**Introduction**

***The Vow Breaker, or The Fair Maid of Clifton***[[1]](#footnote-1)

This modern-spelling edition of Sampson’s play endeavours to establish a well-prepared and reliable scholarly text set within its historical context. For the purpose of this new edition, the copy text is that printed in 1636 held by the Bodleian Library; there is no known extant manuscript copy. I have traced nineteen copies of the only known edition (found in the UK, US and Australia), ten of which I have closely examined including the prompt copy held by Melbourne University, and I discuss the press-variants which appear on only a few pages, under that heading in this thesis. (Hans Wallrath footnotes variations that he found in two editions, and I also comment on these.)

I have considered reasons for when and why Sampson may have been inspired to write *The Vow Breaker, or The Fair Maid of Clifton*, and have looked at events from about 1625 to 1635 that may bear some relevance. The play has several different themes – the maid of Clifton interwoven with the Siege of Leith, but also the childbed scene, the entertainment plans, and the visit of the queen and it is quite possible, therefore, that Sampson wrote it irregularly during this decade. However, although parts of the play could have been written at any time, I would suggest that it may have been finished only a year or so before publication as Sampson appears to refer to James Smith’s ‘mock’ poem, *Hero and Leander*,probablydated from the early or mid-1630s.[[2]](#footnote-2)

In *The Vow Breaker* Sampson mocks the ideologies of Puritans: this theme may have been suggested by the religious conflict that was causing strained relations at the time between the Protestants and Catholics, and it was also during the 1620s that a number of Puritans left England to establish their own communities in America.

There was no specific conflict between England, Scotland and France at this time that may have motivated Sampson to write about the siege of 1560 although Charles I’s accession to the throne in 1625 brought with it a series of political and religious conflicts and for years there was friction between the king and Scotland, not helped by his long overdue Scottish coronation in 1633.[[3]](#footnote-3) Charles was determined to impose his decisions on his governments and this affected his relations with his Parliaments in England (that also represented Wales), Scotland and Ireland. Lisa Hopkins suggests that the growing political unpopularity of Charles I provoked a collective soul-searching on the subject of national identitites.[[4]](#footnote-4)

In 1622, when Sampson was in his early twenties, he collaborated with Gervase Markham on *Herod and Antipater* and then published his own play *The Widow’s Prize, or The Woman Captain* in 1625. At about this time he entered the employment of Sir Henry Willoughby of Risley, dedicating *The Vow Breaker* to Willoughby’s youngest unmarried daughter, Anne, and naming his ‘maid’ after her.[[5]](#footnote-5) Apart from this play, Sampson also published a volume of poems, *Virtus Post Funera Vivit*, in 1636. Sampson’s life experiences are an enigma: I have been unable to find any evidence as to when he wrote any of his own compositions and no positive clues that could suggest dates.

The title page of *The Vow Breaker* informs that the play had been ‘acted by several Companies with great applause’ but there is no evidence as to where the playwas performed. Sampson had connections with the Red Bull and the Prince’s Company but *The Vow Breaker* does not appear in references to their productions.[[6]](#footnote-6) I have searched through records of the important families in Nottinghamshire (the setting for his play) and Derbyshire (where he lived with the Willoughby family) but there is no mention of Sampson or clues that the play had been performed in any of the big houses, and the records relating to drama in these counties are not yet edited and published.[[7]](#footnote-7)

*The Vow Breaker* would have had appeal to a local audience as one of its two main themes was that of a local legend dating from the 15th century that had been published as a ballad in 1603. The Nottinghamshire interest would have been further fuelled by the second main theme, the Siege of Leith of 1560, in which local men are given important roles.[[8]](#footnote-8) In addition, as the conflict was only some seventy years earlier, local people may have been familiar with the event and have had family knowledge.

*The Vow Breaker, or The Fair Maid of Clifton* is a play of many parts and emotions that does not receive the attention that I feel it deserves. Although Sampson has taken phrases and ideas direct from many of Shakespeare’s plays and used them in his own work, he has written an entertaining play in which he lightens the tragedy of Bateman and Anne by comic scenes that sometimes border on burlesque. His play, probably suggested by both the 1603 ballad and the Nottinghamshire legend, has itself inspired other writers of poems, a novel by Scott, even the lyrics for musical ‘extravaganzas’.

This edition of *The Vow Breaker* is supported by a full Introduction and an explanatory Commentary that replaces what Thomas L. Berger described as a ‘band of terror.[[9]](#footnote-9) In the Introduction I have examined possible sources for the themes in the play and have endeavoured to identify William Sampson and trace the performance details. In addition, I have reflected on Hans Wallrath’s thesis and discussed textual variants in ten copies of the play.

1. Sampson, William. *The Vow Breaker, or the Fair Maid of Clifton*. London: Norton, 1636. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. ***The Vow Breaker,* 2.1.68;**  **Raylor, Timothy. *Cavaliers, Clubs, and Literary Culture: Sir John Mennes, James Smith, and the Order of the Fancy.* Newark: University of Delaware Presses,** c.1994. p. 136.

Also: Booth, Roy. ‘Hero’s Afterlife: “Hero and Leander”and “lewd unmannerly verse” in the late Seventeenth Century’. *EMLS* 12.3 (Jan 2007), 4.1-24). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Bennett, Martyn. *The English Civil War*. Stroud, Glos.: Tempus, 2004. p. 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Hopkins, Lisa. ‘We were the Trojans: British national identities in 1633’. *Renaissance Studies* 16, 1 (2002): 36-51. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The fifteenth-century Nottinghamshire legend refers to the ill-fated couple as Margaret and Bateman [Rosslyn Bruce, *The Clifton Book (Nottingham)*. Nottingham: Saxton, 1906. V. 23; 65-70]. A ballad entered in the Stationers’ Register in 1603 does not name the ‘faithless maid’ although ‘young Bateman’ is referred to [*Bateman’s Tragedy,* Pepys I.504-505]. A chapbook published after Sampson’s death, and bearing the same woodcut as used by him refers to the girl as ‘fair Isobella’, and Bateman is given the forename of James [*Bateman’s Tragedy: or the Perjured Bride justly Rewarded*, Pepys I.501; III.766]. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. These were the companies that performed *Herod and Antipater* and *The Widow’s Prize.* [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Sally-Beth MacLean, REED. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. e.g. Gervase Clifton, who did fight in the Siege of Leith, but also men who may well have been recognised: miller, portrait painter, shoemaker, and the mayor (tanner). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. (Thomas L. Berger: Professor of English, St Lawrence University, N.Y. The ‘band of terror’ separates the text of the play and the historical and explanatory notes.) Leah Sinanoglou Marcus. *Unediting the Renaissance: Shakespeare, Marlowe, Milton.* London: Routledge, 1996. p. 72. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)