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Representations of Elizabeth I

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## Abstract

In this dissertation I have sought to examine some contemporary representations of Elizabeth I. Beginning with an outline of how the queen struggled to construct her feminine power within and beyond dominant patriarchal discourse, I go on to explore closely three modern filmic treatments of the queen: The Virgin Queen (1955), Mary, Queen of Scots (1971) and Elizabeth (1998). These films are discussed in terms of their engagement with Elizabeth's iconography and mythic biography, and in terms of the anxieties reproduced as a consequence of their grounding in particular historical eras.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

*“I know I have the body but of a weak and feeble woman; but I have the heart and stomach of a king” (Elizabeth’s Tilbury Speech quoted in Pomeroy, 19)*

Elizabeth I’s forty-four year reign was certainly a “radical event” as Philippa Berry terms it (Of Chastity and Power: 61). Indeed, the existence of a great number of fictionalised historical accounts over the years as well as many successful films about Elizabeth this century might well be read as testimony to her disruptiveness. In “Queen Elizabeth in Her Speeches”, Francis Teague mentions ten films – ranging from the 1912 Queen Elizabeth starring Sarah Bernhardt to Mary, Queen of Scots with Glenda Jackson as Elizabeth in 1971 (in Cerasano & Wynne-Davies: 64). To these may be added, amongst others, the more recent Shakespeare in Love (1998) which has a cameo appearance by Judy Dench as the queen and Elizabeth (1998) starring Cate Blanchett. That Elizabeth I continues to be constructed and reconstructed suggests that perhaps, in Susan Frye’s terms, her authority still represents a challenge to patriarchal definitions of the feminine (Elizabeth I: The Competition for Representation : viii-ix).

Frye identifies three key representational crises during the reign, namely, the queen’s coronation entry in 1559, the Kenilworth entertainments in 1575 and the publication of Spenser’s The Faerie Queene in 1590. These are helpful beacons in negotiating the wealth of art, literature, oratory, courtly entertainments and the like constituting Elizabeth’s myth and I borrow much from Frye’s analyses of these moments in the discussion that follows.

The coronation entry into London in 1559 was the new queen's first opportunity to assert her political self-sufficiency in spite of her femininity and in opposition to her countrymen who also seized the chance to assert for themselves the culturally dominant view of the passive and weak female, inevitably subject to masculine guidance and control. Just prior to her coronation, the Scottish Calvinist John Knox had published a vituperative condemnation of female rule aimed at both her sister Queen Mary and her cousin Mary Queen of Scots. In The first blast of the trumpet against the monstrous regiment of women, John Knox wrote

To promote a woman to bear rule, superiority, dominion or empire above any realm, nation, or city is repugnant to nature, contumely to God, a thing most contrarious to his revealed will and approved ordinance, and finally it is the subversion of good order, and all equity and justice. (quoted in Aughterson, K.: 138)

Given such a formidable climate of misogyny, Elizabeth had to carve out a political identity on the basis of which to exercise her authority. In their compelling article "Icons of Divinity: Portraits of Elizabeth I", Andrew Belsey and Catherine Belsey point to the fact that Henry VIII's authority was confirmed by his often asserted virility, but that then as now "an emphasis on the physical character of the female body connotes something quite different: not authority but availability, not sovereignty but subjection". Thus, Elizabeth's ability to dominate, as they point out, depended crucially on "sexuality subdued, on the self-containment and self-control of the Virgin-Queen" (in Gent & Llewellyn:12). The coronation entry well illustrates these claims.

J.E. Neale, in his influential biography Queen Elizabeth I (1933) describes the coronation procession through London on Saturday 14 January 1559 in terms borrowed

(rather uncritically) from a contemporary description The Quenes maiesties passage through the citie of London to westminster the day before her coronacion (1559)<sup>1</sup>. The city authorities, a wealthy elite group known as the Court of Aldermen had at intervals in the journey through London, sponsored the preparation of pageants which, Neale claims, “expressed London’s religious inclinations and faith in the new Queen” (Neale: 65), a reading which Frye claims misses the anxieties the new sovereign’s gender had prompted. The first of these allegorical shows took place at Gracechurch and consisted in a “stage of three tiers, displaying Unity and Concord” (Neale: 65). It was a representation of Elizabeth’s royal genealogy with Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn together at one tier – a “happy sight after twenty-two years” Neale rhapsodises (65). The fraught marital history of Henry VIII obviously gives the lie to any such idealisation of unity aimed at containing dissent. Elizabeth was unproblematically presented as Henry’s sole and legitimate heir and the last stormy years conveniently elided. This was certainly in the interests of the London merchants who were all too aware of the problems of “gender, foreign influence, and civil unrest” which had characterised the reign of Mary and wished now to foster a climate of stability under which they might prosper (Frye: 26). It also served Elizabeth’s interests to acquiesce to some of the more unpleasant representations of herself (such as the fourth pageant, which will be discussed), if only because she gained authority by this assumption of her – often contested – legitimacy (Frye: 36).

The second device, which took place in Cornhill consisted of a child representing Elizabeth who “sat on the seat of worthy governance, the seat being supported by four

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<sup>1</sup> I am dependent on secondary sources for my extracts since a copy of the 1559 text has proved prohibitively expensive to acquire.

persons representing virtues treading their contrary vices under foot” (Neale: 66). Thus, the virtue of true religion trod upon superstition and ignorance and so on. Frye points out that personal evils such as Follie and Vaine Glorie were included among the political vices - making this a distinctly gendered display (14). The instructive, moralising tone of the device was driven home, at least in the text, which comments tellingly: “the Queene’s majestie was established in the seat of governement: so she should syt fast in the same so long as she embraced vertue” (Frye: 13-14). Frye’s contention that this allegory was directed at stabilising the queen in a passive female position seems convincing : she would receive “their support in exchange for her feminine ‘virtue’” – ultimately she was on display and her subjects would judge her legitimacy to rule (15).

One of the most pointed displays took place at Cheapside – the economic centre where the aldermen awaited Elizabeth. Here she was apparently handed a purse with 1000 marks in gold by the City Recorder – the official liaison between city and Crown who was responsible for, amongst other things, raising troops and loans for the Queen and looking after the interests of the city and her merchants. Frye sees this moment as an elaborate “staging of the city’s socio-economic power” (41). She even suggests that it was at once a financial and a somewhat insulting sexual allegory directed at the queen who would always have to approach them submissively for money. Elizabeth’s response however was an embryonic effort at self-representation:

“I thank my Lord Mayor, his brethren, and you all”, said Elizabeth in acknowledgement. “And whereas your request is that I should continue your good Lady and Queen, be ye assured that I will be as good unto you as ever queen was to her people. No will in me can lack, neither do I trust that there lack any power. And persuade yourselves that for the safety and quietness of you all, I will not spare, if need be, to spend my blood. God thank you all” (Neale: 66)



I would agree with Frye that her speech seems to be a rather subtle restatement of the exchange – she managed to assert her sovereignty whilst still couching it in the terms of daughterly or wifely obedience (42). One can perhaps even read a martial challenge to the notion of her passivity in the language of self-sacrifice employed.

The fourth pageant collapsed gender, economics and religion in its representation of two hills, one fruitful, the flourishing commonwealth, the other barren, a decayed commonwealth. From a cave between them emerged Time with his daughter Truth who presented Elizabeth with an English Bible. An accompanying explanatory verse was delivered which suggests that the queen's political and physical bodies were being conflated and contrasted with her sister Mary's:

Now si[n]ce that Time agai[n] his daughter truth hath brought,  
 We trust O worthy quene, thou wilt this truth embrace.  
 We trust welth thou wilt plant, and barrenness displace. (Frye: 44-46)

Frye notes that the whole scene constitutes a grossly enlarged female anatomy. The hope that Elizabeth would produce an heir was implicit here. Allegorically however, she was to give birth to truth (Protestantism) and nourish it – hence Elizabeth's canny acceptance of the proffered Bible by kissing it, holding it up with both hands and laying it on her breast. That is, she was “allegorised as wife to the city's wishes and mother to its truth” (Frye, 45) and showed herself a willing party to the furtherance of city interests (Protestantism here served as a marker of civic and national identity) (48). Through the emphasis on her female body, the queen was being constructed in terms of various allegorical domestic roles with the city as metaphorical husband or father. To paraphrase

Frye, this appropriation of her body was potentially disempowering because it limited and contained her voice, making her subject to merely receiving their bounty with gratitude and taking advice from the city (26).

The queen's only other opportunity for self-representation during this procession was the prayer she delivered in front of the Tower of London, outside the city gates. This would have been her first address to a public that "collectively equated female silence with female virtue" (Frye: 37). Elizabeth employed the womanly prayer to great effect by, as Frye explains, rewriting her most vulnerable moment (imprisonment in the Tower) and drawing a parallel between herself and a powerful male figure – the Biblical Daniel:

I acknowledge that thou hast dealt as wonderfully and as mercifully with me, as thou didst with thy true and faithful servant Daniel thy prophete whom thou deliveredst out of the denne from the cruelty of the gredy and raging Lyons: even so was I overwhelmed, and only by thee delivered. (37)

Although she calculatedly submitted to the allegories which largely benefited their sponsors, Elizabeth here managed a pre-emptive strike. Not only is it an early instance of feminine sexuality subdued via an identification with a strong and divine male, it is also the kernel of a representational tactic which would ultimately be highly developed – the claim that God had deliberately favoured her. The implication of this would be that he alone was and would be the judge of her virtue (Frye:16). Frye contrasts the accession of James I with this one and concludes that where the former's entry into London deployed a language of mastery – that of a groom entering his bride – and where he felt confident enough to display boredom, Elizabeth was patronised with instructive pageants requiring her submission. It was Elizabeth's female body that was on display, and she needed to submit as a matter of economic and political necessity (Frye: 30-33).

Following the coronation entry, however, the queen moved quickly to strengthen her representational position. Choosing to own her body by preserving her virginity, and therewith her political autonomy and marriage prospects, Elizabeth had, within three weeks of her coronation forged the central Virgin Queen image (Frye:15). In an often quoted parliamentary address she concluded “in the end this shalbe for me sufficient that a marble stone shall declare that a Quene having reigned such a time lyved and dyed a virgin” (Frye: 39). As Constance Jordan shows in “Representing Political Androgyny”, Elizabeth inherited an oxymoronic political identity from her sister Mary. She explains that, on Mary’s marriage to Philip II of Spain, it had been necessary to protect England from Spanish control whilst still preserving Mary’s status as subordinate to her husband. This was achieved by adapting the existing doctrine of a monarch’s two bodies – which splits the physical and political aspects. In Mary’s case her political body was gendered male in law and an act of parliament entrenched this political masculinity (Jordan: 157-159). Thus, not only did Elizabeth politicise her virginity as self-sufficiency, she was also able to seize the legal conception of the sovereign’s two bodies and over time managed to blur the two representationally with such skill that many of our images of her are distinctly androgynous. One of the ways in which she achieved this was in her use of language and in the almost masculine manner in which she openly showed her particular favour to quite a number of courtiers. Jordan’s summation is useful – “she also realized that a male sexuality was an important (and even an essential) feature of a monarch’s power and that somehow she had to convey that in this sense too she was figuratively male”. That is, her “virginity had somehow to include the fiction of a male sexuality and the power it represented” (161). Although her chastity as a woman had to be without

reproach, “her bearing, her actions, her language... was at crucial times suggestive of the sexual license regularly accorded to men” (162). This would have served to bolster her power base in that (male) sexual and political potency had always been conflated, as James’s coronation entry suggested. Several scholars point out that she frequently referred to herself politically as prince or as king or even as king and queen, rather than king and woman. She moved between gender roles of course – for instance, the image of her as mother or wife to her people could prove useful on occasion and she always used to her advantage whatever aspects of her sex she could. But, says Leah Marcus, ultimately she constructed a vocabulary of rule which was predominantly male-identified, even correcting with “prince” those subjects who addressed her as “princess” (Puzzling Shakespeare: 57). This sexual ambiguity became more pronounced as she grew older and weaker and as it became clear she would never bear an heir – a factor which made her vulnerable.

Although the queen was astute (if not unequivocally successful) at shaping her image via her language, and at regulating her portraiture, her image continued to be hotly contested and her chastity in particular became a “discursive battleground” – indeed it remains so (Frye: 16)<sup>2</sup>. Thus, in the courtly literature, spectacles and portraiture it is often possible to chart not only flattering tributes to the queen’s chosen iconography, but also

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<sup>2</sup> In The Life of Elizabeth I (1998: 49), Alison Weir refers to rumours that the queen was incapable of intercourse, citing a recent (male) writer who has attempted to show that the queen may have been a victim of Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome according to which she would have male Chromosomes but develop outwardly as a female with deformed womb, no ovaries and shallow vagina. One might argue that the possibility of such a hypothesis testifies to the successful subversion of ‘natural’ gender identity. It certainly reveals much about its author.

even in the same work, a degree of opposition to it and a bid for authority on the part of the author.

The Kenilworth entertainments of 1575 are of some significance to a discussion concerning the queen's self-representation as it was the first time her unmarried state was idealised. Elizabeth was in her forties by this time and so unlikely to marry and produce an heir – consequently she was more practically beyond the structures of potential male control, although much of the imagery of fertility and desirability continued to exist simultaneously with that of her autonomous and divine chastity. The entertainments took place at the country estate of Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, in honour of Elizabeth. Biographers, novelists and film-makers have generally preferred to cast Dudley as Elizabeth's great love and somewhat whitewashed the fact that he led one of the two major political factions on her Privy Council. His power and status (as with many of her courtiers), was enormously dependent on their close relationship and on her continued support. It therefore stands to reason that he should seek preferment via the trope of an idealised desire for her, and politically, that he should have aspired to marriage with the queen. The Kenilworth entertainments were – as with most such courtly events – a flattering celebration of the queen's favours – “they relate Elizabeth's supposed restoration of a golden age to her gifts of property” (Berry: 75). But, they were also bids for the queen's political support. In this instance, “the competition for control of these entertainments embodied the debate in the Privy Council between moderates and militant Protestants on the advisability of an incursion in the Netherlands and the resulting break with Spain” (Frye :19). Dudley represented the militant Protestant faction urging an invasion. Elizabeth seems never really to have supported aggressive military action,

quite possibly, it has been argued, because of the threatening power that could accrue to the male commander of a successful foreign expedition (Berry: 77). Philippa Berry shows that the earl's courtship of Elizabeth was central to all the entertainments he presented for her and also notes that her chastity was represented in implicitly sexual terms. This was an opportunity for the earl to display himself through his representations of the queen – hence the paradox whereby she is praised for her chastity but still treated as an object of masculine erotic desire (87). Dudley's "militarist ambition and princely pretension" at Kenilworth was ultimately curbed by the queen who needed to respond to his challenging of her authority. A brief description of the events may be useful.

The queen arrived at Kenilworth on 9 July 1575, where she was welcomed in a series of three demonstrations. First, the figure of a "Cumaean Sybil" welcomed her in verse in which the queen was paralleled with Christ as the bringer of peace. This flattering, assertive, non-martial, male image pandered to the queen's preferred iconography, but was undercut when the prophetess declaimed:

If perfect peace then glad your minde, he joyes above the rest  
Which doth receive into his house so good and sweet a guest (Frye: 66).

Frye points wryly to the dizzying speed with which the queen falls here from divinity to compliant house guest! The effect was compounded by the second figure she encountered in this insultingly prolonged entrance: a giant either slow or reluctant to give her the keys to the gate. Dudley's assurance here was hugely presumptuous given that he only held Kenilworth for the Crown. Indeed, the final figure – a Lady of the Lake, concludes her part of the welcome with the annoying command to

Passe on, Madam, you need no longer stand;  
The Lake, the Lodge, the Lord, are yours for to command.

To which the queen replied with some heat "...and do you call it yoorz now?" (Frye: 69). Elizabeth was then variously entertained over ten days with bearbaiting, fireworks, even a bridal dael – the "mock-marriage of an aging, 'ill-smelling' bride that forms an unflattering paraphrase of Elizabeth as an unmarried middle-aged woman" (Frye: 62). After these, however, Elizabeth appears to have begun censoring Dudley. She cancelled two devices – one a masque in support of marriage and the other a battle between a captain (allegorically representing Dudley) and the rapist Sir Bruse sans Pitie. In their place were substituted an allegory in which Elizabeth herself rescues the captured Lady of the Lake, and in which her chastity is the crucial deciding factor. Elizabeth then took the – for her – very unusual and provocative step of knighting five of the supporters of her policy of non-military intervention and laid her hands on a number of locals afflicted with scrofula (the sovereign's touch was thought to cure it).

It is worthwhile citing quite fully Frye's analysis of the allegory Elizabeth substituted so deliberately as it explains the significance of this moment to the queen's self-representation:

The Deliverance of the Lady of the Lake, as it was apparently performed, asserts the central argument of the royal mythology, that Elizabeth's virginal authority, as the expression of God and nature, is complete unto itself, a signifier in command of its signifieds. This iconic argument, although fully developed only after the defeat of the Armada, came into being at Kenilworth through the rescue from male threat of a virtuous virgin who was in many ways a figure of Elizabeth's younger, imprisoned self. This staging of Elizabeth as Triumphant virtue had the double advantage of developing and extending the centrality of the monarch while reducing Dudley's role to that of an observer of her power, the role that his original skirmish had assigned to her. (Frye 86-7).

Her insistence on staging her power at Kenilworth was rendered somewhat less effective by the fact that the censored entertainments were described in texts widely disseminated after Kenilworth. Berry claims that at Kenilworth the Petrarchan mode of Elizabethan courtiership had not yet fully evolved but it was becoming clear that the courtly compliment masked a contest for both political and sexual authority (84-101).

Naturally, as she aged it became obvious that this most marriageable of queens had managed endlessly to defer and finally to evade subjection to a husband. The exasperation of realising that one's prestige was entirely contingent on the whim of the queen – a woman – helps to explain the increasingly violent undercurrent in many of the poems, letters and entertainments of the third decade of the queen's reign. Frye's analysis emphasises the extent to which Elizabeth related the autonomy of her body to the authority of her political self (98) – this then became the locus of dissent.

In summary, Frye's argument is that the queen constructed her authority through "economic cooperation, verbal self-presentation, spectacles of magical chastity, and claims of divine approval" in opposition to prevailing expectations of marriage, reproduction or deferral to militant advisers such as Dudley (97-8). Her authority was allegorised as chastity and as she aged and became more vulnerable she also developed an aura of inaccessible power by isolating herself. In her iconography she presented herself as ageless and by implication still politically viable. In response to this threatening survival of remote female autonomy, there seem to have been a number of authors who mounted allegorical attacks on the queen's chastity/authority.

Frye cites Spenser's The Faerie Queene, book three, as an example of a text in which the poet appropriates, redefines, and even assaults the queen's figure of chastity.



Amoret's captivity and torture at the hands of the magician Busirane, she argues compellingly, is a poetic attempt to define the queen's self-sufficient chastity within male control (118). The queen's redefinition of her virginity as remote, unassailable autonomy was in competition with Spenser's more conventional portrayal of it as something "vulnerable, male-assaulted and male-protected" (119). Even the martial maid Britomart whose militant chastity is one image offered as a mirror to Elizabeth is ultimately destined for marriage to Artegal. From the first - although she lusted after no one - "Yet [she] wist her life at last must lincke in that same knot" - marriage (Spenser: 407). The notion of chastity as a lack to be filled by the masculine is asserted by Spenser over that of virginity as a choice. Similarly, Leah Marcus sees in Shakespeare's *Joan La Pucelle*, *Henry VI*, a distorted image of Queen Elizabeth I, in which cultural anxieties about the Virgin Queen are covertly opened up. Louis Montrose equally finds the imaginative fulfilment of a culture's wish in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, with its restoration of patriarchal norms after Amazonian disorder, while Philippa Berry considers Sidney's "Lady of May" and the dramas of John Lyly as texts where the Elizabethan male's status is recognised to be ambiguous and his power attenuated and where feminine self-sufficiency must - reluctantly - be considered.

The various texts through which Elizabeth I constructed her image and was in turn constructed, intersect revealingly with her portraits, which span the entire length of the reign. They provide plentiful visual signifiers of the metaphors she and her courtiers used in fashioning her political image. Indeed, Cerasano and Wynne-Davies suggest that several key epithets invoke specific pictures - the 'Virgin Queen' brings to mind the famous Sieve portraits for example ("From Myself, My Other Self I Turned": An

Introduction” in Gloriana’s Face: 15). The pictures, they point out, encoded the queen’s political identity, rather than mimetically fixing her individuality. All of the paintings, it has been argued, were intended to serve an iconic function: they proclaimed the queen’s majesty and authority in order to enlist her subjects’ devotion and submission (A. Belsey & C. Belsey: 35). Popular biographies of the queen make a great deal of her enormous wardrobe and allegedly surpassing vanity (see for example Christopher Hibbert’s The Virgin Queen: 102). This is perhaps unfair to the queen. It is certainly evidence of a problem she had always to negotiate in her own lifetime – the difficulty of displaying her majesty with full pomp in public while still catering to the traditional containment of women in the private sphere (Cerasano & Wynne-Davies : 2). The portraits from her later life are obviously the most idealised and this has suggested a paranoid overconcern with ageing. Cerasano and Wynne-Davies explain that from the 1580s all likenesses had to meet with the Master Serjeant Painter’s approval. The government issued official likenesses for public use and suppressed less flattering images. Thus, the famous ‘Mask of Youth’ by the painter Nicholas Hilliard was widely used as a template displaying her vigour and beauty (12).

There was much to be gained from constructing and sustaining the fiction of the queen’s youth. For one thing, without an heir people would become restive around an ageing sovereign and begin looking beyond her – with possible dangerous consequences. In the words of Cerasano and Wynne-Davies, biographers often side-step the political necessity for the queen to maintain a stable and vigorous image – “it could not be acknowledged that a monarch, particularly one without an heir, was subject to the usual tides of mortality, if she or he wished to sustain their full authority” (13). It might be

added that society had little space for menopausal or older women – the crone, after all, was a negative cultural stereotype to which Elizabeth occasionally fell prey as the bridal dæd at Kenilworth illustrates. Furthermore, the illusion of her sustained youth and beauty allowed the English to wield a powerful bargaining tool – the queen’s marriageability – far longer than they should have. The Sieve portraits of her late forties with their symbolic emphasis on her impenetrable chastity apparently assisted in the marriage negotiations with the Duke of Anjou because they contributed to this fiction of the queen’s continued “generative power” (Cerasano & Wynne-Davies: 14).

Not only did the portraits constantly hold the queen up for her subjects’ adulation, they would also, according to Elizabeth Pomeroy, have belonged to the Tudor tradition of dynastic portraiture according to which “portraits are prized not as the work of artists but as affirmations of the family line” (Reading the Portraits of Queen Elizabeth I: 4). Scholars have noted some correspondences between paintings of the queen and portraits of her father. Catherine Belsey and Andrew Belsey for instance, compare the famous portrait of Henry VIII by Hans Holbein with Elizabeth’s Armada portrait in ways which are most illuminating. Her shoulders they argue, echo the exaggerated musculature emphasised in Henry’s picture. Elizabeth is said to have enjoyed standing before this picture of her father as a means of silently underscoring her authority (Marcus: 55) – she was “happy for dynastic reasons to recognise her resemblance to her father” (A. Belsey & C. Belsey : 12). Where Henry’s portrait displays an enormous codpiece, the queen has a large pearl – symbol of chastity – similarly positioned. Either this was a moment of determined self-representation by the queen or else the artist was drawing on the pivotal element of her iconography – the connection between her

authority and her virginity. In their analysis of the Sieve portraits, Andrew Belsey and Catherine Belsey comment that by evoking Tuccia (the vestal virgin who miraculously managed to carry water in a sieve as proof of her chastity), the painting demonstrates “the magic power of chastity” to “seal the leaky orifices of the body”. Moreover, “Elizabeth-Tuccia thus miraculously transcends the body of a weak and feeble woman, and makes of this transcendence a mystical sovereignty... [H]er virginity shows her more than a woman, more, indeed, than human” (15). This is a useful insight as Elizabeth was often connected with superhuman female figures such as the goddesses Diana and Astraea, the vestal virgins and of course, the Virgin Mary - all frequently drawn on. Philippa Berry emphasises the extent of her comparison with Diana which the queen’s subjects found particularly apposite because of the emphasis placed in mythology on Diana’s sacred feminine space (134) – she turned Actaeon into a stag who was savaged by her hounds when he glimpsed her bathing with her ladies. Elizabeth’s increasing withdrawal into the company of her ladies in later life made gaining access to her all the more frustrating and difficult – Berry’s discussion of literary innuendoes of lesbian sexuality in the work of John Lyly can be taken as evidence for this (116).

Returning to the Armada portrait as discussed in “Icons of Divinity”, Elizabeth’s superhuman abilities are evoked by the two windows in the background. The sun detail on her dress together with the luminosity of her face and radiating ruff suggest parallels with the sun - the queen is the source of light and calm in the sea scene she faces. In the shadows behind her is the Spanish disaster at sea and the sexually dangerous image of a mermaid (unsubdued female sexuality). The idea that the weather could respond to Elizabeth’s wishes was played out in other portraits too: in the Rainbow portrait she holds

a small rainbow and the picture is inscribed in Latin “No rainbow without the sun”. In this portrait her red hair is emphasised as always, probably because it fed into the mystical sun imagery (A. Belsey & C. Belsey: 15).

During the Spanish Armada crisis, when another invasion seemed possible, Elizabeth visited her troops at Tilbury, where Leicester was commander. There is much speculation about this, but Tilbury may have been an occasion where the queen actually cross-dressed by wearing some kind of armour – possibly a breastplate (Marcus: 54). Her famous speech projected a martial, masculine image which must have been stirring as well as rather disturbing :

I know I have the body but of a weak and feeble woman; but I have the heart and stomach of a king, and of a king of England too, and think foul scorn that Parma or Spain or any prince of Europe should dare to invade the borders of my realm; to which, rather than any dishonor should grow by me, I myself will take up arms, I myself will be your general, judge, and rewarder of every one of your virtues in the field. (Pomeroy: 19)

Leah Marcus points to the implicit conflation of the queen’s territorial borders with her intact virginity (54), a point which leads us into the imperial theme in many of the portraits. The globe appeared frequently in her portraits and serves as a reminder of Britain’s imperial aspirations at the time. In the Ditchley portrait the queen is actually shown standing on “an enlarged map of her realm, with the edges of the globe stretching out beyond it against the sky...the Queen is shown literally on top of the world” (A. Belsey & C. Belsey: 16). The queen’s divine or supernatural qualities are here being employed to naturalise imperial aspirations - her claim to unmediated monarchy in her realm (she even headed the Church) is extended universally.

The queen was increasingly portrayed as beyond time and in control of nature – her own feminine sexuality and by extension the feminine natural world as well. The increasingly iconic character of her portraiture when understood against the background of greater economic and political unrest later in the reign (Berry: 136) suggests Elizabeth's need to reassure and dazzle her subjects so as to remain firmly in control of her state.

Having isolated some aspects of the queen's representational strategies, I would like to explore three filmic representations of Elizabeth I: The Virgin Queen (1955), Mary, Queen of Scots (1971) and Elizabeth (1988). The films will be examined both in terms of their representations of Elizabeth and in terms of the anxieties reproduced as a result of their particular contexts of production.

## Chapter 2: The Virgin Queen (1955)

*"It may be thought simplicity in me that all this time of my reign I have not sought to advance my territories and enlarge my dominions; for opportunity hath served me to do it. My mind was never to invade my neighbours, or to usurp over any. I am contented to reign over mine own, and to rule as a just prince." (Elizabeth's 1593 address to Parliament. Quoted in Weir, 228-9)*

The Virgin Queen (1955), starring Bette Davis, Richard Todd and Joan Collins, provides us with a modern representation of the queen which perpetuates some of the negative, gendered stereotypes which the historical Elizabeth took such pains to counter. A number of the ideas, attitudes and values presented obviously also have their grounding in the era in which the film was made. In his helpful survey of film history, James Monaco comments that the image of women in American films in the 1930's and 1940's, while still bearing the burden of traditional stereotypical limitations, was surprisingly coequal with that of men. He cites Bette Davis in a list of actresses who "projected images of intelligence, independence, sensitivity" in contrast with female stars of the 1950's, such as Marilyn Monroe, who served as male fantasy objects at a time when national politics was attempting to nudge women out of the workplace again (How to Read a Film: 224-6). As Molly Haskell explains, prior to the war, women in the labour force had generally been young and unmarried – "biding their time until marriage" (From Reverence to Rape: 222) – that is – they posed little real threat to masculine interests. During the war however, older, married women were recruited of necessity to fill men's places and subsequently proved reluctant to give up their jobs. Those who tried to compete with men for work after the war were strongly discouraged. Haskell likewise sees in this the source of the change in films of the time whereby women – formerly the

idols of, and central to, the cinema - were now “brought down to fictional size, domesticated or defanged” (8).

Thus, even though Bette Davis is a carry-over from the heyday of the ambitious actress, who fought for stronger, intelligent, female roles, The Virgin Queen, it will be argued, advances a reading of Elizabeth I and of men and women in the Elizabethan era which – despite the captivating performance of the lead actress – conforms to the ideological imperatives of patriarchal society in the 1950’s.

The film is set late in Elizabeth I’s reign and – to quote from the blurb on the packaging of Key Video’s 1988 re-release of the film – it tells “the story of the ageing queen’s attraction to handsome Sir Walter Raleigh (Richard Todd) and her bitter clash with a scheming, younger rival (Collins)” (it seems that Joan Collins’ later image as the spiteful and conniving woman in the television series Dynasty is being inserted here a little forcefully after the fact). Thus, the story is a love triangle in which the queen falls victim to unrequited love. While it might be argued that this film is at least a woman-centred melodrama, it is worth noting that the script was originally entitled Sir Walter Raleigh and that to get Davis to play in it, Twentieth Century-Fox had to have the “script rewritten in order to enlarge her role” and that they also had to change the film’s title to The Virgin Queen (Jerry Vermilye, Bette Davis: 113). Davis’ role may have been enlarged but I would argue that the story still centres very substantially on the character of Raleigh, as will be shown. Indeed, it is rather revealing that Key Video describes the film as rich in “historical detail, lavish with authentic costumes and period décor and *enlivened* by thrilling swordplay...” (my emphasis). The implication that the film would be rather dead without its (masculine) action scenes probably reflects that continuing



prejudice against the treatment of 'women's' emotional problems in film which so disturbs Molly Haskell (154).

We are first introduced to Raleigh via a lengthy swashbuckling scene which works rather well to establish Raleigh as a skilled swordsman and man of action as well as cunning strategist. In view of his later characterisation as the bearer of truth in the story, it is perhaps ironic that he denies recognising the Earl of Leicester. This lie is however attributed to ambition, which is a thoroughly heroic trait in a man – as Raleigh himself puts it in the next scene - “a man must catch the nearest wave”. Raleigh's self-presentation in the film is the site of some quite significant departures from the historical record and worth considering in greater detail as they relate ultimately to the queen.

Stephen Greenblatt has shown in his study of Raleigh's life that this soldier/captain/seafarer/courtier was nothing if not a consummate “actor who was thoroughly committed to the role he had fashioned for himself” (Sir Walter Raleigh: The Renaissance Man and His Roles: 58). As Greenblatt puts it (56), the queen's favour was everything to him and “Raleigh was committed in his whole being to that strange, artificial, dangerous, and dreamlike world presided over by Gloriana, the world of adulation so intense that it still has power to shock us” (while Greenblatt's account is also only one of many possible interpretations, it is persuasively backed by scholarly research). One aspect of Raleigh's complex and sustained self-dramatisation was his legendary “fantastically rich” dress (Latham, A. Sir Walter Raleigh: Selected Prose and Poetry: 9). The scene at the London tailor's shop, while it certainly conveys Raleigh's (appealing) opportunism, also skirts the issue of his fashion savvy with something of a sneer at the whole business. The sequence is a funny one in which Raleigh runs rings

around the camp tailor. The association of rich clothing with effeminacy is sustained throughout the film and here Raleigh also plays on a cultural prejudice against the French, which is taken up again in subsequent scenes where the French Ambassador often verges on the hysterical.

The scene at court is the first in the film to establish firmly a conventional spatial division along gendered lines, according to which the 'real' men in the film (Raleigh and Derry for instance) are in their element outdoors in the arena of action while the women (the queen and her ladies) are passively and willingly confined within the domestic realm. We are frequently reminded that Raleigh is an outsider. As he enters the court with the Earl of Leicester he pauses awkwardly at the threshold before entering while being stared at and gossiped about. Among the gossips are the French Ambassador and Lord Chadwick who have been discussing a young lady of the court in not very gentlemanly fashion ("well if you promise not to tell..."). This contributes to an underlying implication that the men already ensconced in the court are contemptibly servile and effete.

There are numerous visual signs working to reinforce this impression. Raleigh, for instance, is not as clean-shaven as the court fops. Rather, his beard is shaped to define his jaw-line. It is also notable that despite the fineness of his cloak, it is restrained in colour and decoration, and gives him a large, dark and solid silhouette which is in strong contrast with that of poor Chadwick in his pastel green (there is of course no sign of the pearl earrings Raleigh is reputed to have worn!). Raleigh is thus codified as something of a male action-hero who is out of place in this world of façades and fancy-dress: as Chadwick puts it, his cloak is "too fine for the rest of him". In the confrontation

between Raleigh and Chadwick, the former's masculine physicality is pitted against the feminine court/ier:

Raleigh: I amuse you sir?  
 Chadwick: It is the fineness of your cloak. May I ask how you came by it?  
 Raleigh: I took it from the corpse of a fellow I stabbed. He made the mistake of pawing me.  
 Chadwick: My apologies – you've washed it well.  
 Raleigh: On the contrary. The fellow was bloodless, like yourself.

The excessive hostility to the feminine/effeminate might well be read as in part a response to social anxieties within American culture in the fifties. Raleigh's self-assertion seems increasingly through the film to be an aggressive demonstration of male sexuality/power in response to the autonomous, powerful female. In fact, the absence of the masculine is defined as a deficiency by the queen herself – “you have qualities which the court sadly lacks”. Clearly it is these qualities which also make him irresistible to Beth Throckmorton. During the hostilities with Chadwick she stands in the background talking with a friend and allowing her gaze to travel over Raleigh rather boldly. What seems at first to be an interesting instance of active feminine desire – “were a woman not bold she would lack for much pleasure” – is not really sustained. Her sexuality is not active and outgoing, there in its own right, but might better be defined as receptive and passive. As she rather suggestively puts it later - “On the contrary captain, I do not pursue, I surround!”. Receptivity and passiveness are two factors Richard Dyer considers in relation to Marilyn Monroe's image as having been very marketable in the fifties – as opposed to an independent female sexual self-realisation (*Heavenly Bodies*, 1986: 50-9). Collins is very much in the mould of the 50's male fantasy object with her breathy voice (“your voice is pleasing to hear”), innocent, wide eyes and teasing, ditsy behaviour. That

is, it is her desirability to him which is key (a factor to which we will return in discussing the characterisation of the queen). The camera also functions to objectify her since the interchange is filmed in over-the-shoulder shots from Raleigh's point of view with Collins angled to emphasise her form. *The Virgin Queen* increasingly well exemplifies Haskell's claim that Hollywood films of the 1950's "were all *about sex*, but *without sex*" (235). The enormous significance of the double bed in Raleigh's cabin later is testimony to this.

The exchange again demonstrates the disjunction between the historical Raleigh and the fifties image of him. Where, to borrow again from Greenblatt, the historical Raleigh appears to have conceived of himself as "an actor in a living theatre" (55), here Raleigh needs a woman to initiate him into court etiquette ("... you must be more careful. The man you insulted has the ear of Sir Christopher Hatton and Sir Christopher has the ear of the queen"). There are many rules of court etiquette and Beth's recitation emphasises the quality of masquerade which defines the (feminine) court: to her exhortations that he keep a blank face at all times, Raleigh comments that "your face is not blank". Beth's inability to hide her emotions – that is – to 'act' successfully helps to characterise her as more natural and authentic which tends to ally her with him. Haskell sums up the misogyny implicit in such conventional associations of acting with women – "acting is role-playing, role-playing is lying, and lying is a woman's game" (243). The use of the pearls as a kind of rosary aiding Beth in listing the rules of the court has some obvious religious connotations – perhaps suggestive of an unhealthy idolatry fostered by the power-hungry queen. The spilling of the pearls (a deeply significant aspect of

Elizabeth's iconography) as the queen enters and approaches Raleigh also seems to betoken the iconoclastic role he is to have.

Significantly Raleigh is on his knees when the queen finally does arrive. Her first line is in keeping with that reading of Elizabeth I which feminist historian Francis Teague abhors: "Mistress Throckmorton, is this your pet swine? You have cast pearls before him". As Teague argues, Elizabeth is conventionally shown to have a gift for a jolly or bitter quip, but this is seldom followed through by any representation of the queen engaged in sustained intellectual operations ("Queen Elizabeth in Her Speeches": 63). This film tends to borrow heavily from popular, received anecdote (for example the tale of Raleigh's gallantry with his cloak), but does not employ any of the queen's own writings or speeches. The neglect of her self-representations would negatively skew any portrayal of her.

Bette Davis was well-known for playing viragos and had no reservations about performing unsympathetic roles. For this part, says Jerry Vermilye, "Davis allowed her head to be shaved, so that she could accurately depict the aging monarch..." (113). The costume chosen for her is in marked contrast with those of the other women in the film and strike this viewer as being rather asexual, making her appear distinctly disproportionate and even block-like at times. Thus, the film seems to be drawing on notions of the queen's masculinisation, but, as becomes evident, this does not function to affirm her power (the approach Elizabeth I adopted), but rather implies that a woman's political power is perverse and monstrous and makes her horrifyingly unfeminine. Her make-up is so strenuously applied that instead of seeming convincing, she looks inhuman. Davis' characteristic fervent, histrionic performance style and particular

collection of quirks also contribute in this context to making her Elizabeth a rather grotesque figure. The queen's masculine attributes are repeatedly emphasised – her walk for instance is markedly 'unfeminine' and her speech is aggressive and clipped. (Davis' daring efforts often led her into inadvertent "parodies of womanhood" [Haskell, 217] , as for example in the opening scenes of Now Voyager) Elizabeth/Davis is thus played off against Throckmorton/Collins in such a way that it seems the film is attempting to close off the option of positive identification with her.

The dialogue also has Elizabeth running rough-shod over her courtiers – Sir Christopher Hatton, for example, is put sharply in his place on several occasions. Perhaps the most significant aspect of the sequence where Raleigh lays down the expensive cloak in the mud for his queen, is his patronising offer of it to Sir Christopher as well. The implication that Sir Christopher has been emasculated by submission to a woman ruler is lent further visual emphasis by the fact that he wears red hose and shoes in contrast with Raleigh's serviceable long, leather boots. It is also evident from the contrast between Raleigh's nonchalant treatment of his clothing compared with the value Hatton places on his sable cloak - he quickly retrieves it when the queen drops it on the ground. It is also notable that in the only reference ever made to Raleigh's poetry, it is Sir Christopher who is reading it, and the queen then supplies a sexual innuendo that deflates Hatton.

Raleigh's interview with the queen is worth considering closely since the sequence abounds with wit but it is based on a clash between what in stereotypical terms would be seen as 'female' language and 'male' language respectively – both on the verbal and gestural levels. What Richard Dyer calls the traditional "melodramatic"

performance style of Bette Davis, in which she makes use of her eyes and hand movements particularly to convey emotions beneath her words, contributes here to an overall impression of simmering sexual frustration (*The Stars*, 1979: 42). She turns his blunt soldier's talk into a predatory sexual ambush, insisting on finding innuendo where none really exists. The scene bears out Dyer's comment that during the fifties, women "showing an active sexual interest in men were generally labelled, popularly and psychoanalytically, as predatory or neurotic" (1986: 53). The reaction shots focused on Elizabeth are full of movement: she slouches and fidgets, eats and drinks, calls for wine and dismisses her servant. By contrast Raleigh sits still and upright, looking directly in Elizabeth's direction off screen and speaks plainly without her unusual, leading emphases. With Elizabeth, it is implied, there is plenty under the surface, whereas Raleigh is blunt and plain-talking – "Flattery is something the soldier never learns". Given that Raleigh in fact made a career out of 'courting' the queen (Greenblatt, 57) and that his poetry and letters at times succumbed to "the dangers of histrionic sensibility: self-indulgence, self-pity, posturing" (23), to which the queen typically responded with a "careful and restrained" drop in tone (58) – this reflects an interesting role reversal. Here it is the queen as sexually frustrated spinster who longs to be forcefully overwhelmed – "But now that you have reached your... your citadel, what tactics will you use to storm the walls?" (Raleigh's manipulations are characterised in terms of martial imagery – "strategy" - and thereby valorised). As has been shown in the introduction, penetrating the queen's chastity/power had attained great importance in the last years of her reign and so the autonomy of her body was insistently codified by ambitious courtiers as a lack

rather than a choice, a reading which the film takes up unproblematically. The scene perpetuates the accepted social role definitions in which

The interests of men and women are not only different, but actually opposed... A man is supposedly most himself when he is driving to achieve, to create, to conquer; he is least himself when reflecting or making love. A woman is supposedly most herself in the throes of emotion (the love of man or of children), and least... "womanly", in the pursuit of knowledge or success. (Haskell, 4).

Thus, Raleigh claims to know more of ships than he does "of the ways of women". In his enthusiasm for his proposed project he leaps up from the table and strides about – giving the impression that he is caged:

Raleigh: I know a hundred ways in which they can be improved.  
 Elizabeth: Women?  
 Raleigh: Ships m'am. I've made my own designs – for ships that will skim the waves and outrace anything afloat.  
 Elizabeth: I had thought you were a soldier.  
 Raleigh: I am, but a sailor first of all. I will take these ships of mine to the new world, with all its riches. I would bring them back heavy with gold and spices. I'd swell the coffers of the realm. Give me these ships m'am and a year in the new world and before heaven you'll be glad you met with me this day!"

During this passionate tirade, the audience sees what Raleigh does not – the queen stops drinking, sits forward and by the conclusion of the speech her mood has turned and she flings her wine at him. This is only the first of several sequences where the queen acts on an emotional basis. This proves at least the first half of the Earl of Leicester's statement: she is indeed a woman of whims – much to the frustration and confusion of forward-looking men like Raleigh: "I had thought you'd listen to an honest man". It is noteworthy that Elizabeth/Davis is at her most sympathetic when she fears abandonment,



that is, when she is most vulnerable and powerless. Thus, she is pitiable in the humiliating close to this scene when, apparently desperate that Raleigh not leave court, she pleads her authority, and then – patting her hair anxiously – acknowledges “Faith, you spoke true when you said you knew not the ways of women”. In this moment of dependence, she comes closest to conventional notions of what constitutes femininity. When Raleigh responds that he spoke true in all, the queen points out that the court is no place to talk of truth (a laugh is afforded here at his expense). The queen’s refusal to discuss a sea voyage with Raleigh in the winter weather and the exchange which follows with Beth Throckmorton, reiterates the opposition between the interests of men and women – as the action develops Raleigh is increasingly smothered and contained by the domestic.

When Raleigh next encounters Throckmorton he has been made Captain of the Queen’s Guard. Beth is seen in an upstairs window overlooking the courtyard where he is reviewing his men. She and her ladies are framed by the window and are all in cambered poses. This is a distinctly photographic moment which prominently displays Collins’ bust which is pushed forward. Indeed all of her costumes fetishise the female shape – exaggerating her breasts in particular. Breasts had become very much an obsession of post-war American culture (Haskell, 235). In the marriage scene with Raleigh, for example, her cloak, instead of covering her, is tied about her neck in such a way as to form a cut-out of her cleavage. The shot from Raleigh’s perspective also functions to emphasise that he is being belittled and that the conventional power relations between male and female have been unbalanced. Laughing down on him she taunts – “Even birds of fine plumage have troubles with feathers” - as he fusses with the cap of

one of his men. Beth functions throughout as a mirror reflecting Raleigh's manliness back to him. Here she no longer takes him seriously - "I had no right to think you the man I thought you were". This is especially obvious in the hunting scene where Raleigh is at his most emasculated and humiliated. The queen has him foundering in domestic detail: "the pasties go on that table there the sweetmeats over there". Beth warns that he has a great wound "of the soul" and that "while you linger in the court it festers. The gangrene grows in you captain...". It is notable that the reversal of gender roles whereby the queen has political power and the captain is doing her housework, is described as a great wound of the soul. This makes it clear that even though Elizabeth was a historical anomaly, the success of her forty-four year reign has continued to challenge the values of patriarchy and even modern representations of her appear to have a lot to do with the formulation of a stable masculine identity.

The hunting scene is the one occasion in which Elizabeth is portrayed in action. Once again her costume is rather asexual and the busy diagonal lines contribute to associations of nervous instability. Although Elizabeth was an indefatigable and skilled hunter well into old age, here her efforts prove abortive. The connection of prowess in hunting with political potency is acknowledged by the queen herself - "Did you laugh sirrah? Know you then that though my arrow falls short of its mark, my kingdom will not!". It is surely significant that not only is she refused parity with the men in this arena - they coach her and appeal to her vanity - but she even disavows her connection with the goddess of hunting, Diana, that representative of militant chastity who, historically, was one of the more significant superhuman female figures in Elizabeth's iconography. Unlike Raleigh's pride - he's a Devon man - Elizabeth's hurt pride is shown to be a vice:

she lashes out at the French Ambassador and it is this which forms the basis for her policy decision in the council scene later. Raleigh has to swallow the last of his dignity when he is made to sit on the queen's green, striped cushion (the existence of which is not mentioned in any of the biographies consulted) at her feet. It has been argued that the queen may have consciously shown favour to a number of courtiers because she recognised the significant association of male sexual potency with political power. This scene cannot be read as effecting any such role reversal. Rather, she is being codified as a jealous and controlling spinster via aspects of performance. For instance, her eyes dart from side to side and she fidgets incessantly. The script also enforces this by having her quizz him neurotically – "What did you discuss with her?".

Francis Teague points out that a superficial analysis of how Elizabeth fashioned herself as the ideal of romantic and religious discourses may suggest that she was vain or blasphemous (63). The film certainly seems to subscribe to this kind of negative reading. In the council scene, she is indeed a gargoyle operating on the basis of jealousy, vanity and fear. There is little sign of the skilled and subtle politician whose manipulation of her public image allowed her to remain in control of her state for so long and in precarious times. The mercurial outburst when the French Ambassador approaches her for a diplomatic response grossly trivialises Elizabeth's political role: "Go back to your Catherine de Medici and tell her that I am tired of little French dukes and of old French queens and of ambassadors who laugh when I miss with an arrow and of all Frenchman in general. Go back and tell her that". It could be contended that the possibility of a more sympathetic reading exists here - in that Elizabeth anticipates that the ambassador will not in fact take the message to the queen, but will be forced to linger

longer at court. However, Davis so overacts the scene that she conveys the overwhelming impression of being a termagant, rather than a sagacious politician. Finally, when Raleigh refuses to obey her provocative order that he arrest Lord Derry (“We’ll see what’s in his heart”), she explodes shrewishly – “How dare you disobey me?”. This exchange is a turning point in the power relations between Raleigh and the queen. Raleigh is placed firmly inside history

I wish to serve not you, but England. And I find myself in an aviary full of tame birds. All England’s not confined in the walls of this court but rides proud and free on the bosom of the ocean bounded only by her destiny and hope. Yet while every other nation is pointing the bows of its ships towards the Indies and beyond, we English sit idly by counting our pence. But some Englishmen watch the sun and the waves and dream of a future that will shine on England with the brightness of a hundred suns and, God, I’m of their company!

The queen by comparison is a monster of vanity threatening to strip him of everything – an image of power perverted. She is the too-powerful, entirely self-absorbed inhabitant of a predominantly feminine world away from human affairs. Raleigh’s first loyalty is to his friend and in asserting this and then literally turning his back on the queen he finds himself once more – “It is no honour for a man to humble himself and this I have done time out of mind. I return such honours gladly!”. Thus, to quote from Haskell again, “Bette Davis... must pay heavily... for her selfishness and vanity”. Davis’ strongly individualised women characters were constantly being rebuked for thinking and living only for themselves, she comments (29), and this film is no exception. However, Davis again elicits sympathy when she falters after Raleigh abandons her.

Two vastly differing ‘bedroom scenes’ follow this confrontation. The first, the marriage scene between Throckmorton and Raleigh, provides the audience with

foreknowledge of the film's inevitable revenge on the too-powerful female (which will privilege the viewer in the scene where Elizabeth is told he is married, but does not want to believe what she is hearing). By resisting the queen's dominance, Raleigh has restored the status quo. Once again Beth serves as a gauge for his masculinity. Filmed mainly in intimate two-shots and point-of-view shots which reveal the importance of Collins' body to the camera, sex looms large but is elided. This is in keeping with the repressive morality of the fifties in which the impulse "toward sexual freedom... was deflected into a joke" (Haskell, 235). Indeed, we leave them kissing in the room and follow the wedding witnesses – the innkeeper and the "serving-wench". The latter belongs to the dumb blonde tradition: "A wedding? Why did you not tell me – I always cry at weddings!". Here sex is quite literally deflected into a joke.

In contrast with the unambiguous heterosexuality of this scene, the next depicts Elizabeth as an asexual crone, with an exaggerated fear of ageing: she has no hair under the clownish night-cap, no defined waist or bust. Jerry Vermilye says that in April 1955 Davis appeared at the Academy Awards ceremony wearing Elizabeth's nightcap over her bald head, to present the Oscar to Marlon Brando – "and won a prolonged ovation" (113). Her enthusiasm for roles which played against audience sympathy - a rejection of the restricted place allotted women in the world and in film – clearly struck a cord with her contemporaries and suggests that audiences might have chosen to identify with Davis despite the conventional values projected by such films.

The historical Elizabeth needed to sustain the image of herself as young and by implication, still politically viable, especially as she had no heir. Here the fear of ageing is read as paranoia about ceasing to be attractive to men. Elizabeth's words to Raleigh

are illustrative: "How do I look to you, Walter? Do you like me as you see me?", "Admire you say, only admire?", "Kiss me Walter", "Walter, am I old? Do I look old?". Walter's not terribly flattering reply that he would have her wielding a broadsword in his company— "young men's work" — must satisfy. Historically, male courtiers attempted to be free of complete subjection to the queen by defining their necessary sphere of action as being beyond her queendom (Berry, 76). The queen is here shown to be more concerned with love than with power: "I will please you yet Walter. I cannot give you three ships, but you shall have one". She thus becomes the pathetic spectacle of a woman clinging to a man who does not love her. Leicester articulates this well in his response to the queen's question "Why must Raleigh go?", when he tells her "It is his dearest passion m' am". This re-emphasises the imbalance in the power relations according to which women are most 'feminine' in the throes of love, while men are most 'masculine' in the area of action.

Haskell, referring to the mystique of the man's film, describes the limited options open to the woman who competes with her husband's other life (156). When Beth attempts to goad Raleigh into confessing their marriage to the queen, she becomes a nag and a spoilsport who can't be happy for him - "Only one, when you asked for three?". Once again she also reflects his image back at him in diminished size. The queen's reluctance to relinquish Raleigh resonates with Beth's silence when we discover that the latter has had a fainting spell and conclude that she is pregnant. Her gesture of self-sacrifice — she will endure the shame of being thought an unwed mother rather than do his plans any harm by making him shoulder responsibility - projects an idealised

image of a woman that is given hearty approbation “Beth, I never loved you more than I do at this moment!”.

Beth is again shown to be a feminine ideal when she goes to plead for Raleigh’s life and is played-off against the bitterness of the queen. The queen’s somewhat disparaging treatment of her ladies-in-waiting is intriguing. She tells them, with some irritation, that she can find her own way about her house and of course, at one point, she exchanges some of them for Frenchmen! Alison Weir discusses the historical queen’s relationships with these women at some length, arguing that she “often did show a very human face to her ladies and was especially kind when any of them had suffered bereavement or family problems” (262). Weir points out that a great deal has been made of Elizabeth’s attitude towards the sexual and romantic adventures of these women which has traditionally been attributed to sexual envy. Weir contends rather that these were very young women whose parents hoped the queen could assist them in making good marriages. Indeed, there is “not a single example of her refusing an advantageous marriage for them” (Weir, 261). She even protected them from marriages they did not want (Weir, 259-261). Her anger was more likely to be aroused by conspiratorial or covert marriages which had implications for the succession and therefore posed a danger to her. A disservice is also done to these women in making them silly and insignificant shadows on the sideline of the film, since

aspiring courtiers attempted – often successfully – to bribe them to carry petitions to their mistress, and this was often the ladies’ most lucrative source of money. “We worshipped no saints, but we prayed to ladies in the Queen’s time”, quipped one court wit. (Weir, 260)

It may be suggested that by eliding the strength of the queen's bonds with women, her disruptive potential is contained. Indeed, the influence of these women was significant enough for Raleigh to have called them "witches, capable of doing great harm, but no good" (Weir, 260). In Fire Over England (1936), in which Flora Robson played Elizabeth, there is a significant scene in which the queen pardons a cross-dressed woman who has just attempted to kill her. This woman is an unhinged supporter of the dead Mary, Queen of Scots. Despite the fact that both films script Elizabeth as an ageing spinster, prey to sexual jealousy and most at home in the spheres of romance, and religion in the 1936 film, the Robson film is certainly more sympathetic to Elizabeth from a feminist perspective. This is in tune with the political context in which the film was made. Fire Over England is very jingoistic, clearly intended to whip up national sentiment to aid the war effort. It thus presents a Good Queen Bess image of the queen which, though less grotesque, is equally suspect. In its favour, Robson's Elizabeth empathises with the would-be assassin, indeed, the film goes so far as to depict Elizabeth addressing her troops at Tilbury and wearing a breastplate. This is not given any especial prominence, or treated negatively, rather, she is holding her own in a masculine world. However, in the 1955 film when Beth comes to plead for Raleigh's life in Elizabeth's chamber, she is offered no compassion as a fellow-woman. Indeed, the film presents us with the supreme image of their difference and of Elizabeth's uniqueness when the queen announces that she is infertile. Our final image of Elizabeth is of a lonely old woman who watches with regret as Raleigh and his wife voyage down the Thames. The film fades out on her at her state business, her head hanging in despair.



### Chapter 3: Mary, Queen of Scots (1971)

*“It is hard to bind princes by any security where hope is offered of a kingdom” (Elizabeth quoted in Weir, 128).*

Mary, Queen of Scots (1971), starring Vanessa Redgrave and Glenda Jackson presents a somewhat variable image of female rule despite the upsurge of feminist activism that had occurred in the sixties and seventies. While the seventies were a creative high point in the American film industry, a period in which the burgeoning youth counterculture influenced Hollywood to foster some experimental new film-makers, feminist critics were surprisingly disheartened. Marjorie Rosen, in her useful study Popcorn Venus, points out that many acclaimed anti-Establishment films – while giving voice to public disillusionment and lack of faith in institutions – ultimately still “reinforced masculine dominions” (323). The decade, claims Molly Haskell, was characterised by escapist all-male films and the substitution of violence and sex for romance, that is, a decline in the roles and prominence accorded women (323-371). One of the few areas where actresses might find less negligible and demeaning roles was, as always, historical biography. George Custen explains that women in Hollywood biography have traditionally been “allowed” to pursue careers in only four areas : concubine or paramour, educator, royalty and medical (Bio/Pics: how Hollywood constructed public history:103). In each case he argues, “the female career is dogged by the conflict between the fulfilment of heterosexual desire through marriage or romance and professional duty” (103). Although Mary, Queen of Scots brought together two of the most critically acclaimed actresses of

the day, the film is disappointing; While it does bear evidence of the growing feminist consciousness, it is still substantially a “Hollywood” conception of history which does not always take advantage of the opportunities which this potent combination of historical figures and serious actresses afforded it. The characters of Mary and Elizabeth are, for instance, less multi-dimensional than might have been hoped. The film projects a simplified version of history in that the political conflict between the queens is conceived of in gendered terms. Female rule is treated as a choice between heterosexuality and masculinisation and thus the film opposes the two queens/actresses in terms of their femininity. Elizabeth is scripted as mannish in opposition to the politically less successful Mary, who is consequently the romantic heroine.

From the first, the film invites comparisons between Mary and Elizabeth. The picturesque title sequence, for instance, employs a French musical score and is filmed on-location in France – which asserts the claim-to-truth of the film and also plays heavily on conventional associations of France with romance and the exotic. Mary is at her happiest here taking a romantic boat ride with her husband beyond the château walls (indeed, in the later beach scene with Lord Darnley, Mary is again shown to be most herself with a romantic partner against a natural backdrop – as she becomes increasingly embroiled in politics, the castles become more and more oppressive). The idyll is rent by a reminder of the king’s life-threatening illness – it is his third attack in a month – and a reluctant Mary must face up to her political destiny: “Oh no I will not think of life without him!”. Thus, Mary is codified by the script, as well as by visual signifiers such as her diaphanous gown and flowing blonde hair, as “principally a woman rather than a queen” (Custen, 103).

By contrast Elizabeth, although clearly also young and in love as the parallel boat scene demonstrates, reveals her statecraft. In his biography of Glenda Jackson, Ian Woodward comments that her eyes “always seemed to be challenging” and that this power and masculinity had found such blatant expression in her portrayal of Ophelia in 1965, that “it prompted Penelope Gilliatt to suggest in a review that Glenda should have played Hamlet, while another critic proposed that the production should have been billed as Ophelia” (*Glenda Jackson: A Study in Fire and Ice*: 44-5). Jackson’s plain looks, cold stare and “clipped, almost spitting delivery” certainly make her Elizabeth an appealingly strong figure (astrophile.com). Some conventionally masculine qualities are attributed to the queen, as will be shown. She is quick to size up the political implications of the scandal around Robert Dudley and banishes him from court. The tension between her desire for political power and her love of Dudley is implied by her body language. For instance, she turns to the wall while telling Cecil that Dudley is to be brought to trial in open court, clenching her fists in anger, but then stifling the impulse. Her strong-willed restraint is in direct contrast with Mary’s hysterical weeping as she pleads with François not to go riding.

Again, Mary is depicted rather typically surrendering to emotion. Redgrave’s more conventional good looks and talent for conveying “tremulous vulnerability” (astrophile.com), make her an easier object to hold up for male scrutiny than Jackson. Custen remarks suggestively that “all three categories – entertainer, royalty, paramour – make the female the object of a male gaze, though of three different sorts” (106). While she may be the object of public scrutiny in her ceremonial roles such as addressing court, there is little indication that Jackson is of erotic interest to the camera, a factor which

contributes to the androgyny of this representation of Elizabeth. Mary, keeping vigil isolated and vulnerable, is given the self-sacrificing lines: “Almighty God, if you love François more than I do then take him to you, but take me as well for I have no wish to live without him”.

Significantly, the scene is framed by the gaze of Lord Bothwell – the man for whom she ultimately sacrifices all. Bothwell is constructed as a strong male ideal. Like Raleigh in The Virgin Queen, he is the rugged, romantic hero, an image conveyed by his fur coat and beard (with their connotations of wildness) as well as his belated sensitivity, since he first tells Mary brusquely “Madam your mother is dead!” before he realises that he has been too harsh and softens his tone. Cinematic convention thus establishes the expectation that they will be attracted to each other. Significantly, Bothwell advises Mary on policy. Again she has to be reminded of her political responsibility: “You’re needed in Scotland, madam”. The scene of Mary’s departure for Scotland re-emphasises her political naivety: “She hates me!” she concludes of Elizabeth’s refusal to grant her safe conduct through England. In the style of Raleigh in The Virgin Queen, Bothwell’s masculine physicality is demonstrated when he shouts “Andrew, move those lazy whores and peasants before I take the flat of my sword to them!”. The script even plays for a moment on the same sort of clash between conventional masculine and feminine voices or languages as the fifties film did: Mary asks Bothwell to “lower your voice, my gracious lord. The sound of it is hard to bear”. To this Bothwell responds: “Then you must stuff your delicate ears madam, for you’re going to hear many like it in Scotland when you’ve left the twitterings of the French court behind”. Here the spatial division effected is between the civilised, feminine realm of France where Bothwell is out of place

and an uncivilised, masculine Scotland. The dialogue which follows between Cecil and James Stuart is worth citing for what it reveals about Bothwell's construction as romantic action-hero:

- James: If I am to keep my promise we must cage Bothwell. With him to help her, Mary might find a way to finish me and rule Scotland alone.
- Cecil: But he is no papist.
- James: He's worse. He's an atheist who mocks God and fears no man. His pride is his loyalty to the Stuart queen and he cannot be bribed.
- Cecil: Cannot? I hope we catch him alive my lord, I'd like to study such a rarity.

Alison Weir paints a very different picture, arguing that Bothwell was known as a "ruthless and unscrupulous" man who had acquired cultivated manners in France. She says of his relationship with Mary that he "was a Protestant, and had recently married the virtuous Lady Jean Gordon. Lady Jean, however, could not offer him a crown, and it was his desire for this that now fuelled his pursuit of the Queen" (183). Likewise, Carolly Erickson claims that he was "young, lecherous, brutal... impatient for power" and that within "days of her wedding Mary was reduced to suicidal despair by Bothwell's abuse" (The First Elizabeth: 240). As is the case with Sir Walter Raleigh in The Virgin Queen, the departure from history is testimony to Hollywood's need to homogenise the past into a few stock fictive contexts and characters. The script sanitises Bothwell's marriage to Jean Gordon by suggesting that it was done as much out of frustrated love for the queen as for money. Uncomfortable aspects of history such as his divorce are glossed over quickly in the interests of rendering Bothwell more palatable. Even his involvement in the murder is redeemed by the sexual immorality of Darnley and by the fact that Bothwell believes the consort plans to murder Mary. Given that Hollywood has played a

large part in shaping public perceptions of history (see Custen, 4), and that this film also asserts a claim-to-truth by making use of title-cards at its conclusion and through on-location filming and lavish use of period costume, this kind of closely contained vision of the past is sterile and Custen would see it as potentially eliminating sizeable portions of history's subjects (10).

The contrast between the two women is again made evident when Dudley returns to court. The scene reveals once more the tension in Elizabeth between the woman and the monarch. Dudley kneels before her and she reaches out to touch him but withdraws her hand asking with forced calm: "Well, Robin?". Her treatment of Dudley is also suggestive of a gender role-reversal, since she repeatedly appropriates the sexual initiative<sup>3</sup>. The Virgin Queen and Fire Over England portrayed Elizabeth as starved of romance and, by implication, sex, but here Elizabeth's much-vaunted virginity is simply debunked. Her deliberate, often politically motivated engagement in courtship and flirtation is read with confidence as an open indication that she engaged in illicit sex. Had the film emphasised that she took the liberty of flirting with quite a number of courtiers, it might have been more subversive (instead of seeing her as simply in love with Dudley). This insistence on foregrounding Elizabeth's actual sexual behaviour is something from which feminist historians appear to be distancing themselves. Susan

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<sup>3</sup> To some extent Haskell's suspicion of the sexual liberation of women on the screen in the seventies, is apposite here. Jackson and Redgrave were among the actresses of the period who had performed naked. Haskell remarks of this that there was no intermediary stage between liberation and nonliberation, nudity or full dress. As she puts it, when women were exposed on screen it either complied with male fantasies or confirmed their fears. She cites Glenda Jackson's role as Gudrun in Women in Love as being "abrasive and emasculating" and she cautions further against the film myth according to which it is inconceivable for women to thrive without sexual fulfilment (340-1)

Frye, for instance, examines Elizabeth's struggle for political authority via representations of her female body without finding it necessary to speculate on her physiological virginity or lack thereof. Dudley's role in the film serves as a signpost for the treatment of Elizabeth as not conventionally feminine. In terms of casting and script, Dudley/Massey is considerably less rugged and virile than Bothwell/Davenport. The film opens with Dudley singing and playing music for Elizabeth which is suggestive when offset against the strong and silent introductory treatment given Bothwell. In fact, in his submission and petulance Dudley borders on the unmanly which contributes to the masculinity of this image of Elizabeth. Jackson however does not seem to have conceived of the aggressive use of her sexuality as emasculating men, but rather as empowering women. She once claimed that "the best man is the man within oneself. Most women need to develop their own 'masculine' qualities of independence, pride, courage and open sexuality" (Woodward, 151).

Jackson's Elizabeth is certainly not the grotesque that Davis' was. The Davis film took as its subject an older-woman-younger-man relationship and made it, as Hollywood is wont, undignified – playing heavily on notions of feminine vanity and manipulation. Although this film also operates on the demeaning premise that a woman's power is achieved only at the expense of her femininity, an extract of the dialogue should illustrate that the script for Elizabeth is reasonably strong. Even at her most caustic she explains some of the political motivations for her actions:

Dudley:	If you would have me constantly at your side then marry me my love.
Elizabeth:	In this land there will be but one mistress and no master.
Dudley:	Then madam I will come no more to court. I will leave this land.

- Elizabeth: You shall not! You are my master of horse. When they jibe at me in Catholic courts they say the horsemaster who mounts the queen so freely would now put a bridle on her; you dare to talk to me of marriage!
- Dudley: Forgive me, it was my...delight in seeing you again.
- Elizabeth: You are a commoner whose head itches for a crown: attend to you common business horsemaster. Keep the Scottish queen's horses well. It may suit me to return them one day.

The script makes use of the historical Elizabeth's own words to Dudley ("In this land there will be but one mistress and no master") and Jackson's delivery is, if anything, understated, even amused. It is only when Dudley petulantly threatens to leave the country that she loses her temper and goads him.

The most inspiring of Elizabeth's scenes and those which can best be read as reflecting the impact of feminist activism within seventies culture, are those where she is engaged in politics. While The Virgin Queen grossly trivialised Elizabeth's political role, here Elizabeth is shown engaged in more sustained deliberations. Haskell has called seventies actresses and heroines bland, lacking in the sensuality, humour or individuality of earlier decades (329). In this instance, I would argue that Jackson's star persona is exploited to the benefit of Elizabeth. The actress was well-known for taking her life and her career very seriously and this gravity makes her a strategic choice for a revisionist version of Elizabeth. While the script does not abound with the wit of the fifties film, it certainly conveys a queen who is much more capable and one who frequently manages to out-manoeuvre her councillors. Her subtlety, for example, in proposing Dudley as a husband for Mary is lost on Cecil who objects strenuously that "Mary will not take him – she will rage against the insult". Elizabeth does not even take Dudley into her



confidence, but adroitly manoeuvres him into fulfilling his part in her plan. To his cry that it is she alone whom he loves, Elizabeth responds

Then marry Mary. For only when she is married to a loving subject of mine will I be safe from the assassin, the fanatic and the rebellion in her cause and she will take him because I will send with him the one thing she most lusts after: the promise sealed and witnessed, of the English throne at my death. Go and prepare for your journey and go quickly before my heart wins over my head.

Again of course Elizabeth's diplomacy is rendered more conventionally acceptable by the persistent conflict between romance and career.

While this representation of the queen is stronger from a feminist perspective than its predecessors, the simple polarisation between Elizabeth and Mary limits its impact, since Elizabeth appears to be anomalous and her successful rule precludes a satisfying emotional life. The titular role is, of course, Mary's and she is repeatedly characterised as a political innocent, prone to outbursts of emotion.

At its best the script allows Mary some strong impromptu speeches, that is, instinctive, emotional responses rather than carefully pre-considered ones. When she meets James Stuart, for instance, she shows a 'feminine' over-concern with the pomp and ceremony of court "Oh, I understand, then soon the royal guards will be here, the carpet for me to stand upon, the canopy, there will be gun salutes". It is David Rizzio who prompts her to address the Scottish lords and turn the moment to her advantage. She does this however by appearing to defer to her brother's good sense. Again, on the ride to Holyrood Palace Mary makes an unpremeditated response to the vitriolic John Knox, in which she defends the Catholic Church, saying "I defend the church of Rome for that I think is the true Church of God" and then "I will hear with patience your ugly words John

Knox, for you like all my subjects shall have the free use of your conscience and I of mine". That is, in her relatively modest speaking debut, Mary is assigned a distinctly traditional feminine position: deferring to masculine authority. In her second speaking appearance, when she is championing her religion, a highly politicised issue, she does so in an emotional, unstrategised way. She and James Stuart engage in a struggle for authority in which he attempts to confine her within traditionally powerless female arenas: "I want you to be happy. You shall have dancing and hunting, music and good eating, but leave the troubles of state to me". Although he presumes to tell her where to eat, rest and where and when she is to meet with the Scottish lords, there is no sign of the confidence with which Mary pronounced to Bothwell that she would rule the lords. Rather, after her brother's departure, impotent frustration gives rise to tears. The dialogue is telling:

Mary: Did you hear him Davie, did you hear him? Run away and play he tells me as if I was a child. Davie I am trapped!

Rizzio: Not yet your Grace.

Mary: He has me in a cage!

Rizzio: Then you must appear to sing sweetly and happily madame.

Mary: I cannot do that forever – the lies stick in my throat. I hate him!

Rizzio: He's learning to trust you. When he trusts you he will become careless and then you will have him in a cage.

Mary: Davie I have no army, no treasury, no allies!

Redgrave's performance contributes to the impression that she is on the brink of hysteria: she cries, trembles and pants heavily. It is only when she is promised that her uncles will solve all her problems by finding her a powerful Catholic husband that Mary is contented.

The scene of Dudley and Darnley's departure for Scotland starkly reveals the machinery of this formulaic vision of history. Elizabeth clearly articulates the polarisation between herself and Mary which the film has worked hard at constructing and sustaining. Her dialogue with Cecil is useful:

Cecil: But with Dudley comes the future crown of England. No true monarch would turn her back on that, not even Mary of Scotland.  
 Elizabeth: That monarch is first a woman.  
 Cecil: You would never ignore such an offer for a pretty fellow.  
 Elizabeth: This woman is first a monarch.

The film hereby endorses the impoverished notion that where monarchs may cope easily with wives and mistresses without sacrificing their authority, women are generally so consumed by love that it unfits them for power. Mary's beach ride with Darnley is illuminating here. The scene contains an interesting anachronism in that Mary is dressed in male clothing. It is tempting to read this as a, perhaps clumsy, token of the impact of the women's liberation movement on contemporary culture, however Mary's behaviour undercuts any such reading. Rather than provoking questions about the social construction of gender, something which might be expected to be of central importance in this film given the subject and date of the movie, the sequence seems to underscore the fixity of gender identity. As Annette Kuhn comments in *The Power of The Image*, "although crossdressing may well, as metaphor, subvert sexual difference it may equally well confirm it" (55). Mary still epitomises the 'natural' definition of the feminine as weak, sentimental and passive. Agitated that Darnley has injured himself in the fall, she runs to dampen her handkerchief in the waves, stumbling as she does so, a sequence which suggests that perhaps the choice of costume was intended to create an opportunity

to emphasise sexual difference. With the benefit of hindsight it certainly seems to foreshadow her unwitting entanglement with the debauchery of Darnley (his bisexuality is coded as sick and serves as a sufficient motivation for and marker of, his villainy). Watching with disapproval from the battlements are Mary's advisor Rizzio and the slighted Dudley. Swayed by a sea of emotions she has blundered politically. Indeed, the queen talks herself into marrying Darnley, attempting to convince Rizzio that marrying him would be politically intelligent: "Both wise policy and my deepest longings are fulfilled in him". Mary Stuart's proclivity to love the "wrong man" is one attributed to many great cinematic women, says George Custen, and one which further marks her as first and foremost a woman (105).

Dudley's return to court from Scotland well illustrates the converse masculinising of Elizabeth. In this scene she pays the price for rather literally giving up her lover to her career. She has accurately gauged Mary and propelled her towards Darnley, but having transgressed the code of woman's romantic dependency, she is 'punished'. The veiled implication of Dudley's infuriating comment "and by all the saints madam she is a woman that needs a man", is that Elizabeth's toughness and self-sufficiency make her less than sexually appealing. At the same time though, it is a strength of the film that the possibility exists for a critical reading of Dudley too, since his egotism is brought into full and rather ridiculous relief. Daniel Massey's performance aids this reading since he contributes much of the blustering. Elizabeth feigns surprise that Mary has flirted with Darnley: "And has rejected you?". Dudley storms:

With insults! Encouraged by Darnley your honest messenger. She spoke openly of me as your cast-off lover and far beneath any true queen. She must be demented! Before my eyes she tore up the document of succession. But she

consorts with that boy... and by all the saints madam she is a woman that needs a man.

Elizabeth's response is intriguing. She seems to be looking for sexual validation from Dudley, which would tend to ally the scene with those in the Davis and Robson films which exploit her alleged paranoia about ceasing to be attractive. However, there is also evidence that some of her vanity is quite reasonably based on her abilities and achievements (perhaps it is going too far to suggest that there is again an implicit critique of Dudley in whose eyes a woman's talents are no substitute for externals). Her words are illustrative: "What kind of a woman Robin?", "More than I? Is she better formed than I?", "Does she dance more elegantly?", "She's fiery?", "Does she play instruments more skilfully than I?", "Can she converse freely in Italian, Latin, Greek as I can?", "Is she really as beautiful as they say?". Clearly she conceives of her relationship with Mary as a contest and is torn by sexual jealousy of the other woman. Elizabeth attacks Dudley, delivering savage blows which have him doubling over. Although this combativeness appears to update the image of the queen, ultimately it serves to exaggerate her emasculating toughness. It is also ironic that Jackson should have been played off against Redgrave in terms of her looks, given that she did not conceive of herself as a glamorous actress; indeed, she once dismissively instructed a renowned make-up artist: "Just cover up the blotches"! The scene thus presents a humiliating romantic defeat for Elizabeth, despite what may be some implicit criticism of Dudley's superficiality and disloyalty. It also re-emphasises her androgyny, an obliteration of sexual difference which is not conscious and political, but a 'natural' consequence of her absorption in politics.

Surprisingly, the film includes an apocryphal story of how Elizabeth reacted to the news of the birth of Mary's son James. Of doubtful authenticity (Sir James Melville the Scottish Ambassador, related it years afterwards, claiming to have had it from friends at court), the story goes that upon hearing the news "she sank down disconsolately, bursting out to some of her ladies that the Queen of Scots was mother of a fair son, while she was but barren stock" (in Weir, 176). Alison Weir writes that all Sir James Melville "told Mary of Elizabeth's reaction was that the birth of the Prince was 'grateful to her Majesty'". In fact, continues Weir, "Cecil had told her before Melville arrived, and de Silva reported that 'the Queen seemed glad of the birth of the infant'" (176). Even allowing for some poetic license, the inclusion of this anecdote is regrettable. It is redolent of The Virgin Queen in which Elizabeth is shown to be different from other women because of her sterility and is also consumed by jealousy of the pregnant Lady Raleigh. Here, Elizabeth's implied biological inability to bear children is defining. As Custen points out in his discussion of Hollywood biography

In the end, the female famous person is compelled by biology to do what she must do; males answer to a different authority. The difference between male and female careers then, is striking: men are defined by their gift, women by their gender, or their gendered use of their gift. (106)

Mary bears this out as she begins to conceive of her political 'career' primarily in terms of her son. She pardons her treacherous brother saying:

For myself I care nothing. For the shame I care nothing. But I dare not give the heretics of Scotland and England a case to use against my son, and I will not risk his inheritance – not even for the pleasure of your death.

She presents her son to the people before giving one of the strongest speeches she has in the film:

Scotsmen here is your future king, James VI of Scotland, and in good time James I of England. I am the queen by right of birth and right of arms and tyranny I detest. I practise the old religion, but I tolerate the new. I rule in God's name, so I rule in justice!

Here she asserts her own representation of herself as well as the legitimacy of her rule and, more importantly, that of her son. She is characterised as a doting mother in the next scene where she is on the floor in her night-dress, hair loose, dandling a toy for James. In this scene she shows herself willing to submit to sex with her estranged husband for fear that he will annul their marriage and thereby make James a bastard. As Darnley gleefully puts it “I know, I know and she will do anything to save her son's inheritance as the future king”. She narrowly escapes this fate by drugging her husband and although she has taken Bothwell as her lover, she continues to stay with and nurse her husband in subsequent scenes. Mary may have been a devoted mother, but the film uses this characterisation in telling ways, as will be shown.

This view of women as “chained to the biology of gender” (Custen, 105), is clearest in the scene where the two women first meet. The inclusion of an encounter between the queens offended purists like George Fraser who mentions the film briefly in his book The Hollywood History of the World, calling it a “lacklustre piece” and one which

committed the cardinal (and quite unnecessary) sin of falsifying history by allowing the two to meet – something which, it is generally agreed, Elizabeth was at pains to avoid because she knew that if she once met Mary face to face she

would never be able to deal ruthlessly with her thereafter. In this respect the film was false not only to fact, but to Elizabeth's character. (78-9).

Fraser here betrays his own preference for the long-standing and benevolent "Good Queen Bess" image of Elizabeth rather than the more disturbing picture of a ruthless politician, but certainly the manufactured meeting affects her characterisation. Indeed, Glenda Jackson found the distortion problematic and asked for a re-write (Woodward, 81). Haskell's point that the collapse of the studio system and image-manufacturing apparatus of Hollywood's heyday meant that there was less influence in the hands of actresses, is borne out here (326). Unlike Davis sixteen years previously, Jackson had to capitulate (Woodward: 81). That gender is a powerful frame for the construction of this story is soon evident. The scene is an entertaining one and it is certainly difficult to imagine the film without any such encounter. Although the dialogue is strong, when Mary realises that Elizabeth will not assist her, sparks fly. Elizabeth is contemptuous: "Is it not enough madam to speak one's mind in season and out as you do, that is not the conduct of a queen. It is the outpouring of a pampered woman demanding that all indulge her". She even goes so far as to say "It does not surprise me that you are here helpless and that your brother rules. You are not fit for the high office to which you were born". It is revealing to compare Custen's account of Katharine Hepburn as Mary in the older Mary of Scotland with this Mary, Queen of Scots. In it, she

accuses the unmarried, childless Elizabeth of not being a woman, her barrenness and unmarried state a contrast to the thrice-married Mary. Elizabeth's reply... evokes the scornful trump card from Mary; "I've loved as a woman loves, lost as a woman loses. But still, I win. You have no heir. My son will inherit your throne, my son will rule England. Still, I win." (Custen, 105)



Redgrave's Mary responds to Elizabeth in much the same way when she tells her that she glories in her hatred because

it is clear to me that Elizabeth the bastard, the heretic, the usurper is cursed by God and will soon be too old to bear a child and will die a solitary old woman. Above all it is clear that Elizabeth fears Mary! And whatever my fate my son will rule here in time!

The parallels are striking and the title cards which close the film over the background image of a guilt-ridden, solitary old queen on her throne, would seem to indicate that the film's sympathies lie with Mary :

Elizabeth ruled England for another sixteen years.  
She died as she had lived, unmarried and childless.  
The thrones of England and Scotland passed to the  
Only possible claimant... a man,  
King James the First,  
Only son of  
Mary Stuart... Queen of Scots.

However, there is scope for a less simplistic reading in that the audience is made aware that it is not only a matter of whose offspring rules, but also one of political and religious convictions: James I is after all, brought up as a Protestant. Furthermore, Elizabeth accrues much sympathy in her sustained efforts to save Mary from herself, so that finally the Scottish queen's 'martyrdom' is not particularly convincing.

The scene of Mary's execution has her finally "behaving like a queen" in that she is poised, dignified, graceful and courageous, which is in strong contrast with her prior characterisation. However, even when she reveals the martyr's red dress and submits herself bravely to death, this is not persuasive, given her final encounter with Elizabeth. In it, Elizabeth advocates a pragmatic compromise with Mary, urging her to "put aside

your personal desires and behave like a queen”, and showing great frustration at the Scottish queen’s zealous religious attitude. Elizabeth is dressed to emphasise her physical and political presence, since she wears garments which give her a much more substantial silhouette than the Scottish queen’s. Her dress is richly embellished and generously cut, to lend weightiness to her frame. By contrast, Mary is ascetically and perhaps ironically dressed in the spare black garments suggestive of a religious order. We are left with the ultimate image of the opposition between the women when the script explicitly plays off Elizabeth’s ‘masculine’ rational qualities against Mary’s ‘feminine’ fervour, giving Elizabeth the words: “Madam, if your head had matched your heart, I would be the one awaiting death”. Mary’s dignity, poise and grace in her final scene thus appears to have as much to do with an intuitive ‘feminine’ submission to her destiny, as with behaving like a queen.

#### Chapter 4: Elizabeth (1998)

*"We princes, I tel you, are set on stages, in the sight and viewe of all the world duely observed"* (*Elizabeth* quoted in Frye:9).

In Elizabeth (1988) starring Cate Blanchett, we are presented with a Queen Elizabeth I neatly tailored to the nineties. Johanna McGeary writing about the queen for Time puts it as follows:

First feminist. First spinmeister. Megawatt celeb. So might our age judge her. To sixteenth century England, Elizabeth I was the original feminine mystique: goddess Gloriana; Virgin queen; finally and enduringly, Good Queen Bess... Hers was a prodigious political success story built on the power of personality: the Queen as star. ("Queen Elizabeth I (1533-1603), <http://www.time.com>)

In its extended exploration of self-conscious political image-making, the film is unprecedented and – clearly - very contemporary. Elizabeth's principal strength is its foregrounding of the processes of representation around Elizabeth, a project which is however, hampered by a conceptual framework similar to that which plagued the revisionist efforts of Mary, Queen of Scots. It is helpful to consider the comments of those involved in the making of Elizabeth. On the internet site devoted to this film, "The Genesis of Elizabeth" is described:

Based on the remarkable story of the rise of the young Elizabeth Tudor to Queen of England, Elizabeth depicts the early life of a woman of independent spirit who ascended to the throne in 1558 to a reign of intrigue and betrayal. The conflict of her private passions and personal friendships with her duty, as monarch to achieve national unity, form the basis of a story that is both heartbreaking and inspiring. (<http://www.elizabeththemovie.com>)

The producers of the film apparently intended to make Elizabeth an inspiring feminist heroine, yet were unable to escape the love-versus-career motif that runs through each of the films considered. Ironically, Alison Owen, one of the producers of Elizabeth, sees this as a rather unique take on the period. She argues that at “the heart of it is a wonderful love story” and comments that for her

It was very appealing that the central character is a woman. Her story seemed to have lots of parallels with modern twentieth century women who are often faced with that choice between career and personal life. It is a dilemma many contemporary women are trying to resolve in their own lives that Elizabeth had to face. She had to give up the chance of marriage and children in order to achieve stability in the country. I thought that was very interesting.  
([www.elizabeththemovie.com](http://www.elizabeththemovie.com))

Here, Owen projects onto Elizabeth a ‘natural’ desire for marriage and children which is not borne out in any of the biographical material consulted. David Walsh seizes on these and other similarly prosaic (and I presume marketable) sentiments, though not from a feminist perspective, and calls them “banal”, unoriginal ideas which betray a “passive, lazy, abstract ‘universalism’” (“Elizabeth and a weakened historical sense”, <http://www.wsws.org>). He is particularly critical of the very conventional assumption that a decision to sacrifice a satisfying emotional life for one’s state or nation must necessarily be a harsh one. Alison Owen here lends credence to the idea that women who choose career over family-life, will suffer.

The notion of Elizabeth’s feminine ‘martyrdom’ is central to the narrative - as one interviewer pointed out to the film’s director Shekhar Kapur - “the movie begins and ends with a haircut” (Miller, “Elizabeth: an interview with Shekhar Kapur”, <http://www.allmovie.com>). Another of the producers, Tim Bevan, makes the rather

disparaging comment that “we were keen to make a period movie, but one that wasn’t in the tradition of what I call ‘frock flicks’”. Elizabeth, which was deliberately structured as a “conspiracy thriller” according to the website, is heavily dependent on popular film genres. Indeed the producers proudly claim to have been more influenced by The Godfather than by prior historical dramas or by historical veracity. It is somewhat surprising that they should claim this film as an antecedent (Haskell saw it as the epitome of the ultra-macho cinematic backlash against women in the seventies [323]). One of the effects of an unselfconscious dependence on ‘blockbuster’ formulas is to iron-out ambiguity and contradiction, resulting in unchallenging, changeless material<sup>4</sup>. As David Walsh puts it , we

Have seen much of this before: the wily Spaniard, the sensual Frenchman or – woman, the Machiavellian (and all-knowing) chief of security gliding silently through hallways and corridors, the wise but aging advisor, the passionate but weak-willed lover. (“Elizabeth and a weakened historical sense”)

Amazingly, the producers actually relish the stock characters and it is disturbing that Bevan should wish to claim that Walsingham (Geoffrey Rush), Norfolk (Christopher Eccleston) and Dudley (Joseph Fiennes) are at root what propels the story:

What is good about Geoffrey, Christopher and Joe... is that they are very different. The film is really about the influence these three characters have on Elizabeth’s life. You have Joe as the romantic character, Geoffrey as the almost mystic

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<sup>4</sup> Clearly the producers attempted to appeal to the widest audience by targeting specific aspects of the film at particular market segments, macho action for the men, an empowerment message for the women. This kind of sterile pigeonholing of audiences perpetuates mediocrity in film. To borrow from Walsh again, the dependence on clichés of genre is justified by filmmakers and screenwriters on the basis that “contemporary audiences are incapable of grasping difficult and challenging material”, an insulting notion which, if it were true, he says, “represents a problem that the artist should urgently tackle” (“Elizabeth and a weakened historical sense”).

Walsingham, and Christopher as the ambitious thug and villain. It's a mix of casting that has worked, and will track well through the movie. (my emphasis) ("The Genesis of 'Elizabeth'")

I would endorse his analysis of what the film is about, however Walsh's contention that Blanchett's Elizabeth is a somewhat more complex character than the rest, does bear considering. I certainly enjoyed the film thoroughly and recognise that its melodramatic aspects and visual richness are tremendously seductive. An initial viewing left me on the whole with a rather positive image of the queen. Many of the reservations expressed in this paper only emerged after consulting biographical sources and on subsequent viewings.

The film opens with scene-setting title-cards which pare the plot down to barest necessities. One cross splits into two to present rival family factions: Mary (Catholic) versus Elizabeth (Protestant). While the website contains much self-congratulatory rhetoric on the fresh directing style of 'outsider' Shekhar Kapur, he seems to have taken up many of the simple dichotomies beloved by western moviemakers. Our introduction to Mary's administration of the country is a lurid scene of 'heretics' having their heads shaved and then being burned at the stake. An online reviewer for the San Francisco Chronicle sums it up with deliberate flippancy

Elizabeth is the enlightenment that will take Britain fully out of the Dark Ages, the spirit of practicality and tolerance that will replace repression. The soon-to-be-dead Queen Mary keeps beheading Protestants. She's homely and her teeth are rotting, while Elizabeth is sunny and cute. Anybody could tell which one we're supposed to root for. (LaSalle, "'Elizabeth' a Modern Woman", <http://www.sfgate.com>)

This binary split between Elizabeth and Mary is a historically inherited narrative which feminist writers have begun to set aside. Carolly Erickson in The First Elizabeth puts it as follows:

As I searched through the documentary evidence about Mary Tudor... I found not a hardened bigot responsible for the cruel burnings of Protestants, but an anguished, deeply disappointed and heartbroken woman, buffeted emotionally yet always full of courage. (7)

In a similar vein, Susan Doran argues in Monarchy and Matrimony: The courtships of Elizabeth I, that Mary was not a weak, dependant woman clinging to her husband for guidance. Rather, she claims that

recent research is revealing that the queen had not allowed power and authority to slip from her hands into those of her husband... she placed difficulties in the way of Philip playing an effective role in government... she made little attempt to push his coronation through parliament, an investiture which would have enhanced his status as king. Furthermore, all the court rituals and ceremonies of the reign asserted Mary's role as sovereign and emphasised that Philip was merely her consort... (9).

The introduction to Elizabeth bears out La Salle's summary of the hierarchical polarisation between the sisters. The scene verges on melodrama with Dudley looking byronic in his full, open-necked white shirt as he gallops closer on a white horse while Elizabeth dances in the green grass. The whole scene is bathed in golden light and is filmed, in places, through filters. When the Earl of Sussex appears to take her away, Dudley tells her to "remember who you are, do not be afraid of them". This is the first of numerous occasions which bear out Bevan's claim that the film is about the influence of key male characters on the queen. Dudley is clearly a romantic hero here and not the

strong rival for the queen's political power as suggested historically by, amongst other things, the Kenilworth entertainments.

The film successfully traces Elizabeth's movement towards iconic status via a series of structured image changes. Her trip to, and interrogation in, the Tower of London, for example, works well, particularly on a visual level, to ally her with the martyrs of the first scene. She is standing up in the boat as it enters the tower, hands bound, red hair loose and maidenly, wearing a plain ivory crucifix and a white dress reminiscent of those worn by the burned 'heretics'. This is obviously in strong contrast with the dark, ominous surroundings. In fact, production designer John Myhre points out that the tower was one area that they decided to make "more interesting". As he explains, "I wanted to make the Tower of London look darker, danker, and more claustrophobic than it really was" ("Voices", <http://www.elizabeththemovie.com>). In the interrogation sequence the camera swirls around an immobile Elizabeth, often from above as in the martyrdom sequence, while Sussex, the Earl of Arran and the sinister-looking Bishop Gardner adopt their disorienting interrogation techniques. Elizabeth is frequently framed by a glaring white light penetrating the darkness from a loophole in the form of a cross. It is noteworthy that this scene reflects so well the influence of Elizabeth's self-representations. As has been noted, during her Coronation procession, the young queen cleverly turned this moment of vulnerability (incarceration in the tower) in her past to her advantage by reshaping history and suggesting that God had sponsored her release from prison and preserved her for her coronation because he judged her virtuous (see Frye: 37). This film presents a teleological view of history as progressive and telescopes the events conveniently, changing them where necessary. Thus, here we are faithfully



presented with the image of Elizabeth as a political/religious martyr. There are no messy inconsistencies – the only beheadings Elizabeth is associated with are those of her three tormentors. The cross imagery is persistent: as she walks to and from her cell the camera is outside the castle recording the action intermittently via the cruciform loopholes. When Lord Arran places his coat over her shoulders they are facing the camera directly and are framed by a cross.

During the interview with Mary Tudor the seeds are sown for Elizabeth's eventual appropriation of religious iconography. Mary calls her sister a "consummate actress" and pleads with her not to take away from the people the "consolations of the Holy Virgin". Visually this is underscored because Mary's face is cast largely into shadow while Elizabeth is more flatteringly lit by candles against a gilded background panel depicting the Madonna and child. The panel is in a medieval style and serves as an ironic comment on Mary Tudor as well as being suggestively directed at Elizabeth. The scene builds up Elizabeth at the expense of the grotesque and pitiable Mary. The princess is characterised as courageous, moral and innocent: "When I am queen I promise – to act as my conscience dictates". Elizabeth traces the queen's movement from private person to public icon and in doing so, implies that the private woman is real while the public Elizabeth is a construction and, therefore, less genuine. The film allows us direct access to the personal self but develops distance from the public construction. At this early stage we still have privileged insight into the private, real Elizabeth and can witness her defensive adoption of a self-assured façade as she exits the court through the ranks of hostile courtiers and plays the part of a future monarch. When she rounds the corner we are privy to a very intimate (and therefore honest) moment as the façade slips and it is

suggested, the genuine Elizabeth is seen, showing fear, relief and humour. This scene is in line with the ideology of the film according to which political empowerment involves sacrificing the 'authentic' innocent and moral self and becoming ruthless and inauthentic, that is, acting. To quote Kapur:

Does she go on being a loving, joyous, caring, tactile human being, or does she cut that out and become an image: a ruthless, powerful monarch, but inside, just a shell. (Miller, "Elizabeth: an interview with Shekhar Kapur")

Traditionally, as has been noted, women are consigned to a career/love conflict. Custen argues that the "mere owning up to sexual desire is often taken, by men, as a sign of weakness" (105). The characterisation of the male stars in Elizabeth is apposite here. Dudley is repeatedly shown to be soft and ineffectual, sometimes coming to the brink of tears. The casting of the boyish Joseph Fiennes further reinforces this impression. His passion for Elizabeth and fondness for the comforts of court life including flirtation, dancing and hunting are signifiers of weakness. This over-emotional nature makes him an easy target for conspiracy. In fact, his own words to the Spanish Ambassador bear out the conception that love is destructive to men: "Envy no man for that. Such love is hateful, tears the soul apart. Envy the man who has never known such love". In a similar vein, Norfolk is undone by his sexual involvement with a woman, who, the film subtly indicates, has been blackmailed by Walsingham. This bears out Custen's remark that even mere sexual desire may be treated as a sign of weakness. Walsingham serves as a foil for these men: certainly the more mature actor is played off against the 'pretty' youthfulness of Fiennes. Several reviewers rhapsodised about the "fascinating", amoral figure of Walsingham, played by Geoffrey Rush (see for instance: Addiego, "'Elizabeth'

Rules”, <http://www.sfgate.com> ). He encompasses many of the characteristics popularly attributed to American mobsters: he is ruthless, cool, decisive, cynical and unwaveringly loyal (which has implications of strength). The tremendous appeal Walsingham has is suggestive of a degree of nostalgia for violent, pro-male politics. Walsingham’s words as he slits the neck of Norfolk’s notably effeminate young servant – “Innocence is the most precious thing you possess, lose that and you lose your soul” – drives home the conflict between the emotional, moral self and the ruthless, successful self, since “soul” in the film encompasses notions of human vulnerability, emotional warmth and even religious conviction/morality. Walsingham leans towards atheism in the film both in this scene – “do you suppose that is what God had in mind, that is, if there is a God?” – and again when he tortures the Catholic priest Ballard. The film thus indicates that he is without a “soul” in the sense mentioned above. Walsingham may have lost his soul, but he certainly bolsters the film with “a character so powerful that by the end of the film his mere presence in a scene speaks volumes” (Zelevinsky, “Movie Review: Elizabeth”, <http://www-tech.mit.edu> ). It is arguable that the mysterious, under-written character of Walsingham easily upstages Elizabeth in a number of instances. His words to Norfolk as he arrests him are suggestive: “You were the most powerful man in England, you could have been greater still, but you had not the courage to be loyal. Only the conviction of your own vanity”. This juxtaposition underscores the fact that Walsingham is codified according to standard notions of what constitutes masculinity (courage, loyalty, strength). Notably, Christopher Hibbert describes the historical Walsingham as a zealous Protestant, a tactless, impatient man who actively pursued his own policies in defiance of the queen’s wishes, earning not her trust but rather her “particular resentment” (118-9).

Though Walsingham was a capable and influential advisor to the queen, Hibbert claims, Elizabeth was aware that he deliberately incited her ministers to delay fulfilling her orders or to evade them, to lie to her or conceal facts and to communicate with one another in code “assuring themselves that as a woman she could not fully understand the complicated business of government”. Hibbert also claims that Walsingham often wrote to ambassadors at foreign courts asking them to give the queen the outline of a problem but to reserve details for him or else to tell a false report to persuade her to adopt policies she would otherwise have rejected (119)

At Hatfield it becomes increasingly clear that Elizabeth’s relationship with Robert Dudley is the central concern of the film. The pivotal question in the film becomes “Will Elizabeth renounce Dudley?” (“How could you ever be nothing to me? Robert you know you are everything to me”)? Again Hatfield is given the heightened romantic treatment with none of the “unsettling imagery” which the production designers deliberately attached to the centres of power (“Voices”).

The film borrows from some of the famous Tudor portraits at strategic moments to develop the movement from the personal, private self towards the icon and perhaps also to lend an air of authenticity to this imaginative engagement with Elizabeth’s life. The first of the key portraiture moments in the film is the Coronation. Although the camera lingers for long periods on the carefully re-constructed image of the famous Coronation portrait, it also dissolves the psychological distance which characterises the painting (Pomeroy: 11). In the portrait Pomeroy points out, the “garments and the wearer are visually joined. She has put on majesty and embodies it” (11). The film on the other hand depicts a young woman who is ill-at-ease with the trappings of power. This is

achieved in part by details of performance: Blanchett/ Elizabeth's eyes express nervousness and discomfiture at odds with the stiffness of her body and she anxiously adjusts the crown as it is placed on her head. The camera allows us to witness the tension between the surface Elizabeth has 'put on' and the person she is, by not keeping the requisite distance. Rather, it moves about shooting from intimate perspectives and jumping alternately to the faces of Dudley and those of her ladies. The same effect is achieved by allowing us to see her in private after the ceremony as the ladies assist her by removing the heavy garments: she expresses relief and shrugs and stretches. Although the film employs the love/career conflict in relation to Elizabeth and depends on stock genres and characters, it certainly manages to focus attention on Elizabeth herself and in this instance, on the constructed, textual nature of the portraiture.

The night of Elizabeth's coronation depicts her making her first tentative steps towards leadership. When Kat Ashley whispers the names of potential suitors into the queen's ear, Elizabeth responds "I do not see why a woman need marry at all", an engaging statement of autonomy. The script also has her keeping the French at a distance with an astute reference to the political context: "It is unfortunate however that at this time the Duke's aunt Mary of... of Guise chooses to garrison Scotland with French troops". Her brilliance in diplomatic marriage negotiations has to do here with political self-sufficiency and an understanding of the tremendous leverage her eligibility gives her. Again however, the film sets up the gendered conflict between sex/romance and career, when Elizabeth scandalises the court and delights the romance-struck ladies by dancing a very sensual volta with Dudley. This is a somewhat ambiguous moment, since Elizabeth is sexually assertive in a way which might be read not simply as an abandonment to

romance, but as a deliberate statement of her power. Indeed, she seems to be intentionally courting scandal simply because she can. Nevertheless, throughout the scene there are cuts from Elizabeth and the various political interest groups in the hall, to Dudley, who is leading the dancing. Elizabeth also looks on him with much love and seems eager to join him dancing just as de Foix is foisted onto her. Love and career are thus literally juxtaposed here, as they are in the next sequence. (The scene also well illustrates the differences between Dudley and Walsingham in that the former revels with the women, while the latter is ascetically dressed and works his way silently, but significantly, around the room.)

Particularly telling is the love scene between Elizabeth and Dudley. In an interview Shekhar Kapur said that the decision to include this scene caused much controversy which he attributed to an equation between virginity and purity. He said that “educated British historians hanging on to the relationship between purity and virginity today is as tribal as what they say about the Islamic tribes who say things like that”. Kapur’s stance on sexuality is significant. He acknowledged in the same interview the “huge macho burdens” he bore growing up in north-west India and agreed that his attraction to films about strong women had to do with formulating his own identity:

Perhaps it has to do with this thing that I suddenly discovered, that accepting the feminine side of yourself would make you more complete and therefore maybe this is a journey through which I have to go to understand women more completely. (Miller, “Elizabeth: an interview with Shekhar Kapur”)

Although Kapur’s efforts may be well-intentioned, the insistence on foregrounding Elizabeth’s sexuality is a reminder that allowing her the choice of a self-sufficient, untouchable virginity is potentially an immensely threatening one. Central to Kapur’s

previous film The Bandit Queen is the spectacle of the heroine Phoolan Devi's brutal and prolonged gang-rape subsequent to which she exacts her revenge and becomes a ruthless political leader. This forms a telling pattern.

The scene opens with the queen's ladies lining up outside her chambers in eager anticipation of Dudley's arrival. The action constitutes a contest between Dudley and Cecil for ownership of the queen's body. Particularly interesting is its adoption of imagery from one of the best-known portraits of the last decade of Elizabeth's reign, the Rainbow Portrait. The filmy bed-curtains depict the same open mouths, ears and eyes as the portrait does. Susan Frye points to a number of iconographic elements in the portrait which "claim the queen's chaste body as the center of the Ptolemaic universe while wrapping her in a mantle whose open mouths, ears, and eyes form a disquieting suggestion of vaginal openings combined with a sense of governmental surveillance" (102-3). The picture is thought to have been painted at the very end of her reign and depicts Elizabeth as the "sun who makes possible the rainbow" (103). The connection of youth and fertility with political viability is crucial to the portrait. Frye reads the Coronation portrait (also painted around this time) together with the Rainbow portrait as suggestions of how Elizabeth preferred to be viewed. In the film the iconography is decontextualised and instead over-emphasises the physical availability of Elizabeth's body. Thus all eyes are turned inwards onto the queen and we witness three men penetrating her private spaces: Dudley, Cecil and finally Norfolk. That Elizabeth's rooms are being conflated with her body is evident, I think, from the many gaps in the wall through which her ladies peep, echoing the ears and eyes on the bed. Certainly, a deliberate effort was made to 'animate' the architecture: "The architecture had so many

interesting details which were almost human: doorways that felt like they had teeth, and windows that looked like eyes peeping in", says Myhre ("Voices"). When Cecil asks to see her sheets each morning saying "her majesty's body and person are no longer her own", it is possible he becomes the scapegoat for the voyeurism of the audience, since he is throughout treated as an ageing, old-fashioned busybody and spoilsport, and the ladies mock him. The camera is directed almost exclusively at Elizabeth, the principle object of enquiry being her face at the moment of orgasm, when she cries. This preoccupation with her face fixes the meaning of the encounter: the queen has physically and emotionally surrendered herself. It is arguable that the film is about unmasking Elizabeth and getting behind the 'false' veil of her virginity to disclose the truth, that is about "knowing" her. Hence, perhaps, the many veils through which the action is filmed and the strong emphasis on voyeurism in the scene, despite the fact that neither Elizabeth nor Dudley is treated very explicitly.

The role of the ladies-in-waiting is enigmatic. It is a strong point in the film that these women are so conspicuous. In fact, they collude in Elizabeth's clandestine love affair. Elizabeth often countered rumours of her sexual immodesty with the apparently indisputable argument that she was never alone. She herself said, claims Alison Weir, that she was "always surrounded by my Ladies of the Bedchamber and maids of honour" and, indeed, they slept in her room (51). In fact her very words "My life is in the open, and I have so many witnesses. I cannot understand how so bad a judgement can have been formed of me" (Weir, 52), are taken up in the film during the confrontation with Lord Burghley after the assassination attempt. This is said (with staggering sincerity) when the women are present and they do not dispute her declaration of



innocence. The women's collusion makes them very subversive. While this emphasis on the strong bonds between women is an asset to the film, conversely, the repudiation of Elizabeth's argument seems rather violent in its assumption that all of the queen's ladies-in-waiting, were liars (if not out of love as in Kat's case, then from self-interested motives, as in Isabelle Knolly's). The love scene is punctuated by portentous jump-cuts to messengers approaching the court which re-emphasises the treatment of love and career as antithetical.

That sexual desire and love are equated with weakness in this film becomes evident in the council meeting when Elizabeth, having slept in, further undermines her tenuous rule by making an unwise political decision influenced by her weak-willed lover and by Norfolk. To quote one rather flippant reviewer who likewise argues that the affair with Dudley is the film's central concern "are passion and the monarchy compatible; can a good orgasm spoil a perfectly respectable royal heritage?" (Morris, "Like a Virgin", <http://www.Student.Com>).

The first image change Elizabeth undergoes takes place after this decision has been taken. Against an appropriately stormy background her ladies undress her, allowing us to focus on her severely curled and partly tied-up hair. This marks a turning-point in the film as Elizabeth stops relying on her childhood love and begins to turn to Walsingham for guidance. Although she instinctively looks for Dudley, he has gone hunting and visually there is much emphasis on her vulnerability and isolation. To paraphrase the production designer John Myhre again, they intentionally highlighted Elizabeth's isolation by making Whitehall Palace bigger and more expansive, specifically attempting to convey that the huge stone rooms were alive so as to capture the feeling of

conspiracy (“Voices”). Again the film borrows from Tudor portraiture, this time the famous Hans Holbein portrait of Henry VIII. At this moment of weakness, Elizabeth confronts the politically and sexually potent image of her father and appears to take inspiration from this affirmation of the family line. Although Walsingham is in many ways propelling the scene, the portrait is a significant catalyst for Elizabeth as tears turn to anger:

Elizabeth: Why did they not send proper reinforcements?  
 Walsingham: Because the bishops would not let them. They spoke  
 against it in the pulpits.  
 Elizabeth: Then they are speaking against their queen!

Although a lover’s quarrel ensues between Elizabeth and Dudley, this powerful identification with her father carries over into the scene where she confronts the bishops. The scene employs the disconcerting technique of presenting Elizabeth rehearsing her speech directly to the camera. This is a particularly positive representation of the queen since it manages to communicate the sustained and disciplined effort of intellect it would have required to prepare some of the great speeches the queen made. Rather than implying that she generated them spontaneously on the basis of overwhelming love for her people, or through her quick wit, here she is engaged in strategic – albeit tearful – planning. The jump-cuts ahead to the scene of the meeting further emphasise the pressure under which she was placed.

Elizabeth formulates a speech in which her self-representations draw crucially on the divine right of kings: “God has placed me here”, “I am your annointed sovereign”, “I am your queen and like my father I mean to rule”. The script thus utilises some of the queen’s own preferred representations, allowing her to identify with her father, a strong

male, to augment her authority while also presenting her putting her gender to good use through strategic deference: “How can I force you, your grace? I am a woman” and via the metaphor of motherhood: “upon your hands lies the future happiness of my people” . An appealing aspect of the scene visually is that despite this masterful self-representation, her femininity is still preserved. The choice of costume is a strategic underpinning of the dialogue since she wears a small close-fitting skullcap which has religious connotations and which is decorated with pearls. She is also dressed in red which is the pope’s colour and therefore an emblem of her appropriation of religious authority. It is a pity that this complex representation of Elizabeth is so unnecessarily undercut by the blatant assertion that Walsingham had to intervene illegally to swing the vote:

Walsingham: Her majesty has won the argument.  
 Gardiner: By what count?  
 Walsingham: By five, your grace, five.

The camera here pulls back to reveal six mitred heads suggesting that were it not for Walsingham, she would have lost by one vote. Walsingham is not mentioned in relation to the Acts of Uniformity or the Oath of Supremacy in any of the biographies consulted. In fact, J.E. Neale argues that the queen’s gradually unfolding religious policy was helped by Fortune in that five bishoprics had been left vacant at the time of Mary’s death and a sixth bishop had subsequently died, so that there were fewer potential leaders of resistance (63). Recalcitrant bishops refusing to take the Oath of Supremacy or to use the new prayer book according to the Act of Uniformity, says Hibbert, were made examples of by the queen in agreement with her council:

the Bishop of London who perversely continued to celebrate Mass in the old Roman Catholic way was sent to the Marshalsea prison in Southwark where he

died ten years later; the Bishops of Lincoln and Winchester were imprisoned in the Tower; all the others... were deprived of their bishoprics and replaced with more amenable men. (93).

In keeping with the theme of Elizabeth's evolving self-invention, images of disguise and role-playing/ deception proliferate in the film. It is also typical of the conspiracy thriller genre in which the tension between appearance and reality is paramount. The arrival of the Duke of Anjou, for example, provides broad comic relief (based on the cultural prejudice which associates the French with lewdness), but is also instrumental to the plot in that it speaks of the tension between surfaces and depths. Thus, Anjou's meeting with Elizabeth is a carefully staged and solemn procession in which the duke hides his individual identity, allowing the queen and the audience to be misled into assuming that one of his servants is the royal suitor, a notion which he then explodes. This has some parallels with Elizabeth's story in which becoming a queen entails playing a part and melding her public and private selves until the private ceases to exist. The festivities that evening take the form of a masque which obviously intensifies the sense of intrigue and deception around the assassination attempt on Elizabeth. It also foregrounds the depth or absence of identification between individuals and their literal or figurative masks (Anjou, for example, wears a particularly apposite mask – the beak of a bird with peacock's plumage). Masks are usually understood to have the capacity to liberate their wearers temporarily from social taboos. Thus, Dudley plays at courting Elizabeth - with hindsight he garners some of the unsavoury associations of masking when it is discovered that he is already married. Appropriately, Dudley's mask is surmounted by a small golden disc, probably signifying the sun which is conventionally masculine, where Elizabeth's mask has a crescent suggestive of the feminine moon.

Liberated and intoxicated, the queen treats Dudley's proposal half seriously asking "Does not a queen sit under the same stars as any other woman?", a question which is abruptly answered by the attempted assassination. This foregrounds the interface between Elizabeth the woman and Elizabeth the monarch.

Likewise, the mask can symbolise liberation from dominant sexual codes, as in the case of Anjou. His mask of peacock's feathers speaks the truth. Attention is focused on dress and gender identity in this scene and during the cross-dressing episode. Ironically, Anjou and de Foix attribute to Elizabeth and to women in general a propensity for deception and acting:

- Anjou:           The queen is very intimate with Lord Robert, not? With me she plays the shrew, with him the lover. Her life depends on the feelings of my heart, yes?
- de Foix:          She is a woman, Sire...they say one thing but mean another – no man can unlock their secrets.
- Anjou:           Unless they have...a very big key. Yes. A very big key!

Anjou's transvestism is constructed as sexual depravity, partly motivated by the implication that he has an incestuous relationship with his aunt, Mary of Guise. His cross-dressing is codified as being both sick and comic. Notably, it is Elizabeth who uncovers the sexual perversion and breaks off their courtship, thereby signifying her distance from cross-dressing and re-establishing the social order. She performs the duties of a queen with sarcasm "Although my affection for you is undiminished I have, after an agonising struggle, determined to sacrifice my own happiness for my people". Given that the film places much emphasis on Elizabeth's self-representations and on her dress and performance of power, it is surprising that she is never shown attempting to denaturalise gender identity for herself, for example, by deliberately presenting herself as

androgynous. Blanchett's Elizabeth is never mannish, which represents a departure from previous films where a natural consequence of competing in the male world was the sacrifice of conventional markers of femininity (both Jackson and Davis were played off against younger, more beautiful women). Thus, the retention of a more conventional feminine identity can be seen as important and positive for this film. At the same time the film doesn't generate many questions about the fluidity or fixity of gender roles either. With the exception of one very interesting but ambivalent scene, she never attempts to appropriate masculine positions in any very threatening way. Rather than violating gender identity, here the film has her enforcing it.

Elizabeth's final volta with Robert Dudley is an important representational moment. From this point on Elizabeth starts to become ruthless and excludes her private self, a movement based on disillusionment with Dudley and Anjou. When Dudley says: "For God's sake you are still my Elizabeth!", she pushes him off and responds with one of her strongest statements of self-sufficiency in the film: "I am not your Elizabeth! I am no man's Elizabeth and if you think to rule your are mistaken... I will have one mistress here and no master!". Kapur explains helpfully that in order to give the impression that Elizabeth was constantly being watched, he envisioned the camera as a conspirator "almost like a serpent that kept going around, looking around, waiting to strike". However, when Elizabeth started to become powerful he says, "then the camera calmed down, until the end when the camera becomes a loyal subject"(Miller interview). This is well borne-out in the interview with Dudley in which he advocates Elizabeth's marriage to the Spanish king. Her costume is markedly more severe: in previous scenes the neckline had been increasingly closed-up with netting which alluded to the flesh beneath,

but here her dress is restrictively buttoned with no exposed skin. Her make-up is also applied in such a way as to make her look paler and more unreal. Similarly, the increasing emotional distance is indicated spatially in that Elizabeth remains on her throne refusing to bridge the distance and she even toys distractedly with a spray of flowers which accentuates her psychological inaccessibility. Although she approaches him briefly to question him, when Dudley declares his love (“For God’s sake, I do this for us, I ask you to save some part of us!”) she moves back to her throne. At the moment of Elizabeth’s renunciation of Dudley she uses his title to keep him at arm’s length “Lord Robert, you may make whores of my ladies, but you shall not make one of me!”. The camera films at a ‘respectful’ distance and is at rest when she delivers this line, though at some height above the scene.

The political consequences of Elizabeth’s sacrifice of her ‘feminine’ need for romantic love is driven home in the scene where she retires Cecil. The dialogue is illustrative:

- Elizabeth: The word ‘must’ is not used to princes. I have followed your advice in all the affairs of my kingdom, but your policies would make England nothing but part of either France or Spain. From this moment I am going to follow my own opinion and see if I do any better.
- Cecil: Forgive me madam but you’re only a woman.
- Elizabeth: I may be a woman Sir William but if I choose I have the heart of a man. I am my father’s daughter. I am not afraid of anybody.

The use of the term “prince” and the incorporation of some of her words from the Tilbury speech are notable because of the cross-gender identification which is suggested. Here, Elizabeth, as is usual in biographical films treating female royal rule, shows “her mettle by forgoing things typically ‘female’” (Custen:105) – in this instance her ‘female’ heart.

That she claims the agency to choose “the heart of a man” is nevertheless very appealing. Despite this new voice though, Walsingham has been busily at work without Elizabeth’s knowledge, materially consolidating her power by, amongst other things, murdering Mary of Guise (historically she died of dropsy). The scene depicts him helping to fashion Elizabeth’s image:

A prince should never flinch from being blamed for acts of ruthlessness which are necessary for safeguarding the state and their own person. You must take these things so much to heart that you do not fear to strike. Even the very nearest that you have, if they be implicated.

His shadowy presence on the sidelines throughout Elizabeth’s exchange with Sir William tends to insinuate that he is structuring the queen’s seizure of power. He prompts Elizabeth to initiate the climax, which he masterminds, where her enemies are systematically eradicated.

The relationship of the cinematic techniques to the narrative flow is particularly obvious and suggestive when Elizabeth visits the Catholic Lord Arran and his wife in prison. In the artificial blue lighting her costume blends in with the walls, as does the increasingly theatrical and pale make-up she wears, which impresses her aloofness and makes her seem incorporeal. Elizabeth is off-screen as Arran and his wife plead for pity on their knees before her. The camera echoes their subservience by not filming her directly: only her disembodied hand reaches out to each of them in turn as they look up reverently, or else it films her from behind through the bars, allowing us to see the suggestively high collar she is wearing. Elizabeth says (still off-screen) “All your many kindnesses are remembered. You must not think we care not for your children”, which hints at a reworking of religious language, but it is Arran’s wife who reassigns Christian



terminology when she kisses Elizabeth's hand devoutly and says: "Your majesty is merciful and forgiving". Equally, in the queen's meeting with Dudley she blends in with the tone of the walls around her, which lends impact to the impassivity she shows and is in stark contrast with his haggard, overwrought appearance.

Crucial to the chronicle of Elizabeth's evolution towards iconic status is the penultimate scene where she is kneeling before a statue of the Virgin Mary, but asks Walsingham for guidance. It is Walsingham who proposes that Elizabeth become the secular substitute for Mary, as is amply demonstrated by an extract of their dialogue:

Elizabeth: Am I to be made of stone? Must I be touched by nothing?  
 Walsingham: Aye madam – to reign supreme. All men need something greater than themselves to look up to and worship. They must be able to touch the divine – here on earth.  
 Elizabeth: She had such power over men's hearts. They died for her.  
 Walsingham: They have found nothing to replace her.

The finale rides substantially on the stone metaphor as Elizabeth comes to resemble a marble statue and narrative gives way to spectacle. At the transition between the scenes, the camera makes the glazed, staring eyes of the statue its focal point, moving towards the back of the icon's head which then melds into the back of Elizabeth's head, thrown forward for the final haircut. The analogy between them is made explicit by Elizabeth's parallel preternatural gaze as she raises her face. The women's grief as Elizabeth's hair is shorn serves as a reminder of the potent sexual connotations of long hair and again emphasises the strong emotional bonds between Elizabeth and her ladies. The flashes of her past as she undergoes this metamorphosis assigns a personal meaning to this political metamorphosis and suggests that with her sexuality, she is excising her past. When she announces to the camera "Kat... I have become a virgin", her own eyes glisten. The film

thus constructs virginity as a lack and given that we have seen her as distinctly not a virgin, the audience can treat the announcement ironically. As one reviewer put it “Fortunately... we get to know Blanchett’s queen before she is a virgin” (Walker, “Elizabeth”, <http://www.thisislondon.co.uk> ). Finally, the depth of Elizabeth’s identification with her guise of power is attested to by the surprise registered even on Walsingham’s face as he kneels with the stunned courtiers. Her dramatic announcement “Observe, Lord Burghley. I am married. To England”, is the ultimate statement of the alleged dehumanising quality of power. As Kapur intended, the camera is by this stage a faithful subject and with its subjection the audience is equally distanced. The final frame of the film is a close up of Elizabeth’s head and neck, employing the symbolic visual vocabulary familiar from many of the portraits of the queen: the pearls, the luminous halo-like ruff, the motto. The film concludes with the words

Elizabeth ruled for another forty years. Walsingham remained her most trusted and faithful advisor to the end. She never married and never saw Dudley in private again. On her deathbed she was said to have whispered his name. At the time of her death England was the richest and most powerful country in Europe. Her reign has been called the Golden Age.

Despite its limitations, this final scene is stunning and adds a new, nineties dimension to Elizabeth’s popular mythic biography. The film implicitly draws parallels between Elizabeth’s statecraft and modern politics which is so heavily dependant on the media and on image-making as the means to achieving and retaining, control of the state.

. . .

Our contemporary images of Elizabeth participate in the ongoing struggle to define this female ruler who continually disrupted available definitions of the feminine.

Scholars have pointed out that Elizabeth's voice is only very partially available, due to the absence of a definitive edition of her works and given that it could never be recovered absolutely (see Frye, 9). Even more so than in her own lifetime, Elizabeth exists only as a fascinating, and often contradictory, web of texts and counter-texts, that will probably continue to be affirmed and transformed in the light of our own changing perspectives.

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Fire Over England 1937 William K. Howard, London Films.

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