Sir Toby Belch and the Susannah Window

The oldest glass in the Cathedral, dating from about 1500, is now in the ‘Susanna window’ at the west end of the south aisle. The bottom half shows the story from the Apocrypha of Susanna and the elders who hid in her garden and falsely accused her of adultery. When she was brought to trial, however, the young prophet Daniel defended her, exposing the inconsistencies in her influential accusers’ story and in the end it was they, not Susanna, who were stoned to death.

This story was very popular in the sixteenth century and was set to music as a broadside ballad *Constant Susan*. You could buy a copy for ½d or 1d from the 1560s onwards and it was reprinted even into the nineteenth century.

Remarkably the tune to this ballad, but with different words, is written on the title page of a book in the Ancient Library. The book, originally from the Suffolk parish of South Elmham, is a copy of the *Paraphrases of Erasmus*, one of the books, along with the *Prayer Book*, the *Bible* in English and Foxe’s *Book of Martyrs* that all churches were required to possess in the reign of Elizabeth I.

The book itself was ‘Empriented at London in Flete Strete at the signe of the sunne by Edwarde Whitchurche, the last daie of Januarie 1548’. However the earliest handwritten date in this volume is 1561, just 2 years after William Elderton, an actor at the court of EdwardVI, published his first known ballad, *The panges of love and lovers fits*, which begins ‘Was not good King Solomon ravished in sundry wise’ – exactly the same as copied in our book.

Sir Toby Belch? In Twelfth Night Act 2 Scene 3, the drunken Sir Toby sings ‘There dwelt a man in Babylon, Lady, Lady’ the opening line and the refrain of the ballad *Constant Susan.* No doubt the audience at the first performance in February 1602 knew the tune well enough to sing along and recollect the story depicted in our Susanna window.

Stephen Dart and Margaret Statham

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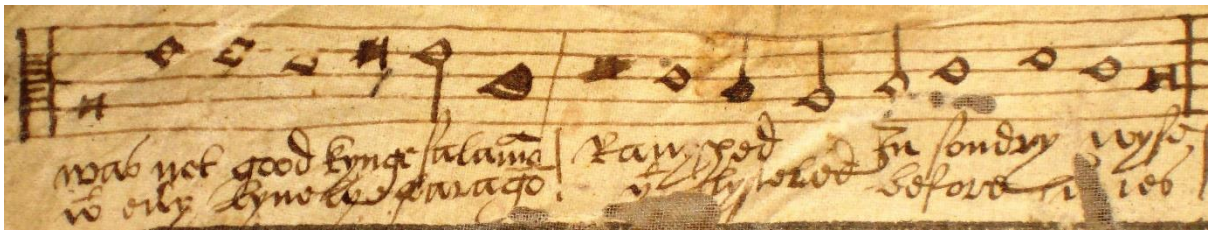
The panges of love