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Writing 'Amye Duddley': seeking clues in books, bones and stones

Abstract
This paper explores some of the processes of literary detection involved in creating a fictional account of an historical figure, including seeking archival clues, examining existing fictional portrayals and locating my own position from which to write about the story.

Seeking

In February 2008 I ate lunch at a café in the crypt of the cathedral of St Mary the Virgin in Oxford. Buried somewhere between the vaulted ceiling above me and the floor of the cathedral itself was said to be the body of Amy Dudley (née Robsart), the woman I had come to England to research for a novel about her life. It was a peculiar experience to sit and eat below the bones of a woman who died over four hundred years before I was born and one whose life I was attempting to re-create in fiction. The moment captured for me some of the persistent strangeness of writing about this woman - I was both tantalising close to her, yet impossibly separate.

The novel-in-progress about Amy Dudley had begun as a stray thought a number of years before. I had been watching one of those enthusiastic British historians describe the life of Elizabeth I, and he mentioned gossip about the queen and her favourite, Robert Dudley. The historian said that Dudley was already married, but that his wife was soon found dead at the base of a stairwell in a manor house near Oxford, with her neck broken but none sure if she jumped, fell or was pushed. The scandal meant the queen could never marry Dudley. Without pausing for breath, the historian continued to talk about Elizabeth, but my thoughts remained with the body at the bottom of the stairs. Amy was my age when she died. How would I have felt in the months before, I wondered, if all of England gossiped about my husband and the

queen? My sudden empathetic question shifted quickly to become: how did she feel? With it came the thought that I might use fiction to create an answer.

Another issue niggled at me as I wondered about Amy's inner self. A few years earlier I had watched Shekhar Kapur's luscious film, *Elizabeth* (1998), and had been swept away by the poignancy of the impossible love between Elizabeth and Dudley. Dudley's marriage is revealed to the queen near the end of the film, which makes her realise how close to disaster her desire has brought her - the catalyst for her transformation into the Virgin Queen. Not once while watching Kapur's film did I think about Dudley's wife. In this narrative she is the impediment to the great love; although never on-screen, her character is thus the cause of the couple's tragic separation. Had I known then, as I came to discover, that Dudley's marriage to Amy was not secret, my experience of the film would have been quite different. I had fallen for a fiction while the 'real' story, like the body of Amy Dudley, lay discarded at the bottom of the stairs.

Josephine Tey (the pen-name of Elizabeth Mackintosh) explores a similar issue in her novel, *Daughter of Time* (1951). A bedridden detective applies his logical skills to the 'case' of Richard III, the king universally accepted as having killed his young nephews in the tower. The detective concludes that Henry VII was a more likely culprit, as he had motive and opportunity. He searches the secondary material and realises that others have come to the same conclusion, yet the people he speaks with, on the whole, are more attached to the popular view of Richard as the killer. What intrigues the detective is why the 'real' story has been eclipsed by the fiction. A similar question haunts my thinking about Amy Dudley: why is it that Kapur's version of the events, and its literary ancestor, Walter Scott's *Kenilworth* (1821), retain their grip on the public imagination, while the 'real' events are modified or discarded?

Josephine Tey begins her novel with an epigraph of an old proverb: 'Truth is the daughter of time.' When first reading this phrase I assumed it meant 'truth will out' - that what emerges in time are the facts of the matter. Tey's novel suggests just the opposite - that what is widely accepted as the 'truth' about historical figures is created over time, and that this does not necessarily correlate with archival records. Amy Dudley herself is the daughter of time, a figure who lives in the public imagination as a mixture of fact and fiction. My aim with the novel-in-progress is to write a version of Amy's life that stays true to the 'facts' and yet offers one possible and satisfying answer to the question raised earlier: how did she feel?

Clues

Like Tey's bedridden detective, I began my investigation with the available textual evidence. One of the first challenges in this project was locating material that was written in her lifetime or soon after her death, as her archival trail is meagre compared to some from the period. There are no contemporary images of her, and little written by her own hand.

The most compelling artefacts for me are two letters signed 'Amye Duddley'. The originals are held by the British Library and Longleat House, and transcriptions are provided by Rev. J.E. Jackson, who accidentally discovered one of the letters in the nineteenth century (Jackson 1878: 61-62, 66).

The letter held by the British Library (Dudley n.d.) is written to Mr Flowerdew, a steward at Amy's Norfolk property, and asks him to sell some

wool quickly, even if it is at a loss, in order to see 'thosse pore men satysfyed' (Jackson 1878: 62). She apologises for not asking her husband about the matter before he left, for he was 'sore trubeled wt wayty affares' and she 'not beyng all to gether in quyet for his soden departyng' (Jackson 1878: 61). She confirms her right to request the wool sale, assuring the steward: 'in my lordes absence of myne own awtoryte' (Jackson 1878: 62).

The Longleat letter is written to Mr Edney, a London tailor (Dudley 1560). In it Amy asks that the tailor 'make this gowne of vellet [velvet] whiche I sende you wt suche A collare as you made my rosset taffyta gowne you sente me last' (Jackson 1878: 66). She writes from 'comnare' [Cumnor, near Oxford] and asks the tailor to 'let it be done wt as muche speade as you can' (Jackson 1878: 66).

I was able to hold the originals of both letters while in England - one with white gloves, the other with bare fingers - and observe the style of the writing and its corrections, and the way the paper had been folded and sealed into a packet. While historians debate whether these letters were actually written or even signed by Amy (see Jackson 1878: 62; Adlard 1870: 22-23), both letters offer contemporary readers hints about her daily activities and her relationship with her husband.

Other traces of Amy appear in the disbursement books of the Dudley household. Simon Adams uses these records to map her movements in the eighteen months before she died: between 1558 and her death in 1560 she travelled from Lincolnshire to Throcking (Herts.), then to Christchurch in London and on to Camberwell, then to Compton Verney (Warwickshire) and finally to Cumnor (Adams 1995: 377-384). The ledgers also record small details of gifts and clothing, sent to her by Dudley (for example, 'a hoode', '6 doz. gould buttons … a littell cheyne', 'lynnen cloath', 'Russet taffata', 'sewing silk' and 'ii pair of hose' (listed in Jackson 1878: 85).

One of the most intriguing fragments of evidence is an entry in the journal of young King Edward for June 1550, which describes Amy's wedding at Sheen Palace where a goose was hung (Bartlett 1858: 31-32; Reid 1896: 80; Sidney 1908: 28-29; Tighe 1821: 42):

> S. Robert dudely, third sonne to th erle of warwic married S. Jon Robsartes daughter after wich marriage ther were certain Gentlemen that did strive to who shuld first take away a goses heade wich was hanged alive on tow crose postes. Ther was tilting and tourney on foot on the 5th, and on the 6th he removed to Greenwich. (cited Reid 1896: 80)

Surviving legal documents include a pre-marriage agreement between her and Dudley and a series of land grants (Jackson 1878: 80-84; Reid 1896: 79-80). Her name also appears in the Privy Council records as one of the visitors to the Tower of London when her husband was interred there because of his family's involvement in the plot to make Lady Jane Grey a queen (Bartlett 1850: 33; Rye 1885: 5).

The letters of the Spanish ambassadors often mention Amy, writing that in April 1559 she was suffering from a malady of the breast (transcript in Frere 1937: 13). In September 1560 the ambassador wrote that Amy was reported as being ill when she wasn't, only taking care not to be poisoned (transcript in Frere 1937: 18). James Gairdner (1886, 1898) examines these letters carefully and questions both their dates and their translations, which makes these 'facts' about Amy's life quite unstable.

Amy also appears in a series of letters between Dudley and Blount, one of his gentlemen. The originals are in the Pepysian Library in Cambridge (transcripts are available in Adlard 1870: 32-65; Bartlett 1850: 39-49; and Rye 1885: 5-7). These are particularly fascinating, as they seem to provide some clues about Amy's last day, as told to Blount by her servant Bowes, himself on his way to tell Dudley that his wife had died 'by a falle from a paire of stayres' (Dudley to Blount, cited Bartlett 1850: 39). Bowes told Blount that Amy had ordered the household to a nearby fair and

> wt any of her owne sorte that made reason of tarying atwhome she was verie angrie, and cam to Mrs. Odingsells, the wedowe, that lieth with Anthony Forster, who refused that daie to go to the faire, and was very angrie wt her also, Bycause she saide it was no daie for gentlewomen to go in, but said the morrowe was moch better, And then wold she go; whereunto my ladie answered and saide, That she might chowse and go at her pleasure, but all hers shuld go; and was verie angrye. (Blount to Dudley, cited Bartlett 1850: 47-48)

Blount also interviewed Amy's maid, who confirmed the tale, and 'saithe that she hath harde her [Amy] praie to god to deliver her from Disperaconne' (Blount, cited Bartlett 1850: 48). Blount suggests that Amy 'might have an evell toy in her mynde' [suicide], which is strenuously denied by her servant (Bartlett 1850: 48). Once again, the trail is muddied a little - while Bartle Frere sees these letters as 'undoubtedly authentic correspondence' (1937: 21), Bartlett suggests that they might have been copied from originals or even written a number of years after the events (Bartlett 1850: 39).

An inquest decided that Amy's death was accidental (Bartlett 1850: 57), but other possibilities spoken of afterwards included murder, suicide or illness. Unfortunately the inquest records cannot be found (Frere 1937: 38; Jackson 1878: 76; Reid 1896: 94).

Other historians have gathered details of her genealogy. Amy's father, Sir John Robsart, was a Norfolk landowner whose ancestors were from Belgium (Bartlett 1850: 27). He married Elizabeth Scott, the widower of Roger Appleyard (Bartlett 1850: 28). Bartlett suggests Amy was born in Norfolk between 1525 and 1530 (1850: 30), but recognises that '[w]hen or where she was born is not indeed a matter of certainty' (Bartlett 1850: 30). The *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* gives the date as 1532, based on a printed missal held by Durham University (Adams 2008). She had four half-siblings from her mother's first marriage (Adlard 1870: 11) and an illegitimate brother (Reid 1896: 79), but she was the only legitimate child of Elizabeth and John and was thus their heir.

The sense of Amy's life that emerges from these historical clues is a patchy and threadbare one (see, for example, the brief accounts in Inman (n.d.) and Yaxley (1996)). It marks key events and dates but offers few insights into her personality or emotions, aside from the ones noted. She is like a chess piece, moved from place to place, but with little individuality or character. While this prevents historians from being able to describe her with any accuracy, it is a boon for the fiction writers - these gaps in the record leave us spaces to speculate and to draw different narrative hypotheses based on the same evidence.

In books

Fiction writers, playwrights and poets who have come before me have filled in these archival lacunae with speculations about Amy's life and how she died. Her textual manifestations appear in William Julius Mickle's poem 'Cumnor Hall' (1784), Walter Scott's novel *Kenilworth* (1821), Victor Hugo's play *Amy Robsart* (1828), which was based on *Kenilworth*, as well as more recent manifestations, including Jennette and Francis Letton, *The Robsart Affair* (1956), Judith Saxton, *The Bright Day is Done: The Story of Amy Robsart* (1974), Rosalind Miles, *I, Elizabeth* (1993), Fiona Buckley, *The Robsart Mystery* (also published as *To Shield the Queen*) (1998), Audrey Evans, *So Pitifully Slain* (1999) and Philippa Gregory, *The Queen's Fool* (2003) and *The Virgin's Lover* (2004).

Shaped by the authors' own agendas or desires, and by the period in which they were writing, Amy emerges from these texts in a number of different forms, and observing these fictional portrayals has been a most interesting part of the project. What seems to interest writers most in Amy's scant biography are two key events: Her marriage and her mysterious death. In this discussion I will reverse the chronology and begin with her death.

Historically, the mystery of Amy's death has remained unsolved and will most likely continue to be so in the absence of the inquest records. [note 1] Complicating the issue is the additional absence of her body. In 1956 Ian Aird offered the hypothesis that the breast malady written about by the Spanish ambassador might have been a cancer that had spread to her bones, making her neck fragile enough to be broken by a small fall, yet his suggestion can be neither proved nor disproved, as her skeleton cannot be located. The floor of St Mary the Virgin was dug up in 1946, with the excavators discovering they were not the first to do so:

> The disturbance of the soil down to a depth of about six feet was very great and bones and soil were so intermingled and in such complete disorder that if there had been a grave in the area, all trace of it was lost, destroyed by the previous disturbance. There is thus no hope now of recovering Amy Robsart's remains … (Aird 1956: 78)

This mystery is one of the reasons her story endures - the question of how she died has not been answered, so speculations continue to whirl around it. Indeed, while in Oxford I was told that there was a fellow researcher in the Bodleian Library who has been driven to distraction trying to solve the mystery. The lacuna of her death is vital to the plots of many writers who engage with her story, and they often use this gap to shape and direct their narratives. Writers interested in Amy's end interpret elements of the archival record to provide 'proof' for their particular hypothesis about 'who dunnit'. In Gregory's *The Virgin's Lover* Amy is killed by Cecil's men, with the Queen's implicit agreement, because Elizabeth is unable to say no to her Robin, and the scandal associated with Amy's death will scupper any possible marriage. In Buckley's novel, it turns out that Lady Catherine Grey, with the support of a group of men, organised the killing in order to discredit Dudley and prevent his marriage to the queen. In *Kenilworth* Walter Scott has Amy killed by Dudley's men, Forster and Verney, an act triggered by Dudley's desire to marry the Queen and his mistaken belief that Amy has been unfaithful. Later (too late!) this desire is retracted - but, alas, his ambitious retainer goes ahead with the deed anyway. In Evans' work Amy is to be murdered by associates of Anthony Forster, so that they might rise in status when Dudley marries the queen, but Amy dies accidentally after being drugged, which throws the plans into disarray. Letton leaves the mystery unsolved, but has Elizabeth feel responsible for the tragedy as she had once wished Amy dead, and uses it as

the trigger for her resolve never to marry. In these stories Amy's death is either the climax of or the catalyst for the narrative; it is the authors' chief interest in her. She is the body required at the beginning of the classic murder-mystery, or centrepiece of the tragic tableau at the plot's end.

Similarly, Amy's marriage to Dudley seems to be of narrative interest not in itself but because of the function it performs in thwarting the love between Dudley and the queen. An example of this is the Letton novel which, although called *The Robsart Affair*, spends much of the narrative following Dudley and Elizabeth. Amy is an obstacle in the classic 'triangular' plot shape of love stories, which defers the lovers' union and thus, according to David Shumway, increases narrative tension (2003: 45).

In stories where Amy plays such a functional role there is, not surprisingly, little interest in her private and inner self. The authors of these works do not seem interested in creating a complex or appealing character for her. She is generally what EM Forster would describe as a 'flat' character, 'constructed round a single idea or quality' (1974: 46). The archival gap of Amy's personality, however, has been filled by these authors in strikingly similar ways. In *The Virgin's Lover* she is jealous and childlike, and struggles or is unable to write (Gregory 2004: 69-71). In other works she is a petulant child, soothed by new clothes (Evans 1999: 8; Letton 1956: 11). Another Amy manifests briefly in Rosalind Miles' *I, Elizabeth*: a fat, 'nut-brown' country bumpkin with 'baby's' eyes (1994: 214), who exhibits 'animal dumbness' and 'rank sensuality, easy as any cow's' (1994: 218). What these portrayals lack, for me, is a convincing sense of her inner life or emotions. They are too simplistic to answer the question that has haunted me: how did she feel?

Amy is sympathetically portrayed in only a few of these fictional representations: Saxton's *The Bright Day is Done*, which gives an appealing but relatively simple account of her childhood and married life, Buckley's *The Robsart Mystery*, in which Amy dies halfway through the novel, and Scott's *Kenilworth*. While there is not space here to examine the first two, I will consider Scott's novel in some detail, because his is the most well-known of the fictional Amy stories, and yet it is the one that varies most from the historical record.

Amy's character in *Kenilworth* is much more appealing than how she is generally portrayed. She is a devoted wife to Dudley, agreeing to keep their marriage secret for him so not to upset the queen, and she appears throughout as intelligent and kind. Her death is cruel and tragic, made more so because we have come to care for her as the story develops, and the two culprits meet deservingly gruesome ends.

There was an enormous amount of interest in Amy's story after this novel's publication. Indeed, many people were so moved by Scott's rendition of her life that they travelled to the little village of Cumnor outside Oxford to see where she spent her last days, only to be devastated by a pile of ruins, as the manor had been demolished ten years before the novel's publication. According to HJ Reid, writing in 1896: 'The disappointment was felt by everybody, for it is said all the world hastened to the site of the tragedy so graphically described by Scott, only to find they were too late' (73). HU Tighe, writing not long after the novel's publication, described his own reaction to Cumnor:

> My residence in Oxford has enabled me to visit this interesting spot, and I have myself experienced an enthusiasm, while standing amid the wreck of those scenes so accurately

> and beautifully described, which cannot fail of being felt, but which is impossible for language adequately to define. (Tighe 1821: vi-vii)

The Amy that so compelled Scott's readers and moved them to such 'enthusiasms' was a character created far from the historical record. While many of the authors listed earlier seem to write between gaps in her biography, Scott writes over some of the established facts of her life and creates a new one for her. The most significant of these changes is to the timeline. In a writerly sleight of hand, Scott shifts Amy's marriage forward in time, to the mid-1570s, when Dudley has been honoured as the Earl of Leicester and given Kenilworth Castle by the Queen. This peculiar move allows Walter Raleigh to bound in at the end of the novel, attempting to save Amy, when in reality he would have been eight when Amy died. Scott strays farther from the historical record by making the marriage secret from the Queen and the wider world. While there have been some questions about whether Dudley's later marriage to Lettice Knollys was kept from the queen, Edward's diary entry suggests to Reid that she would certainly have known of Amy's marriage, and perhaps even attended it (Reid 1896: 79).

In casting Dudley and his henchmen as the villains, Scott's novel owes a great debt to Elias Ashmole's account of Amy's demise in his *Antiquities of Berkshire* (1719). Scott cites Ashmole as his 'authority … for the story of the romance' (1952: 15), which in turn drew from the slanderous document, *Leicester's Commonwealth* (originally published in 1584). This document implicates Dudley in the murder of his wife and notes the convenient deaths of those around him at strategic moments (Burgoyne 1904). In his author's introduction, Scott notes that 'It is possible that slander … may have blackened the character of Leicester with darker shades than really belonged to it' (1952: 15), but he justifies his plot choices with Ashmole's text and the gossip that accompanied Amy's death (1952: 15). According to James Anderson, Scott also believed he had a right to 'commit anachronisms for the sake of effect' (cited Adams 1995: 378), and he did so with gusto.

This wilful manipulation of the historical record is no secret - HJC Grierson, in the introduction to *Kenilworth*, recounts the main discrepancies and describes Scott as taking 'the same freedoms as in others of his novels' (1952: 9). In Grierson's view:

> [D]ates are of little importance to Scott. He had hold of the main facts of the situation, that Leicester was married and that the Queen's favour led him to dream of further possible advancement between which and fulfilment the existence of his former wife would prove an impediment. … The central interest of this story is this conflict in Leicester's mind between love, for he does love Amy Robsart, and ambition. (Grierson 1952: 10)

From the nineteenth-century onwards other commentators have noted (and with some acid) how much Scott stretched the truth. A 'Miscellaneous Correspondence' from the *Gentlemen's Magazine* in May 1821 lists these historical errors, and writers since then have continued the commentary (including Adlard (1870), Bartlett (1850), Jackson (1878) and Reid (1896)). Reid goes into Scott's 'most glaring historical inaccuracies and anachronisms' (1896: 74), and Bartlett notes that 'the reader will be surprised to find the extent to which his account varies from sober history' (1850: 127). The compelling thing for me is that many nineteenth-century readers' first introduction to this story was Scott's take on the tale, so poor murdered Amy

came to live vividly in their minds. Rev. Jackson notes the difficulty of getting the 'real' story across: 'But whilst thousands see the false history …, not one in a thousand ever hears the correction' (1878: 52). Similarly, for Reid:

> The public was not aware then that its sympathies had been aroused by the vivid imagination and marvellous genius of the novelist, and that while there was just a substratum of fact the greater portion of this had no foundation other than the great constructive power of the Author. While thousands deplored the untimely fate of Amy Robsart, their sympathies were in truth tributes to the dramatic power of the novelist, not to the unfortunate heroine; the novel may be said to bristle with chronological inaccuracies, and utter disregard for historical fact. (Reid 1896: 73-74)

The legacy of this is with us today. As described earlier, Shekhar Kapur's first film about Elizabeth (1998) strikes me as part of the same tradition - like Scott's novel, it plays fast and loose with the dates and also uses the trope of the secret marriage, while Amy's 'real' story is put aside. This is one of the areas I have found most fascinating in this pursuit: the elements that engrave themselves into the public consciousness through stories like *Kenilworth* or *Elizabeth*, irrespective of their fidelity to historical truth. How or why is it that certain aspects of the story become for some authors the 'main facts of the situation' that Grierson describes, while elements of the historical record can be ignored or changed?

Scott's writing, lodged uncomfortably between fact and fiction, was a cause for great concern for some nineteenth-century readers of his novel. Reid worried that the fictions would imprint themselves on readers' minds as history:

> It has been repeatedly reasoned that novelists should be permitted a certain licence, and in actual fiction this may possibly be; but if the subject and characters chosen are both historical, misconceptions may easily arise, and erroneous statements may be indelibly impressed on the mind of the reader. (Reid 1896: 74)

Bartlett also warned of the dangers of mixing the two:

> As long as the tale is regarded as purely fictitious, it would be literary prudery to make objections to it. But when there is danger of its being regarded as grounded on facts, the student of truth will desire to see due discrimination made between fiction grounded on the superstitious traditions of the ignorant peasantry, and the incontrovertible records of history. (Bartlett 1850: 130)

The nineteenth-century criticisms of Scott's approach to the historical record remind me of more recent comments about Kate Grenville's novel, *The Secret River* (2005). Inga Clendinnen, who had 'recently written out of the same sources' as Grenville, 'flinched from what looked like opportunistic transpositions and elisions' (2006: 16) and was horrified when a slap from the historical record appeared in a new form in Grenville's novel (cited Sullivan 2006: 12). Both debates reveal similar anxieties about the border between fact and fiction, and the motivations of both: 'It is that confusion between the primarily aesthetic purpose of fiction and the primarily moral purpose of

history which makes the present jostling for territory matter' (Clendinnen 2006: 34). The scuffle between Grenville and Clendinnen (one of many recent border disputes between the genres of 'fiction' and 'history') suggests that the two hundred years separating Scott from Grenville have not resolved the issues raised when fiction writers make incursions into history.

From a personal perspective, with my eyes fixed on Amy's portrayal, I did find my reading experience of *Kenilworth* diminished by Scott's 'opportunistic transpositions and elisions' (Clendinnen 2006: 16). The novel is a deeply engaging adventure tale, bristling with intrigues, carnival players, walk-on quirky characters, and tragedy, but as a convincing imagining of Amy's life, which is what I have been looking for in this investigation, it fails for me, because it swerves from some of the few facts that are known about her. Amy's threadbare biography threatens to become diminished if stories like Scott's overwrite the historical facts. I read the novel with tainted enjoyment because I felt Amy's real story was being lost within Scott's revels, and it is this 'real story', admittedly a much quieter one when stripped of *Kenilworth*'s fanfare, that matters to me.

This brief examination of the many fictional manifestations of Amy Dudley reveals that there seem to be two main ways of writing her story: mostly historically accurate but unsatisfying (she is a flat and functional character); or mostly appealing but historically inaccurate. And neither have answered the question that was my original response to the events of her life: how did she feel?

Bones and stones

Amy makes a fleeting appearance in Josephine Tey's novel: the injured detective is given an image of Dudley and remembers the mystery of his wife's death. 'Well, he wasn't interested in Amy Robsart. He didn't care how she had fallen down stairs, or why' (1995: 26). I do care about Amy Robsart, although through these recent endeavours I have realised that, like Tey's detective, I too don't care much about how she came to her end. Reading these different fictional versions of Amy I have discovered that my aim, with this novel, is not to answer the question of how she died, but to work closely with the historical record and to offer one answer to the question of how she might have lived.

At the same time I'm also conscious of the difficulties in this: the struggle to avoid overlaying my own contemporary thoughts and sensibilities on Amy. Clendinnen warns about fiction writers using archival materials without a complex understanding of the context of the period, as developed by historians:

> Historical novelists spend time getting the material setting right, but then, misled by their confidence in their novelist's gift of empathetic imagination, they sometimes project back into that carefully constructed material setting contemporary assumptions and current obsessions. (Clendinnen 2006: 27-28)

While I resist the claim to historical objectivity that seems implicit in Clendinnen's comment - and remember the question mark that must hang over such claims (Curthoys and Docker 2006: 5) - I am acutely aware of the gulf of years between Amy and myself and know I will never truly understand how she felt. Yet recent scholarship into Renaissance ways of knowing

suggests that those who precede us cannot be seen simply as separate and other; our relationship with them is better defined in terms of what Timothy Reiss calls 'the complex interweavings of continuity and change' (cited Berry and Tudeau-Clayton 2003: 6). While much differs between us, then, there is yet some hope of common experience.

This hope for a thread of connection between Amy's life and my own carried me to England last year, to seek out the fragments of her archival self and also to walk through the places she inhabited in the last nine months of her life. I was seeking what Nigel Krauth describes as an 'embodied comprehension of my environment' (2008); specifically, my bodily comprehension of Amy's environment. Like the nineteenth-century Scott enthusiasts, I visited the small village of Cumnor, three miles outside of Oxford. I stood in the churchyard on frosty winter mornings and paced out the perimeter of the house where she had died. I could picture, then, where her chamber was and the view it would have had over fields and woods. I touched the only remaining relics from the house - a mantelpiece slab carved with quatrefoils - and sat in the church where she would have worshipped. After that trip - having held her letters, searched for her in the archives, and walked in my mind through her house and church - some sense of her began to emerge in the manuscript. Certainly it is not the 'real' Amy Dudley - I recognise that she is as remote and inaccessible to me as her body above the crypt café. Yet through this literary detective work I have found the bones of a portrayal that I hope will be satisfying, sympathetic both to this woman's plight and the few archival facts that document her life.

The fictional offer in Amy Dudley's story is writing between what is known, into the mystery of one woman's life - what Alex Miller describes as the 'story of the intimate and the private lives of us […] the story of the interior and the unrecorded' (2006). A story that feels 'true' to me - true to the scant archival records but true also to the life of a woman who died, childless, at twenty-eight while the whole country gossiped about her husband's dalliance with the queen. A woman who was probably suffering metastatic breast cancer and lived away from her husband, in a household of mostly women, in a little village outside Oxford. This is the 'real' story that pulls me: a small, quiet human story that emerges from the fragmented historical record.

Note

1. The mystery may yet perhaps be solved. In August 2009 Orion will publish Chris Skidmore's *Death and the Virgin: Elizabeth, Dudley and the Mysterious Fate of Amy Robsart*, which, according to the publisher's website, contains 'newly discovered evidence from the archives' and allows the author to 'put an end to centuries of speculation as to the true causes of her death' (Orion Publishing Group 2004-2007). return to text

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