

A Puzzle Picture at Abbey House, Strata Florida

By Sir CHRISTOPHER DAVSON, Bart.

In 1997, as part of their 150th Anniversary Meeting at Aberystwyth, the Cambrians visited Abbey House, Strata Florida (Card.), and were duly intrigued by the painting on board above the parlour fireplace. Peter Smith, F.S.A. (a well-loved member, and former Secretary of the Royal Commission on Ancient and Historical Monuments in Wales), opined that it represented ‘the temptations of Jesus in the Wilderness’.

With the best will in the world, the present writer cannot see it as a representation of Christ’s temptations in the Wilderness. What little we know of the temptations must originate from Jesus himself — and we know of only three: stones into bread; levitation; and wordly power. In the Strata Florida instance we see depicted a typical ‘Virtue and Vice’ allegory: a personal struggle with *libido* — too ‘Renaissance’ to be from the life of one of the desert fathers.

In the writer’s opinion, the subject is the High German medieval legend of Tannhäuser. To the right (sinister), we have Venus (nude, with suitably queenly hair-do and traces of ?horns. Her ‘Comedy’ mask belies her snarling features. To *her* right (dexter) a splendid stringed instrument is depicted, plainly a *viola da gamba*, albeit only four strings are shown instead of the normal six. It *may* be that this is because it is, in fact, a *viola d’amore* (having four sympathetic strings *below* the finger board to produce a ‘seductive’ effect), and that in the present condition of the painting these extra strings cannot be discerned; that the fingerboard



Painting in Abbey House, Strata Florida (Card.).

By courtesy of the Royal Commission on Ancient and Historical Monuments in Wales.

seemingly has no frets strengthens the view that we have here a *viola d'amore*. The *viola da gamba* was certainly in use in the early sixteenth century, and the *viola d'amore* was very popular by the mid seventeenth century.

Reverting to Tannhäuser, we have him as the central figure. He looks to be in his mid-thirties, with a full head of curly hair. He seems undecided. His partial nakedness could indicate either his 'sexual innocence', or else that he was already preparing himself for the joys of love. He appears to be standing on a casket - significance unknown - and he is spurning with his foot some sort of a scroll.

At the left of the picture we have two well-depicted monks (or pilgrims), the leader of whom holds a book resembling the two 'tablets' of the Torah. He seems to be pleading with the central figure, who seems unresponsive. Magnification of the scroll clearly reveals some writing, in particular three words: 'doth' ... 'whic[h]' ... 'hell', all appropriate in a 'wages of sin is death' sort of way. These three words, which point to an English original for the painting, do not appear together in any one verse or even chapter in the Authorised Version of the Bible (although 'doth' appears in Revelation 19:11, and 'which' and 'hell' in Rev. 20:13), so one thinks of Tyndale or Coverdale, and this may be relevant to the dating of the painting.

Tyndale was printing his English New Testament in Cologne and Worms in 1525. Thereafter he resided in Antwerp, revising his NT and commencing his OT with his Pentateuch of 1530. He died in 1536. The Dissolution of the Monasteries began in 1536 and was completed by 1540. Tyndale's German sojourn could have enabled him to encounter the Tannhäuser legend. Coverdale (who followed him as translator of the whole Bible into English) was with him in Antwerp, engaged with printers, and could also have encountered the Tannhäuser legend there. So all this would give us a *terminus a quo* of c.1540. for our picture, and England for its origin - for it is probably a copy.

The Tannhäuser legend, itself deriving from the Sibylline legends 'realised' by the fourteenth-century author of *Guerino il Meschino*, was popular in north Europe in the late fourteenth century, but the picture, perhaps by an accomplished 'country' dauber, looks later. Early sixteenth-century remains a possibility, but if (as Sir Roy Strong in a personal communication to the writer opines), it is late seventeenth-century, it would therefore be Puritan, with Venus/Rome depicted as the Great Whore, and the 'People of the Book' ranged in opposition.

How this picture, with its provocative subject, could have reached Abbey House, Strata Florida, has yet to be discovered. But it is hoped that this present study of its religious *milieu* may give leads to future investigators of the owners of the Abbey House following the Dissolution.