the king, and defended his conduct on the Guiana voyage. He refuted several allegations made by his kinsman Lewis Stukeley, who had escorted him to London after his return from Guiana, but also ostentatiously extended Stukeley his forgiveness. Raleigh also attempted to defuse two long-standing suspicions, asserting that he had neither engineered nor gloated at Essex's fall and execution in 1601, and insisting, in a compelling display of piety, that he was no atheist. In effect, Raleigh took control

of the meaning of his own execution and the shaping of his posthumous reputation, refusing to play the prescribed role of abject penitent submitting to a blameless royal authority (Beer 82-108). Copies of Raleigh's final speech and accounts of his scaffold demeanour circulated widely in newsletters and separates, and neither the printing of an official royal declaration on the case, nor the publication of a self-defence by Stukeley, managed to reverse the impact of Raleigh's vivid self-fashioning.

The poetry composed on Raleigh's death was profoundly shaped by the brilliance of his scaffold performance. Even those poems that remain critical of Raleigh's career and refuse to absolve him of all the charges that dogged him are forced to admit that Raleigh had died well. The majority of the poems lean towards a mostly positive assessment of the old Elizabethan and in them we can witness a key stage in Raleigh's transformation from a complex and controversial figure of dubious repute into the straightforwardly heroic icon of martial Protestantism that he would become in the anti-popish and anti-Spanish underground literature of the 1620s.

Many but not all of the poems collected below have been printed in Michael Rudick's recent edition of Raleigh's verse (Raleigh, *Poems* 181-205). Rudick also includes a number of printed epitaphs and poems copied out in the margins of printed books that we, given our focus on the manuscript culture of early Stuart libels, have chosen not to publish here.