

# Virgin Queen and Aging Monarch: Contesting Images of Queen Elizabeth in the Last Decade of Her Reign

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By the time Shakespeare arrived in London in the early 1590s, Queen Elizabeth's rule was celebrated in church, marketplace and tiltyard every November on her Accession Day. Yet the post-Armada years were also marked by bad harvests, outbreaks of the plague, and wartime taxation that burdened the country and left the people discontented. Furthermore, the constant threat of a Catholic invasion and the rise of various factions at court resulted in a more autocratic style of government. In close parallel with the emergence of economic and social problems in the last decade of the sixteenth century, there occurred a change in the perception of Queen Elizabeth's public image. An unprecedented number of rumours, gossip and writings challenged the Queen's female authority and undermined her moral reputation as a woman. The fount of treasonous ideas was the Catholic propaganda arriving from the continent, and its chief example was the 1588 pamphlet written by Cardinal William Allen. The work not only questioned Elizabeth's right to the throne of England, but gave vent to attacks on her gender. As a reaction to the libel, praise of the Queen intensified and was buttressed by institutionalized ceremony, yet its hyperbolic and stiff language became obsolete for the young generation of writers and poets who often distorted it to convey voices of doubt and criticism.

The following paper will analyze the image of Queen Elizabeth in the last decade of her reign, examining both excessive praise and dissenting undercurrents detectable in the works of such older writers as John Lyly and younger talents like William Shakespeare. The three parts of the paper, which look at examples of official praise, Catholic slander, and artistic equivocation, will attempt to draw attention to the conflicting images of Queen Elizabeth as the awe-inspiring Virgin Queen and the lonely aging monarch at the twilight of the Tudor period.

## Official Praise

The defeat of the once invincible Spanish Armada in 1588 triggered a wave of laudatory literature and an upsurge in nationalistic feeling. James Aske's *Elizabetha Triumphans* (1588) summarized for the nation the pride and triumph of the queen and the country over the "damed practises that the divelish Popes of Rome have used ever sithence her Highnesse first coming to the Crown" (A1r). Aske's epic poem mythologized the history of Elizabeth's reign as a struggle between two polar opposites, the wolf-like wickedness

of the pope and the land of Elizabeth whose “virtues shine as bright as Sol itself” (B2r). According to Aske there was such an upsurge in the publication of topical ballads about the events that he nearly committed his work to the fire after “hauing intelligence of the commonnesse of Ballads, with Bookes to this purpose” (A3v).<sup>1</sup>

That year’s Accession Day was solemnized with festivities taken to new extremes. A commemorative coin was issued which provided a tangible relic of the events of the year. The three versions of what is known as the “Armada” portrait of the queen created a new iconography of Elizabeth.<sup>2</sup> The imperial closed crown—appearing on an earlier canvas only as a miniature jewel—was enlarged and presented prominently above the right hand of the queen. The depiction of a globe with Elizabeth’s hand resting upon the North American continent also strengthened the imperial aspirations of the post-Armada epoch. John Case’s *Sphaera Civitatis* was printed in the same year with an engraving that showed Elizabeth embracing a Ptolemaic universe, in which the seven royal virtues were equated with the seven planets that surround the centrally placed Earth, Iusticia Immobilis. The imperial overtones placed the trope of celebrating the queen as Astraea in the centre of the cult discourse (Yates 29-87). In mythology Astraea was the last of the immortals to abandon Earth after its deterioration from the Golden Age into the Iron Age. Virgil in his *Eclogue IV* gave Astraea a messianic role by prophesying the virgin’s return to re-establish the Golden Age upon Earth. Elizabeth’s reign in the 1590s was praised as Astraea’s golden rule, as for instance in the twenty six acrostic poems of John Davies’s *Hymns of Astraea* (1599).

Writing in 1591, Lodowike Lloyd in his book *The Triplicite of Triumphs* made a bold comparison between the ancient cult of pagan gods and emperors on the one hand, and the celebrations of Queen Elizabeth’s accession to the throne on the other:

I leave Athens to honour their Minerua in the feast of Panathaenea, with the triumph of Peplon; Rome, to worship Iuno in her feast Quinquatria, with the triumphs of Epinicion . . . We will Cantare Domino, and solempnize Triplicia festa for the seuenth of September, the 17. of Nouemb. and the 15. of January, which God graunt us long to enjoy for Christ his sake our sauour. (A<sup>r</sup>)

Lloyd claims a ritualistic importance for the queen’s Accession Day and broadens the concept by suggesting a triple feast of the monarch inspired by the example of the Macedonians, where Philip was celebrated for three reasons: the birth of his son, Alexander, his lieutenant’s victory above the Acaians, and the success of his horses and chariots at the games of Olympia. The Queen’s celebrations of 17 November were combined with two further dates: Elizabeth’s birthday (7 September) and her day of coronation (15 January). Lloyd’s book is unique, as he tried to collect a body of historical evidence for these various customs of celebrating the Queen. On the title page

1 See Leicester Bradner’s “Poems on the Defeat of the Spanish Armada” in *The Journal of English and German Philology* 43. 4 (1944): 447-48 for further examples of both English and Continental poetry on the subject.

2 The three Armada portraits are attributed to George Gower, the Queen’s Serjeant Painter. See Strong, *Gloriana* 131-33.

of his work he claimed to examine the “order, solemnitie and pompe, of the Feasts, Sacrifices, Vowes, Games, and Triumphs; vsed vpon the Natiuities of Emperours, kinges, Princes, Dukes, Popes, and Consuls,” and he provided a list of the various rituals which were invented in the past to justify the customs of his own time. The example of the Romans who used “to make vowes, and to sacrifice for the preservation and health of their kings, Dictators or Emperors” (B2<sup>r</sup>) provided a secular explanation for the use of prayers on Elizabeth’s Accession Day. The Greek custom of dedicating “statues and images of Marble, Copper, Iuorie, Siluer and Gold, to stand in Ceramicus, in their Castle of Minerua, and in their Temples” (B2<sup>r</sup>) and the Macedonians of wearing “the picture of Alexander about their neckes in iewels, and on their figure in rings” (B3<sup>v</sup>) could be compared to the custom of wearing the queen’s image in the form of a miniature and to the queen’s fancy pictorial representations. The rite of Minerva’s birth being celebrated by military games served as a parallel to the custom of the tournaments held at the Elizabethan court. All Lloyd’s examples thus prefigured a ritualized act of veneration of Queen Elizabeth and offered a comparison to her celebration: “Let Romanes sing Mamurius song, And sound Talasius fame: / We laugh aloud, and clap our hands, And sound Elizas name” (C1<sup>v</sup>-C2<sup>r</sup>).

Lloyd was the first to articulate explicitly that the celebrations on the Accession Day of the queen were not simply some form of thanksgiving to God for a Christian monarch, but resembled the practice and worship of pagan cults. It was no coincidence that accusations of idolatry were heard from the continent. Cardinal William Allen, the prominent Catholic exile, attacked the day’s festivities in particular: “she hath caused her owne impure birthe day to be solemnlie celebrated, and put in to the kalender the verie eve of the said holie feaste and put out the name of an other sainte the 17. of November, to place the memory of her Coronation” (XXV).

In spite of the nation’s rejoicing after the Armada victory, the queen’s cult became overburdened with the strains of economic, social, and political problems in the last decade of her reign. The discrepancy between Elizabeth’s cult images as “semper eadem” and the reality of the aging queen were becoming apparent and was compensated by an excessive language using the stock-in-trade symbols of the queen’s iconography. While the early language of the cult had freshness about it, as for example in Spenser’s *April Eclogue* (1579), the later literary works have an air of stiffness, staleness and forced artificiality about them. The change is conspicuous and is connected to a general alteration in the climate of the last decade of Elizabeth’s reign.

## Slandering the Queen

John Guy claimed that from 1585, when the queen first dispensed with her non-interventionist policy, a growing tendency towards autocratic rule could be seen. He enumerated several reasons for distinguishing the last period of Elizabeth’s rule, which he named “the second reign of Elizabeth” (Guy, “The 1590s” 1-19). During these years England was engaged in wars in France, in the Netherlands, on the Atlantic, and in Ireland, which impoverished the crown, and burdened the country. Furthermore bad harvests, outbreaks of the plague, and growing rates of crime and unemployment

increased the discontent of the people. By the 1590s Elizabeth had lost direct control over her country's military decisions and the court was factionalized by a competition for patronage and position. The reaction to such threats was the tightening of government control. From 1589 onwards the doctrine of the queen's "divine right" was voiced, supplanting the earlier concept of "mixed polity" in government advocated for instance by Sir Thomas Smith in his work *De Republica Anglorum*, where "the most high and absolute power of the realm of England, is in the Parliament" (78).

Bishop Goodman's remark that "the people were weary of an old woman's government" (qtd. in Guy, "The 1590s" 17) echoes the fin de siècle atmosphere of a nation awaiting an unsettled succession and bored with the long rule of their monarch. The constant threat of military invasion and Catholic treason also contributed to the people's yearning for a king who could deal with matters personally. The feeling of impatience with female rule could be witnessed by the incident, for example, of John Feltwell, who was reported to have remarked in 1591 "the queene was but a woman and ruled by gentlemen ... so that poore men cold get nothinge ... We shall never have a merry world while the Queene lyveth" (qtd. in Levin, "We shall never" 77-78). The last decade of Elizabeth's rule saw the rise of rumours, gossip and writings that challenged her female authority and undermined her moral reputation as a woman.

From the time of the excommunication of the queen in 1570 by Pope Pius V, Catholic propaganda was keen to expose any deficiency of the English government, and to discredit the reputation of the virtue of the queen and her court. Continental pamphlets defaming the queen were disseminated within England. Although from the first moment of her reign Elizabeth faced charges that female authority was a disaster as women were inclined to weakness,<sup>3</sup> in the last decade of her queenship, rumour and gossip that slandered the queen's chastity in order to discredit her as a monarch was becoming more frequent. In a sixteenth-century context this was one of the most effective ways to undermine a woman's reputation.

Catholic propaganda was especially effective in producing arguments for the queen's moral depravity. In 1585 Nicholas Sander published *De origine ac progressu schismatici anglicani* at Cologne in which he primarily set out to discredit the morality of Queen Elizabeth by accusing her and her parents of licentious behaviour (Montrose 15). In 1588 Cardinal William Allen used similar charges to urge the English to rebellion and to prepare the ground for the Spanish invasion. Allen's pamphlet was addressed to the "most noble and valiant gentlemen of England" (lix) and expounded arguments against Queen Elizabeth's rule. One of the main points of the pamphlet was to challenge her female authority, and Allen's means to achieve his goal was to attack the Queen's chastity. Licentiousness in a woman was condemned as one of the most heinous acts that deprived her of all virtue, and thus by slandering Elizabeth's chastity, Cardinal Allen resorted to the easiest method to win over his audience. After enumerating ecclesiastical charges, such as not upholding ecclesiastical liberties granted at her coronation (ix-x), abolishing the Catholic religion and the sacraments (x), prosecuting

3 The best known example of sixteenth-century misogynistic discourse and criticism of female rule was the pamphlet of the Scottish reformer John Knox, *The First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Regiment of Women* (1558).

priests and bishops (xi), suppressing religious houses (xii), and confiscating the land of Catholics (xii), Allen moved on to deliver a lengthy attack upon the morals of the English queen:

VVith the foresaid person [the Earl of Leicester] and diuers others she hath abused her bodie, against Gods lawes, to the disgrace of princely maiestie & the whole nations reproche, by vnspeakable and incredible variety of luste, which modestly suffereth not to be remembred, neyther were it to chaste eares to be vttered how shamefully she hath defiled and infamed her person and cuntry, and made her Courte as a trappe, by this damnable and detestable arte, to intangle in sinne and ouerthrowe the yonger sorte of the nobilitye and gentlemen of the lande, whereby she is become notorious to the worlde, & in other cuntries a common fable for this her turpitude (xix).

Allen addressed the issue of female power, and joined the views of John Knox that the authority of a woman above men is unnatural and contrary to God's law. He condemned the sovereignty of Elizabeth as "she vsperpeth by Luciferian pride, the title of supreme Ecclesiasticall government, a thinge in a woman, in all mens memory vnheard of, nor tolerable to the masters of her owne secte, and to Catholikes in the world most ridiculous, absurde, monstrous, detestable, and a verie fable to the posterite" (Allen ix). The queen was further accused of idolatry for spoiling "all sanctified places of . . . holye images, relikes, memories, and monuments of Christe our Sauior, and of his blessed mother and saintes, her owne detestable cognisaunce and other prophane portratures and paintinges exalted in their places" (Allen xiii). Her dealings were termed Machiavellian (Allen xlix-lii), her diplomatic relations to the Turks a sign of an enemy of Christendom.<sup>4</sup>

Certain points of Allen's pamphlet met with the opinion of the Puritan faction of the Church of England. Robert Wright, for instance, was prosecuted for having spoken "against the keeping of the queen's day, which, he said, was to make her an idol" (qtd. in Montrose 76). Other arguments in the treatise simply resounded popular opinion and dislike for certain members of the court. The quick rise to power of Robert Dudley, whose father and grandfather were both executed for treason, was widely criticized throughout the kingdom. In 1584 a pamphlet was published which later became known as *Leicester's Commonwealth*. It openly discussed the alleged thefts, murders and abuses committed by the Queen's favourite and contained also his "intolerable licentiousness in all filthy kind and manner of carnality, with all sorts of wives, friends, and kinswomen" (*The Copie of a Leter, Vvryten by a Master of Arte of Cambrige, to His Friend in London N1*). The major

4 "As furthermore it is euident, how she hath by messingers and letters, dealt with the cruel and dreadfull *Great Turke* himselfe, ... for the inuasion of sum partes of Christendom, and interception of sum defensible portes and places of the same, as for the disturbance of Christianity and annoiance of the principall defenders of the Catholike religion, and hath at this day a ledger in his courte" (Allen xxiii). The English government maintained diplomatic relations with the Turkish Empire and the English envoy's personal participation in the 1596 military campaign against Christian Hungary supports the charges of Cardinal Allen. See Gábor Várkonyi, "Edward Barton konstantinápolyi angol követ jelentése az 1596. évi szultáni hadjáratról."

threat of such a pamphlet was the direct association of Elizabeth with immorality in spite of the fact that the text showed the queen as the victim of the machinations of the Earl of Leicester rather than an accomplice to them. Thus it is not surprising that rumours about the illegitimate children of Elizabeth were rife (Levin, *Heart and Stomach* 82-86). It seemed impossible to stem the tide of such illegal reports.

Furthermore, the queen also had to face trouble within her own court. Paul Hammer argues that the 1590s witnessed a high number of promiscuous incidents among the courtiers and ladies of the queen. In the single year of 1591 Elizabeth lost half of her maids-of-honour due to illicit pregnancies or secret marriages. Although scandals at court were present in the early years too, as the examples of the affairs of Robert Dudley and the Earl of Oxford demonstrate, in the 1590s there was “unprecedented sexual turmoil” at court (Hammer, “Sex and the Virgin Queen” 91). Every sexual slander about the court ultimately challenged Elizabeth’s authority as a female ruler. Elizabeth was consequently infuriated with all promiscuous behaviour that cast a shadow on her female court. She was reportedly harsh in her punishments for adulterous relationships or illicit liaisons. She even sent Sir Walter Raleigh and her maid-of-honour, Elizabeth Throckmorton to the Tower after their secret marriage came to light, and it was another five years before Raleigh was readmitted to court. The increase of the number of the incidents of moral impropriety in the 1590s was a sign that Elizabeth was losing authority over her court’s moral as well as political behaviour.

The strict measures of the authorities to cope with the unrest reinforced the arguments of Catholic criticism of the Elizabethan regime. The increasing cruelty with which the missionary priests who flooded England from the early 1580s were tortured and executed could not remain hidden from the masses. As Louis Montrose has demonstrated, religious prosecution in the final decade intensified, torture became a common practice to elicit information, and the number of political executions nearly reached the rate of the period of “Bloody” Mary (190). John Bossy pointed out that these occasions were like the ritual manifestations of the secular cult of the monarch, which he termed monarcholatry: “This and later examples of the execution of justice in England, attended as they were by a ritual cuisine requiring dissection of the victim, boiling of entrails and placing of heads in public situations, might well be considered sacrificial rites in the temple of monarchy” (159). The public executions of priests offered a counter-discourse to the popular Protestant martyrology of John Foxe. The scenes of moving testimonies of faith by suffering Catholics questioned the absolute truth represented by the official executioners (Monta 1-7). Accounts of miracles happening at the executions—as, for instance, with the heart of Robert Southwell which leapt up in the hand of the executioner who cut it from his body—strengthened the belief in the innocence of the victims and underscored the dubious righteousness of the proceedings of the authorities.

With regard to the public image of the queen, a further problem was posed by the breakdown of the system of Elizabeth’s cult formation in the final decade of her reign. Elizabeth never had a poet laureate or court painter; her praise was rather financed by her courtiers, who sacrificed money and time to woo their sovereign with eulogistic works. In the last decade this effort slackened, yet the financial support of panegyrists was not taken over by the frugal queen. Edmund Spenser was dismissed with a small

pension for his *The Faerie Queene* and sent back to Ireland, and John Lyly never achieved the post at court he yearned for in spite of his laudatory court plays. For the younger generation to whom the language of the queen's cult was handed down, the theme of the praise of the queen and its tropes were stale, and in their writings they often disrespectfully chose to explore the negative imagery inherent in them.

By the last decade of Queen Elizabeth's rule a set of fixed attributes and tropes was used in her official eulogy. Most of the poetical devices had their origin in a courtly literary genre, either drama or poetry, before they became stock-in-trade figures in popular celebrations where they were uncritically set next to each other without elaboration or refinement. This resulted in a highly complex and tiresome symbolism, as in Davies's *Hymns of Astraea*. Another reaction to this cultic language was the appearance of literary works which explored the wider and even the negative associations of the metaphors of the cult, casting a shadow on the panegyric of the queen.

### **Artistic Equivocation: The Case of John Lyly and William Shakespeare**

One of the most common figures of praise for Queen Elizabeth in the second part of her reign was her association with the goddess Diana whose attribute was the Moon. While the metaphor was applied widely to eulogize the Queen, there were instances where lunar symbolism expressed anxieties about female power. Two examples of the application of the Diana/Moon symbol where a semantic ambiguity is detectable are *The Woman in the Moon* by John Lyly, who produced plays from the 1580s to entertain the Queen, and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* by the young William Shakespeare.

The Roman goddess Diana, identified with the Greek Artemis from around the fifth century BC onwards, was the chaste goddess of forests and hills. In Greek mythology she was the twin sister of Apollo, often called Phoebe, the moon, based on the solar epithet Phoebus, the sun, and on late antique representations she was always depicted wearing a crescent moon in her hair. In the early sixteenth century the figure of Diana was revived as a means to praise the consort of the monarch in France (Berry 38-60). Throughout the century the king was eulogized as Phoebus, the sun, while the women surrounding the monarch (his wives or mistresses) were addressed as Phoebe or Diana. From the late 1560s onwards the court of Queen Elizabeth developed a unique language of Christian and mythological figures to praise its sovereign, including references to classical deities such as Juno or Minerva. It was not until the late 1570s, when Elizabeth was well in her forties, that the Diana-epithet emerged as one of the most prominent elements of her cult. While the French royal Diana discourse contained no allusions to chastity, the English queen's cult foregrounded this aspect of Diana so that the Queen's unmarried state was mythicized and the image of the Virgin Queen created. In the last decade of Elizabeth's reign the darker aspects of this chaste moon symbol were explored.

In John Lyly's last play *The Woman in the Moon* (1597) criticism of the questionable virtue of the female sex is so outspoken that one wonders at the statement on the title page of its edition which claims that it was performed in front of the queen. Although most critics, including G. K. Hunter, point out that "the extension of this idea that the satire on woman is pointed at Queen Elizabeth should be too absurd" (219), it must

be asserted that the imagery of the play shows a distorted reflection of the cult of Elizabeth. In *The Woman in the Moon* the devices of the queen's panegyric are utilized to express an unfavourable opinion about women in general.

The play fits into a general framework of Lyly's interest in representations of worldly power. His first work, *Euphues: The Anatomy of Wit*, showed court life as an amoral life form, but in its sequel the author created space for an exemption, the English court. Lyly's early plays expounded on images of the exquisite qualities of the mistress of this court, Elizabeth. Yet his final play reversed its discourse and ended on an embittered note on mankind's lack of power to determine the course of its life and on the necessity of subduing its will to the influence of the celestial bodies. *The Woman in the Moon* provides the darkest image of the female sex. The main character, Pandora—her name meaning "the gifted"—is elevated to a unique position in the drama: she is the only woman on Earth, and she is adored by all men. This unrivalled privilege is coupled with the most pitiful state: she is the most powerless person on Earth, constantly subjected to and acting according to the various influences of the seven planets, among whose influence that of the moon is the most pernicious. The planet Luna exerts its power in order to make Pandora "lunatic, foolish and frantic" (V.i.66-67). Luna is dominant within the play, yet she is deprived of the majestic authority with which the Moon is associated in Elizabeth's cult. The gifts of the other planets are also damaging: Pandora receives a melancholy mood from Saturn, thirst for power from Jupiter, unmaidenly militancy from Mars, lust from Venus, and falseness from Mercury. It is remarkable that only Sol, the sun, associated with kingship—that is male authority—endows Pandora with true virtues. The play is openly misogynistic. In the fifth act, as Pandora is placed in the sphere of the moon, she and Cynthia become one and occupy a ruling position from which a harmful influence emanates upon Earth. The play could not in any way be understood as complimentary to Elizabeth since the negative aspects of lunar power and their association with female authority were explored to their fullest.

William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*—published in 1600—also uses the Queen's Diana discourse and combines it with another image, that of the Fairy Queen. With Spenser's 1590 edition of *The Faerie Queene* the image of the Queen of Fairies became another metaphor to celebrate the glory of the English monarch. Spenser's Fairy Queen Gloriana was identified with Elizabeth in "A Letter of the Authors" which prefaces the work, and Gloriana's virtues set the note for the frame story of the poem in which knights embark on quests. Gloriana does not physically participate in the plot, yet reference is made to her several times, and she appears in a dream. In Shakespeare's *Dream* the Fairy Queen Titania is a far more earthly figure; instead of glory, her name implies defeat. As a counterpoint to Gloriana she is rife with physical sensuality and engages in an erotic rather than spiritual relationship with a man. Furthermore, Titania's power is broken, and she is humiliated in the play; her female will is subdued by the authority of the Fairy King, Oberon.

In spite of the sharp contrast of Spenser's and Shakespeare's Fairy Queen figures, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* also contains allusions to the official cult of the Queen. As it was written for an aristocratic marriage blessed by the Queen—and most possibly performed in the presence of the Queen—hints at her cult rhetoric are appropriate. As the play is a "dream," most of the action takes place at night under the beams of



the Moon, and the Queen's royal patronage of the newlyweds can be compared to the glimmering moonshine within the play bathed in which the three couples are united. A more direct reference is made to the Queen by Oberon in the second act where an "imperial votaress" of the West and a "fair vestal" is described as the desirable target of the fiery shaft of Cupid. Yet this vestal is protected from earthly affections by the chaste beams of the Moon:

Cupid all arm'd: a certain aim he took  
 At a fair vestal, throned by the west,  
 And loos'd his love-shaft smartly from his bow,  
 As it should pierce a hundred thousand hearts.  
 But I might see young Cupid's fiery shaft  
 Quench'd in the chaste beams of the watery moon;  
 And the imperial votaress passed on,  
 In maiden meditation fancy-free. (2.1.157-64)

The passage is preceded by the description of the occasion when Cupid unsuccessfully aimed his shaft at this "imperial votaress" recalling a famous royal progress to Kenilworth in 1575.

Since once I set upon a promontory,  
 And heard a mermaid on a dolphin's back  
 Uttering such dulcet and harmonious breath  
 That the rude sea grew civil at her song  
 And certain stars shot madly from their spheres  
 To hear the sea-maid's music. (2.1.149-54)

The details of a "lake" upon which there is a "mermaid on a dolphin's back" singing and above them in the night sky "shooting stars," i.e., fireworks, point to the entertainments at the estate of Robert Dudley, the Earl of Leicester (Brooks lxviii). As Kenilworth lies only fourteen miles from Stratford, it is possible that the adventurous, eleven-year-old Shakespeare decided to ride over to see the pageant and show staged at the feast. Shakespeare's image of the English queen is static as he embellishes it with the common adjectives of the panegyric cult and fixes the image of the virgin queen in an unchallengeable position, thereby leaving the playwright free to elaborate his story at other levels of the plot.

Thus, while the general propriety and reverent tribute to the queen's majesty were respected within the play, the boldness in the handling of topics on female authority, virginity and shame reflects the language of a younger and more libertine generation that challenged the conventions of the Petrarchan rhetoric. Hannah Betts argues that in the 1590s a current of sexual imagery emerged within English poetry that reversed the Petrarchan blazon in order to express highly critical views about the late Elizabethan government (153-84). It made use of the blazon to produce sexually evocative images to attack the concept of female virginity and articulate misogynistic opinions. Betts fits Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis* (1593) in the context of these works that appealed

to the audience of the Inns of Court, including Shakespeare's patron, the Earl of Southampton. While Venus is addressed five times as "queen" within the poem, she also appears as the powerful sexual aggressor (164-65). Titania's dotting on Bottom in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* echoes a similar female sexual obsession, yet the change of the object of love from the young and beautiful Adonis to the ass-headed artisan introduces a satirical note.

Furthermore, the play reiterates a misogynistic view by emphasizing the subjection of the female will to male authority at all levels of the plot. The play starts with Theseus, the Duke of Athens preparing for his wedding with Hippolyta, the Amazon queen, whom he had defeated in war, and "won ... [her] love by doing ... [her] injuries" (1.1.17). Female will is left out of consideration within the same scene when Egeus, the Athenian citizen, obtains the support of the duke to marry his daughter Hermia to a man she does not love. A further example of male domination is provided by the fairy sub-plot, where the fairy king sets out to punish his queen for not handing over a boy for his train.

The audience witnesses the correction of the female characters by their exposure to shame. Hippolyta, the queen of the warlike women, has to suffer defeat to be wed and furthermore she is threatened by Theseus's aside, linking her situation to that of Hermia:

For you, fair Hermia, look you arm yourself  
 To fit your fancies to your father's will,  
 Or else the law of Athens yields you up, -  
 To death, or to a vow of single life. -  
 Come, my Hippolyta: what cheer, my love? (1.1.121-24)

Hermia is shamed as she undergoes a phase of neglect and hate when her suitors transfer their affection to another Athenian girl, Helena. But Helena's feminine modesty also becomes a laughing stock when she chases after a man who despises her. When wooed by two men, she displays no confidence in herself. Yet the fairy queen Titania suffers the most severe humiliation. Instead of working wonders, she falls prey to the magic of the fairy king whose machinations undermine her virtues and moral integrity.

The approach to virginity offers a further example of the counter-discourse to the queen's cult. Hermia is urged into marriage by arguments that condemn virginity and at the same time echo phrases of Elizabeth's panegyric. The moon, the symbol of the English queen, is called cold and fruitless, and the service of the altar of Diana leads to lonely austerity:

For aye to be in shady cloister mew'd,  
 To live a barren sister all your life,  
 Chanting faint hymns to the cold fruitless moon.  
 Thrice-blessed they that master so their blood,  
 To undergo such maiden pilgrimage;  
 But earthlier happy is the rose distill'd,  
 Than that which withering on the virgin thorn  
 Grows, lives and dies in single blessedness

....

Take time to pause; and, by the next new moon

...

Upon that day either prepare to die  
 For disobedience to your father's will,  
 Or else to wed Demetrius, as he would;  
 Or on Diana's altar to protest  
 For aye austerity and single life. (1.1.71-80, 85, 88-92)

Despite the reconciliation of the characters, the play ends with the confirmation of male supremacy. It is through the power of Oberon that the action of the play is manipulated and the fate of Titania and the lovers is determined. Thus political authority is gendered and becomes a male principle. While *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is not a play that directly attacked or criticized the queen, yet the disrespect with which it treated the Fairy Queen trope and the equivocation about the virtue of virginity mirror the instability of the queen's position during this final period of her reign.

An example of this insecurity is the 1601 rebellion of the Earl of Essex, who aimed to overthrow Elizabeth's long female rule. Shakespeare's patron the Earl of Southampton was also implicated in the uprising, and he spent three years in the Tower afterwards. On the eve of the Essex rebellion it was Shakespeare's *Richard II* which was commissioned to be staged at the Globe in order to create a favourable atmosphere among Londoners for the happenings of the following day. *Richard II* depicts the deposition of an anointed king who was not able to govern his country, and thus the play drew a parallel between the historical example and the aims of Essex to dethrone the elderly queen and supplant her with a male authority figure. In the investigations following the uprising, the Globe performance and its actors were also placed under scrutiny, though no measures were implemented against the actors (Hammer, "Shakespeare's *Richard II*" 19-20).

## Conclusion

As the sixteenth century was drawing to its end negative representations of the aging queen appeared in growing numbers. The greatest threat to the queen's female rule was posed by accusations that attacked her femininity and her chastity. The slanders about her licentious deeds were expounded fully in the pamphlets of Catholic propaganda that found their way to the households of the English. In these writings the cult of the queen was regarded as the queen's "excessive praises that her fauorers and flatteres now giue vnto her" (Allen xxv), and its chief day of celebration, the Accession Day, as the manifestation of idolatry.

The language of literary works mirrored the uncertainties about the queen's cult and her position. The connotations of figures of the queen's cult discourse, as for instance the Diana/Moon and the Fairy Queen, were challenged when poets explored the negative associations of the symbols. Thus the vocabulary of the queen's cult became a means to criticize the reign of Elizabeth and to express, after a fifty-year-rule by queens, the growing desire of the English nation for a king.

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