

GLORIANA

Composed by Benjamin Britten

Act One Scene One

Essex is outside the tilting ground. Cuffe reports to him what is happening; Mountjoy is winning. But Essex can't bear to hear of Mountjoy's success.

As the people sing "Green leaves are we", a paean to their Queen, Mountjoy comes out, with the token given him by Elizabeth. Essex insults Mountjoy deliberately, and Mountjoy responds angrily; they fight, but as the trumpets sound, Essex turns, and is wounded.

The Queen is perturbed to see Essex's wound; no lords may fight at court. Essex and Mountjoy try to justify themselves, but the Queen turns to Raleigh to know what to do. He dismisses their pretensions; "When head and heart are hot then tongue and hand are wild". Both Essex and Mountjoy swear revenge on him for his insult, but the Queen is satisfied, and attempts to reconcile them. As they kneel to her, the chorus sings once again the "Green leaves" song.

Act One Scene Two

The Queen, alone with Cecil in a room at Nonesuch, discusses the quarrel. She is worried that Essex is proving too headstrong, too rebellious; and yet she loves him for this spontaneity. But she is "wedded to the realm"; and Cecil, schooling her, sings of the art of government, a sinuous and Machiavellian song.

As Essex enters, Cecil leaves; the cares of state have overwhelmed the Queen, and she asks Essex to sing to her. "Quick music is best when the heart is oppressed", he sings, but it is too light for her; his second song, rather than gaiety, suggests retirement, the world of the hermit. Essex vows himself to the Queen; but they are not alone - Raleigh's shadow can be seen through the curtain. Despite Raleigh's opposition, though, the Queen grants Essex his wish to claim Ireland. After he leaves, she reflects on the necessary pains and longings of a monarch's life; she prays for strength to rule her people in peace.

Act Two Scene One

The Queen's progress has reached the Guildhall at Norwich. The Recorder's speech of praise is answered graciously by her; but it is less graciously described by Essex, aside, as a "tedious oration". He has still not been appointed Deputy for Ireland, and resents the progress as time wasted.

In a masque, Time appears - not the old man with his scythe, but a young and lusty sower of seed. Then Concord, his wife, appears, and the masquers bring floral tributes. Throughout the masque, however, sinister political asides continue - Raleigh plots with Mountjoy, Essex ponders on his disappointment.

Act Two Scene Two

Mountjoy, alone in the gardens at Essex House, sings of his hope of a meeting with his lover; and his "dark Penelope", Lady Rich, appears at last. For a moment, they sing, "Let us walk in the paths of pleasure and forget the nagging world outside" - a luxury the Queen will never know. Essex and Lady Essex appear; as they pass, Essex complains of the Queen's obstruction of his plans.

Mountjoy and Lady Rich comment on the many dark enemies who would subdue the eager Essex. As Essex returns, he shouts his disobedience - "I'll break her will! I'll have my way!" Mountjoy and Lady Rich step forward, and warn him how dangerous his words could be, heard by the wrong ears - but he continues, raging. As Lady Rich and Mountjoy join his plotting to gain the crown, Lady Essex warns them to be cautious; but they no longer hear her.

Act Two Scene Three

The Pavane is being danced in the great hall of the Palace of Whitehall. Lady Essex enters, most splendidly dressed; a galliard is danced, and at last the Queen enters, and commands a lavolta, a more rousing dance to warm the blood on a cold night.

While a Morris dancer entertains, the Queen leads the ladies out to change their dresses. The ladies return. Lady Essex, wearing a plain dress, is last; her dress has been stolen.

As the Queen enters we realise that it is she who has stolen Lady Essex's dress; she is wearing it, but it is much too short for her, and looks grotesque. Pointedly, the Queen asks Lady Essex what she thinks of it, and sweeps out. Lady Essex is left behind, crying.

Essex vilifies the Queen; but she, re-entering in state (and in her own clothes again), summons him to hear the proclamation. He has at last been appointed Deputy of Ireland. He is overjoyed; but Raleigh and Cecil reflect that exalted so high, he has further to fall. "So now he has his way, so goes he to his fate." As the excitement peaks, the music for the coranto begins; Essex partners the Queen in the dance, and the curtain falls.

Act Three Scene One

In the Queen's anteroom, the maids of honour are discussing the news from Ireland. It is not good. A Lady-in-waiting bursts in - there are horsemen downstairs - then Essex bursts in, dishevelled and raging.

Essex will not be restrained, but tears back the curtain that conceals the Queen. She is at her dressing table, bald without her wig, in an old dressing-gown; but immediately, she takes control of the situation - "You see me as I am".

He claims he is there to defend her against her enemies; but she points out that he has not subdued that greatest of enemies, Tyrone. "You have failed in my trust, you have left a wound in a heart too fond."

As he leaves, and she finishes dressing, the ladies sing to distract her; and when she is ready, they leave, and Cecil enters. He foresees danger with Essex, failed in Ireland, now in England with his troops. She no longer trusts Essex; she has never tamed him, and orders Cecil to keep watch on him. "I must break his will and pull down his great heart. It is I who have to rule."

Act Three Scene Two

In a street in the City of London, a blind ballad-singer reports the beginning of Essex's rebellion. "The lion in his range" has burst out; Cuffe tries to enlist the citizens for Essex's army. But the old men are sceptical, and as Cuffe marches off, a housewife leans out of her windows and tips a chamber pot over his head.

A crier shouts from the end of the street. He proclaims Essex a traitor. As the chorus sing, "He asked for trouble, and trouble has come"; the rebellion has already failed.

Act Three Scene Three

The trial is over; in Whitehall, Raleigh and the councillors gloat over Essex's death sentence. But Cecil warns that the Queen may defer the execution.

The Queen enters, and as the lords kneel to her, asks for the verdict. Raleigh shows her the warrant; but she will not sign it now. Cecil warns her of her duty to sign it, but he is rebuffed, and the Queen dismissed the whole council.

Left alone, she ponders her dilemma, in a typically Elizabethan verse:

I grieve, yet dare not show my discontent;
I love, and yet am forced to seem to hate;
I am, and am not; freeze, and yet I burn,
Since from myself my other self I turn.

Lady Essex, Lady Rich and Mountjoy have arrived to plead for Essex's life; the Queen tells Lady Essex that her children will be safe - it is a woman, as well as a Queen, who speaks. But Lady Rich refuses to plead; rather, she asserts Essex's essential greatness - "Still great he would have been without the grace and favour of a Queen!" Elizabeth is enraged; turning to Raleigh, she demands the warrant, and signs it.

Now, as the Queen becomes a figure of history, as time and place recede, she breaks from singing into speech. She hears Essex's voice accusing her; she dismisses Cecil and speaks directly to the audience; and she remembers the years of her triumphs; but she is near death now, and it is all meaningless. "I see no weighty reason that I should be fond to live or fear to die." As the chorus once more sings its 'Green leaves' homage, darkness envelops her.