

Navigating Femininity: Queen Elizabeth I and the *Armada Portrait*

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INTRODUCTION

This essay aims to examine the *Armada Portrait* (c. 1588) within the context of gender roles in the Elizabethan era to discern the strategies that Queen Elizabeth I utilized in the visual arts to control the public perception of her reign.¹ Despite being one of the most recognized portraits of Queen Elizabeth I, the *Armada Portrait* has been overlooked in art-historical studies. However, in examining this painting, we can better understand the role of female image-making and, by extension, the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, which was characterized by both insecurity and triumph. At this time, Elizabeth I implemented a command of visual culture, following the precedent set by her Tudor ancestors, to embolden and legitimize her image. She effectively used the visual arts to confirm and defy her female identity. During the Elizabethan era, women rulers who sought power were condemned mainly, while those who passively acknowledged their position were met with praise. This paper will demonstrate how the anonymous artist of the *Armada Portrait* both reinforced and challenged these values.

The *Armada Portrait* is one of the most iconic paintings of Queen Elizabeth I, solidifying the image of a mighty queen. Commissioned in 1588 after the Spanish Armada's defeat, this portrait serves as a celebration of England's triumph of the sea. Highlighting Queen Elizabeth's propensity for regal magnificence, military prowess, adept statecraft, and ultimate sanctity, the *Armada Portrait* reflects the efficacy of image for propaganda.² This idea will be discussed in detail below.

There is no current convincing attribution for the *Armada Portrait*; in fact, there are three surviving versions of the portrait that exist: one in the collection of the Woburn Abbey (Fig. 1), a

¹ I would like to thank Dr. Elizabeth Ferrell for the opportunity to present the original version of this paper at the annual meeting of the Philadelphia-Area Undergraduate Art History Symposium, 2022. Earlier iterations of this essay were generously read by Dr. Cameron McKay, Dr. Prash Naidu, and Dr. Elizabeth Ferrell.

² Erna Auerbach, "Portraits of Elizabeth I," *Burlington Magazine* 95, no. 603 (1953): 205.

cropped design at the National Portrait Gallery (Fig. 2), and the last currently housed in the Royal Museums Greenwich (Fig. 3).³ All three portraits feature the central figure, Queen Elizabeth I, sitting for a portrait surrounded by illustrious attributes, patterns of luxury, and evocative scenes of battle and ensuing peace, speaking to a European precedent of utilizing the visual arts to reinforce the regimes of rulers through allegorical symbolism. This paper will focus on the Greenwich version of the *Armada Portrait*, with supplemental information from the other two portraits.

Given the differences in style, scale, and iconography between the three versions of the *Armada Portrait*, it is presumed that different workshops executed the compositions.⁴ The two portraits in the Woburn Abbey and the National Portrait Museum collections have historically been attributed to George Gower, the court painter to Queen Elizabeth I. However, this attribution is currently being called into question.⁵ Serjeant painters in this period were appointed in a life-long position that granted stability in a time of uncertain commissions; it would have been consistent with his job description for Gower to produce a portrait of the Queen intended to idealize and flatter the figure.⁶

Throughout history and particularly during the Renaissance period, portraits had the potential to act as agents for propaganda. Artists, especially at the level of a royal court, were deliberate in their choice of objects present within the images they created. This choice was intentional, as elite patrons commissioned art to orchestrate political messages. The practice of

³ Robert Blyth and Christine Riding, *The Armada Portrait*. (London: National Maritime Museum Press, 2020), 44-45.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ J. W. Goodison, "George Gower, Serjeant Painter to Queen Elizabeth," *The Burlington Magazine* 90, no. 546 (1948): 261–65; Blyth and Riding, *The Armada Portrait*, 45.

⁶ Blyth and Riding, *The Armada Portrait*, 37.

propagandist image-making, utilized by regal figures and courtiers, was consistent during Queen Elizabeth I's reign because she was concerned with her image as a queen.⁷

To further examine the propagandist impulses seen within the *Armada Portrait*, it is useful for the art historian to examine commission records that work in conjunction with courtly politics. Blyth and Riding maintain that Sir Francis Drake, celebrated privateer and explorer, likely has a direct connection to the *Armada Portrait*, particularly concerning his status as both a courtier and vice-admiral of Queen Elizabeth I's fleet positioned against the Spanish Armada.⁸ Given Drake's role in the Armada campaign, it would not be inappropriate for him to signal his loyalty to the monarch and his association with the events with such a portrait. It is fitting that Drake potentially has a link to a portrait that celebrates his personal and military success, as well as his rapport with the Queen. The theory is further verified by a mid-eighteenth-century inventory, securing the ownership of the portrait by the Tyrwhitt-Drake family.⁹ Drake's possible association with the *Armada Portrait* profoundly reveals the overarching nature of Renaissance portrait benefaction.

In a courtly setting, as can be presumed in a depiction of England and Her Queen's militant triumph, one would expect the ever-present precedent of Renaissance portraits functioning as "tokens of friendship, friendship, alliance... as well as diplomacy."¹⁰ In this line of thinking, Sir Francis Drake would desire to commission a portrait of the Queen that enhances her reputation via adherence to prescribed visual patterns and the status of his naval victory and character through attributes that signify success.

⁷ D. V. Alaeva, "Portraits of Elizabeth I: Image-Making and Propaganda," *Young Scholars' Research in the Humanities* 2019), 7.

⁸ Blyth and Riding, *The Armada Portrait*, 47.

⁹ Ibid., Robert Blyth, in discussion with Julia Gregory, February 2023.

¹⁰ Patricia Lee Rubin, "Understanding Renaissance Portraiture," in *The Renaissance Portrait: From Donatello to Bellini* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2011), 8.

The fact that three versions of the *Armada Portrait* uphold similar composition standards indicates that the portrait held a degree of significance in the court. Taking into account the current scholarship that suggests that various workshops and artists undertook these designs, a considerable amount of resources were factored into the creation and commissioning of the *Armada Portrait*, underscoring its value to art historians as it demonstrates the strategic use of the visual arts to represent contemporary political and personal interests as well as reinforce the magnificence and position of a female monarch.¹¹

Robert Blyth and Christine Riding, curators at Royal Museums Greenwich, affirm that it is well noted in the field of English regal painting that the artist of the Greenwich version differs from the other two paintings.¹² Blyth and Riding further suggest that the recent scholarship suggests that the artist was English. Rather than contend with the divisive methodology of attribution and connoisseurship studies, I will combine iconographical, cultural, and feminist methodologies to supply a deeper historical understanding of Greenwich's *Armada Portrait*.

Upon first glance of the *Armada Portrait*, the spectator is confronted with the image of the central figure, Queen Elizabeth I, decorated in cascading bejeweled ornamentation and lavish clothing. Flanked by two seascapes, she is surrounded by two images of naval battle: the right shows the peak of the violence as the Spanish ships struggle against the inexorable tumultuous sea and the formidable English forces, with the left showing the gradually peaceful conclusion of battle. Beside the Queen, one can find various attributes, such as a proximate crown and a globe that the Queen's finger delicately grazes. The bottom right corner of the composition reveals an armless mermaid under the violent seascape. There is no doubt that the artist of the *Armada Portrait* paints Elizabeth in a way adherent to her desired iconographic program.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., 45.

The anonymous artist's use of iconography or attributes allows the audience to perceive Queen Elizabeth I in a dualistic manner— as an effective, but resigned leader. This duplexity is necessary to its reception, as the queen held great regard for the compulsion of the visual arts, navigating the conditions of Elizabethan era Christendom and European society disapproving of female dominance and authority over men. This concept, as discussed briefly in *Sartorial Power: Regal Magnificence*, is essential to understanding Queen Elizabeth I's command of her public image and popular reception. Before delving into this argument, it is necessary to have some background iconographic information on the *Armada Portrait*.

SARTORIAL POWER: REGAL MAGNIFICENCE

The use of the visual arts as a type of propaganda and policy, as in the case of the *Armada Portrait*, was particularly opportune, as all Tudor monarchs drew on the merits provided in the legitimizing and aggrandizing of their regimes.¹³ The inclusion of opulent objects within a ruler portrait pointed to wealth, but also power and agency. In the *Armada Portrait*, they helped demonstrate the capacity of the Queen for administrative functions, maintaining trade and diplomatic relations, and building social networks that allowed for the development of a luxury trade economy and a labor stratified society. This emphasis on her efficacy for leadership is particularly relevant for our subject, whose capabilities were doubted simply on the basis of her position as a woman.

Nowhere is Queen Elizabeth I's wealth more obvious than in the splendor of her garments, which also highlight her femininity. Queen Elizabeth I recognized the vigor of fashion,

¹³ Elizabeth Cleland, "England, Europe, and the World: Art as Policy," in *The Tudors: Art and Majesty in Renaissance England* (United Kingdom: Yale University Press, 2022), 20.

remarkably spending two hours a day dressing herself, with the help of her Ladies in Waiting.¹⁴ Prefacing a discussion of her keen understanding of public image, knowledge of elite Renaissance fashion is imperative. A woman of Elizabeth's status would wear several layers of clothing including, in order of the most intimate to exterior layers: a shift, bodices, kirtle, farthingale, petticoats, and overgown.¹⁵ Considering her notorious appetite for fashion and the resources she had access to, it is not surprising that an estimated 3,000 pieces made up her personal wardrobe.¹⁶

This interest is reflected in the *Armada Portrait*, as Queen Elizabeth I dons fashion and is surrounded by symbols that exhibit her level of sophistication and prestige. Here her regal magnificence is suggested by the delicately rendered embroidered garments, elaborate jewel ornamentation inlaid with gold, and splendid materials, namely ostrich feathers.¹⁷ Crowning the top of a delicately crafted hair ensemble is an example of the highly coveted fashion trend. The inclusion of the feather within the portrait signals Queen Elizabeth I's refinement and courtly magnificence. For Queen Elizabeth I to wear feather luxuries was to signal the cultivation of a "brilliant [courtly] body," commanding viewers to perceive her as a rightful leader.¹⁸ Featured prominently, as well, is a trifecta of jewels topped by a pearl. Gemstones such as these were lavishly expensive to produce and audiences would have been aware of the labor demands necessitated by their production. The combination of gemstones and feathers would have been a particularly adept fashion choice in the Elizabethan era, distinctly with the sensorial experiences

¹⁴ Alison Weir, *The Life of Elizabeth I* (New York: The Ballantine Publishing Group, 1998), 235.

¹⁵ For a more extensive consultation on Elizabethan era fashion trends and conditions, see: Anna Reynolds, *In Fine Style: The Art of Tudor and Stuart Fashion*. (London: Royal Collections Trust, 2013), 28–50.

¹⁶ Bronwyn Cosgrave, *Costume & Fashion: A Complete History*. (United Kingdom: Hamlyn, 2003), 126.

¹⁷ Cosgrave, *Costume & Fashion: A Complete History*, 135; S. Hanß, "Feathers and the Making of Luxury Experiences at the Sixteenth-Century Spanish Court," *Journal of the Society of Renaissance Studies*, no. 0 (2023): 1.

¹⁸ Timothy McCall, "Brilliant Bodies: Material Culture and the Adornment of Men in North Italy's Quattrocento Courts," *I Tatti Studies in the Italian Renaissance*, 16 (2013): 445–90.

provided by the contrast in gravity between the objects, replicating in fashion the grace of bodily comportment expected by courtiers.¹⁹

Unsurprisingly, below the assemblage of pearls, ostrich feathers, and heavily coiffed hair is the Elizabethan ruff, or goffered frill. The gravity-defying garment instantiated wealth, luxury, and reinforced hierarchies found at the level of a princely court. Once functioning as a collar, the Elizabethan ruff evolved to emit a sense of prestige, certainly befitting the Queen of England and the impracticality of the accessory. The stiffness and embellishment of the ruff, requiring the possible tedious starching of elaborate *étoffes*, such as linens and lace or steel reinforcements, to maintain the shape, fortified its association with the upper classes, particularly in conjunction with sixteenth-century demands on a physically imposing regal posture.²⁰ The artist, by including an exorbitant ruff, tediously captures the garment's delicacy, its accompanying prestige, and Queen Elizabeth I's felicity in compliance with the era's courtly fashion. The particular fan-shaped ruff utilized in the *Armada Portrait* was ceremonial in nature, and its incorporation in the painting cements the significance of the defeat of the Spanish Armada as a momentous occasion, necessitating its representation in the visual arts.

Queen Elizabeth I's sleeves are particularly intriguing in the *Armada Portrait*, as they occupy a substantial amount of space within the composition. Visually compelling and infused with meaning, the sleeves are embellished with golden solar motifs that would have bolstered an image of power. Their ostentation is completed with carefully placed pearls embedded within the fabric. The *Armada Portrait* is well-known for its inclusion of dozens of pearls, which in the

¹⁹ Hanß, "Feathers and the Making of Luxury Experiences at the Sixteenth-Century Spanish Court," 15; Baldassare Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier*. Introduction and translation by George Bull. (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1976), 57–86.

²⁰ Nancy Bradfield, *Historical Costumes of England: 1066-1968* (United States: Costume & Fashion Press, 1997), 78; Sarah Bendall, "Whalebone and the Wardrobe of Elizabeth I: Whaling and the Making of Aristocratic Fashions in Sixteenth-century Europe." *Apparence(s)*. 11 (2022): 1–23.

sixteenth-century would have been valued between 196 to 1250 dollars per pearl.²¹ Noting this, the inclusion of the sheer amount of the gem is significant, as it demonstrates Queen Elizabeth I's material wealth and disposable resources.

The embroidered gold thread that embellished the sleeves with suns is provocative in that it articulates the status of the Queen. Elizabeth I, an ardent supporter of fashion, reinforced the Renaissance social hierarchy through the institution of sumptuary laws. Sumptuary laws were not unique to the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, but in fact were a precedent in European and Mediterranean history to subdue the lower and middle classes in an effort to substantiate the power and influence of the elite. In her 1577 Proclamation Against Excess, Queen Elizabeth I declares that “none shall weare in his apparell any Silke of the colour of purpure.— Cloth of {golde, Tissue.—}But onlye the —{Kyng— Quene}.”²² For her to be wearing threads of gold in her sleeves and elsewhere on her bodice within the *Armada Portrait* was to reinforce the ubiquitous social stratification of the age, and particularly her own authority and status, as Queen. The symbolism of the sun as well reinforces her role as commander and figurehead of England, evocative of the glittering nature of Elizabethan court culture and fashion that would have stimulated the senses. The artist tastefully includes these elements of splendor to highlight the Queen's luxury aesthetic, power, wealth, and adherence to courtly decorum. Her own wealth, illuminated brilliantly within the *Armada Portrait*, reflected the economic prosperity of England, and hence her capacity for leadership, as well.

Image-making again, was an adept strategy for Queen Elizabeth I, particularly in the wake of religious opposition and precedents of centuries of political instability, as portraits

²¹ Yamada, A., “World History of Pearls.” Tokyo: Chuokoron-Shinsha, Inc. 2013; Price is adjusted according to 2021 American dollars.

²² “Elizabeth I's Proclamation Against Excess.” The British Library. Accessed February 21, 2023. <https://www.bl.uk/learning/timeline/item126628.html>.

reflected the position of the sitter within the socio-cultural milieu.²³ Not only does the artist of the *Armada Portrait* and the Queen herself utilize fashion to exude material wealth, but also a command of power. The gown that Queen Elizabeth I wears cultivates an image of dignity and poise through its dominant coloring of black and red. A black gown, such as the one of consideration for our subject, could have served multiple functions: to illustrate a knowledge of Spanish courtly tastes as well as emanate a sense of *gravitas*, or solemnity, fitting for a monarch of any gender.²⁴ Queen Elizabeth I is adorned with cascading bows of red and blue that highlight the duality and fluidity of her gender expression by complimenting her femininity. Her speech to her troops at Tilbury, where she declares her knowledge of this gender duality is epitomized through her words, “I know I have the body of a weak and feeble woman; but I have the heart and stomach of a king.”²⁵

Not only do Queen Elizabeth I and the artist utilize sartorial elegance within the *Armada Portrait* to convey a sense of regal magnificence and power, but also to clarify her military prowess. Her gown acknowledges an attempt to navigate femininity and masculinity, while also demonstrating the impregnability of her body, and hence her country, as her fashion functions as armor.²⁶ During the Renaissance, armor performed varying roles on both the battlefield and the body. This was a particularly consummate prop for female rulers, who necessarily needed to

²³ Historical context pertinent to the insecurity of Queen Elizabeth I’s reign, and the Tudor dynasty more generally, can be found in several sources, such as: R. Turvey, *Lancastrians, Yorkists and the Wars of the Roses, 1399-1509*. (Hodder Education Publishers, 2015); M. Hicks, *The War of the Roses*. (Osprey Publishing, 2003); G. W. Bernard, “Henry VIII: ‘Catholicism without the Pope?’” *History* 101, no. 2 (2016): 201–21; Maria Dowling, “Anne Boleyn and Reform.” *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 35, no. 1 (1984): 30–46.

²⁴ E. Melikoğlu, “The Armada Portrait: Costume and the Body Politic,” *Litera: Journal of Language, Literature and Culture Studies* 0 (2014): 1–10; José Luis Colomer and Amalia Descalzo, eds., *Spanish Fashion at the Courts of Early Modern Europe* (Madrid: Centro de Estudios Europa Hispánica, 2014), 77–112.

²⁵ Queen Elizabeth I, “Speech to the Troops at Tilbury”; in *Norton Anthology of Literature By Women: The Tradition in English*. (New York and London: W.W. Norton, 1985), 30.

²⁶ Natalie Zemon Davis, “Women in Politics,” in *A History of Women in the West: Renaissance and Enlightenment Paradoxes* (Harvard University Press, 1994), 170.

neutralize biases against their gender that characterized them as frail, soft, and incompetent leaders.²⁷

It is well established in the field of history that Elizabeth I's identities as a female monarch hindered her ability to reign, as these circumstances generated gender-sex specific obstacles that men would not encounter. She was a last resort in this leadership role, simply because she was a woman. The concept of the Male Right, which refers to the preference of male monarchs in contrast to female monarchs, illustrates this notion as it highlights that society merely tolerated female monarchs.²⁸ This concept was particularly important in Henry VIII's desire for a *male* heir to the Tudor dynasty.²⁹

This informal policy was contemporaneous with Elizabeth, and deepened as the Protestant Reformation grew. This historical development is significant as it was a time when faith, as well as the concept of dominant female rulers, was debated heavily. As noted above, it is clear that a woman reigning over a man is unbiblical and this was reflected by contemporaries, like John Knox. Knox was a prominent Protestant leader, who overtly spoke of his distaste for women holding what he would consider to be an unnatural position, writing that "it is a thing most repugnant to nature, that women rule and govern over men."³⁰ The message here is overt, as it argues that only men should have the authority to govern other men (and women).

This paradigm reveals one of the obstacles that Elizabeth faced as a woman. This obstacle is inherently linked with her identity as a woman ruler, because men were never

²⁷ Sara Greico Matthews, "The Body, Appearance, and Sexuality," eds. Natalie Zemon Davis and Arlette Farge, in *A History of Women in the West: Renaissance and Enlightenment Paradoxes* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 47.

²⁸ Sarah Hanley "Configuring the Authority of Queens in the French Monarchy, 1600s-1840s." *Historical Reflections / Réflexions Historiques* 32 (no. 2) (2006): 453.

²⁹ Henry VIII notoriously had six wives and a preoccupation with producing a legitimate male heir to continue the Tudor dynasty.

³⁰ John Knox, *The First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women* 1558, 5.

questioned for their ability to rule simply based on their gender. No one questioned whether or not men explicitly should have authority. In fact, the role of monarchy was not disputed until the Enlightenment, and the debate never centered around whether or not males had the right to rule, rather whether humankind, as a whole, should exist and function with a monarchical structure. The only gender-sex identity whose authority was challenged based explicitly on this quality was female.

This situation is significant because it presents an obstacle that Elizabeth I faced, as her authority was questioned simply because she was a woman. Bearing the concept of the Male Right in mind, Elizabeth was well aware of these considerations, which underpinned the dislike of female rulers, and the constraints it placed upon the presentation of her public image. Though ostentatious and ornate in nature, it is difficult to not observe the extremely padded structure of her garments that exude strength, counteracting the male suspicion to which she would have been subject. While keeping up to date with fashion movements and beauty standards popular at the English court, and thus adhering to feminine ideals, she also utilized her garments to exude masculine agency.³¹ This trend continues with the expression of her military prowess in the visual arts.

MILITARY PROWESS

The daughter of Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn, Queen Elizabeth I, inherited a kingdom and international sphere rife with religious and political catastrophes, caused by England's secession from the Catholic Church under her father's reign.³² As a result, the hegemonic power

³¹ Naomi Tarrant, *The Development of Costume* (London and New York: National Museums of Scotland, 1996), 93.

³² After 23 years of marriage to the Spanish Catherine of Aragon, Henry VIII pursued a relationship with Anne Boleyn in the hopes that she would consummate his wishes for a male heir to the throne. Catherine of Aragon's relationship with Pope Clement VII complicated geopolitics and world religion, as Henry chose to break away from the Catholic Church under threat of excommunication from the Pope.

of Spain attempted to invade England with intentions to restore its Catholic status. England's geographical placement on the English Channel made it a prime target for naval attacks, precisely explaining the military choices of the Spanish. For various reasons that can be described as "tactics, nerve, and... luck," the Spanish Armada was eventually defeated by the English fleet, galvanizing a pictorial celebration seen in the *Armada Portrait*.³³

In displaying Queen Elizabeth I's aptitude for military strategy and decision making, the artist places two seascapes in the background of the composition. To gain an insight into the expert crafting of a perceived military prowess, it is more useful to examine the Woburn Abbey version of the *Armada Portrait* (Fig. 1). Conservation efforts executed by the Royal Museums of Greenwich have revealed that there were some alterations done to the seascapes in the background of their version at a later time, leaving the Woburn Abbey version more practical in assessing the way that English courtiers would have viewed the painting.³⁴ I am comfortable, in this instance, with changing the object of focus in a discussion of the seascapes due to the fact that all three versions of the *Armada Portrait* follow a pattern that would have been heavily regulated and approved by the Queen. With this being said, the naval representations would have had minimal variation amongst the portraits, and the Woburn Abbey version provides art historians with a more original appearance of the naval scenes.

The two scenes in the background of the painting diverge in that there is a dichotomy between peace and active war (Fig. 4, 5). Both framed scenes, featured prominently amongst green drapery, indicating that they are paintings within a painting, depict ships in different battle stages. The fact that there is a representation of an art collection is significant. It alludes to a

³³ Blyth and Riding, *The Armada Portrait*, 25.

³⁴ Elizabeth Hamilton-Eddy, "Revealing an Icon: Conserving the 'Armada Portrait,'" Royal Museums of Greenwich, last modified November 15, 2017. Based on paint analysis, it seems that the Greenwich version was painted over in the 1700s.

glimpse into the royal decorative interior and a reflection of Queen Elizabeth's power via a demonstration of her acquisitions.

On the left is an image of tranquility, evinced by clear skies and the subtle depiction of a light breeze through the artist's rendering of curvilinear sails on the English ships that suggest a sense of potential zephyr. One can identify the origin of the calm ships through the English flag placed on top of the ship's masts. It is particularly telling that the artist situates Queen Elizabeth I turned toward this particular image, indicating her prioritization of peace in her kingdom. In contrast to this, the Queen turns her back on the image of war. The right seascape is characterized by the artist's use of line and dismal color choices to signify calamitous waters and dangerous conditions experienced by the Spanish fleet in their fight against the English. As she turns her back on the image of violence and chaos, the anonymous artist reveals her efficacy for leadership as her fleet conquered the seas, and hence also the international situation at hand. This victory, and its visual representation manifested in *The Armada Portrait* was particularly advantageous to the reputation of Queen Elizabeth I.³⁵

As seen in the anonymous artist's provocative iconography in the *Armada Portrait*, the visual arts were critical in promulgating Queen Elizabeth I's power and aptitude for leadership. Thus far, the portrait has reinforced her military and leadership capabilities through her demonstration of material regal magnificence, fashion that exudes masculine strength that counteracted biases of her female frailty, and the depiction of England's triumph over the seas. This triumph enhanced her status as a female monarch as well as England's international prestige, and not just on the European stage.

³⁵ Blyth and Riding, *The Armada Portrait*, 29.

ADEPT STATECRAFT

Elizabeth I was unique in her control of her public image, particularly in the visual arts, as evidenced by various proclamations and prohibitions against “unseemly paintinge... of her Majesty’s person and vysage.”³⁶ To reiterate, the *Armada Portrait* is particularly useful to art historians in examining how Renaissance portrait artists utilized visual attributes to convey the efficacy of leaders, such as Queen Elizabeth I. The anonymous artist points to Queen Elizabeth’s adept statecraft through the inclusion of a globe, foreign materials, and a crown in the composition of the painting. Notably, the *Armada Portrait* is a composition divided bilaterally between the vertical and horizontal axes, with the figure of Queen Elizabeth I at the center. This division creates a sense of compositional balance, as the eye is led to acknowledge her domineering presence first, and her associated visual attributes, featured in the background, second.

The bottom left corner of the composition features a table draped in a green tablecloth that presents a globed object to the viewer, an adroit choice that responds to the “Age of Discovery” contemporaneous with the orchestration of the *Armada Portrait*.³⁷ During the Renaissance, European monarchs used exploration as a way to conquer land in the New World to assert their status on the international stage. It is useful to know that England was not immune to these colonization efforts under the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, who actively sponsored voyages in North America in the 1570s and 1580s.³⁸ It is likely that England’s colonial endeavors were

³⁶ Proclamation prohibiting portraits of the Queen (draft) 1563; *TRP* 1964-69, vol 2, 240-241, no. 516; Louis Montrose, “Idols of the Queen: Policy, Gender, and the Picturing of Elizabeth I.” in *Representations*, no. 68 (Autumn 1999): 109; Warrant of the Privy Council to her Majesty’s Serjeant-Painter, July 1596, *APC* 1902, 69.

³⁷ The usage of the term “Age of Discovery” can appear problematic to contemporary mindsets with its failure to recognize the already-thriving cultures that existed prior to European intervention; however, I find that it reflects the paradigm of European elites and is therefore useful as a categorization of time.

³⁸ James Voorhies, “Europe and the Age of Exploration.” In *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000–present) http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/expl/hd_expl.htm (October 2002).

done in an effort to challenge the hegemony of coincident Spanish explorations and diplomatic tensions.

Within the *Armada Portrait*, the artist positions Queen Elizabeth I turned toward the globe, with her fingers lightly grazing an area depicting North America, the region of her interest (Fig. 6). Thus, the portrait allows Queen Elizabeth I to assert her fortitude in her colonial endeavors, insinuating her capacity to conquer the “New World,” while highlighting simultaneous docility as she does so, thereby navigating both the conventionally feminine and masculine in a way favorable to English Renaissance tastes.

Including foreign materials in fashioning the Queen’s image is useful in exhibiting England’s economic and diplomatic Golden Age and, therefore, Queen Elizabeth I’s virtue in leadership. The exploration of the New World accompanied a discovery of pearl beds in South America that prompted an increased supply (to the detriment of indigenous populations) and a mania for pearls that can be sufficiently evidenced by their prominence in the *Armada Portrait*.³⁹

The convention of adept statecraft does not merely include the management of international affairs, but also internal. For Queen Elizabeth I, it was critical that she beguiled her subjects, wrought with complex conflicts. The use of the visual arts was a requisite strategy in securing the favor of her country’s subjects by strengthening her claim to the throne. I cannot think of a symbol more fitting than a crown to succinctly illustrate the queen’s authority. The crown, in Western Art, finds itself in conjunction with connotations of sovereignty and superiority in hierarchical systems.⁴⁰ Queen Elizabeth I’s authority is embraced with the inclusion of the imperial crown, an attribute that combines internal and external affairs for its

³⁹ D. M. Dirlam, E. B. Misiorowski, and S. A. Thomas, “Pearl Fashion Through the Ages,” *Gems & Gemology* 21, no. 2 (1985): 63–78.

⁴⁰ Jean Chevalier and Alain Gheerbrant, *The Penguin Dictionary of Symbols* (United Kingdom: Penguin Publishing Group, 1996): 262–264.

allusion to England's aforementioned colonial pursuits. Its placement in the *Armada Portrait*, though not central, is prominent in its proximity to our subject, Queen Elizabeth I and in its dazzling effect on viewers in its material opulence. The artist also carefully places the crown below the seascape conveying peace, a choice which suggests a positive judgment toward Queen Elizabeth I's reign and approach toward the naval spectacle of the Spanish Armada's defeat. Ultimately, the inclusion of attributes within the *Armada Portrait* such as the globe, foreign opulent materials, and the crown contribute to a sense of Queen Elizabeth's aptitude for managing both worldly and domestic affairs within her kingdom.

PERCEPTIONS OF WOMEN IN POWER: A COMPARATIVE CASE STUDY

It is natural to inquire why the crown is not placed on Queen Elizabeth I's head, as one might expect. Though not impossible to find a contemporary representation of Queen Elizabeth actively wearing a crown, it is more frequent to find her elaborately adorned with gems and accompanied by a crown in passivity. Her bodily comportment evidences the artist's portrayal of Elizabeth as both powerful and humble.

To apply Patricia Simons' psychoanalytic and cultural methodologies utilized in her groundbreaking essay, "Women in Frames: The Gaze, the Eye, the Profile in Renaissance Portraiture," (1988) is particularly useful when examining Queen Elizabeth I's visual engagement with the crown in the *Armada Portrait*.⁴¹ While she chiefly examines marriage portraits in Quattrocento Italian art, one can still apply her conclusion that the averted gaze reflects feminine virtue. This precedent was due to the fact that direct eye contact suggested a

⁴¹ Patricia Simons, "Women in Frames: The Gaze, the Eye, the Profile in Renaissance Portraiture," in *Expanding Discourse: Feminism and Art History*. Edited by Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (New York: Harper Collins, 1992), 39–47.

degree of seduction and agency that was deemed unfit for women in the Renaissance. Within the *Armada Portrait*, Queen Elizabeth I faces the crown, but does not engage with it directly, indicating a passive acknowledgement of the source of her authority.

The artist positions our subject in this way to exemplify her dedication to royal duties but also her humility as she does not actively seek more power granted to her. It also suggests a consensual relationship between monarch and the people, as opposed to the “Divine Right of Kings.” Regardless of the veracity of this in practice, it was a distinguishing visual representation necessary to the perception of her reign. Noting again the ubiquity of negative perceptions of female rulers in Europe, it was important for Queen Elizabeth I to appear strong, yet not tyrannical. While she did hold a privileged position in society as a monarch and person of wealth, her female identity was an obstacle to overcome. My research has compelled me to believe that the visual indication of her passive admission of power was a strategy to navigate her feminine identity – a careful compromise between a visual demonstration of her authority and her acknowledgment of the cultural expectations imposed by her gender assigned at birth.

This strategy can be usefully demonstrated by a comparative study of her Scottish contemporary, Mary Stuart, Elizabeth’s rival and cousin, who served as an example of the antithesis of desirable female behavior.⁴² Mary was perceivably ambitious and this perception was inimical to her reputation, particularly considering the aforementioned context of biases against women for their perceived proclivity to corruption.

Though a source of contention amongst historians, Mary’s ambition was arguably justified, as she believed that she had a legitimate claim to the English throne in addition to her role as Queen of Scots. This circumstance derived from her lineage, as she descended from the

⁴² Mary Stuart, or Mary, Queen of Scots is a separate entity from Mary Tudor, or Mary I of England. In this paper, to avoid lengthy sentences, Mary Stuart will hereafter be referred to as “Mary.”

Tudor King Henry VII. This 1561 letter from Mary to Elizabeth I illustrates Mary's desire to be named successor to the English throne shortly after her departure of her motherland France after the death of her first husband, Francis II:

For that Treatie, iiii far as concerns us, we can be content to do all that of reaoun may be requirit of us, or rather to entre into a New of fic Subftance, at may ftand without oure awin prejudice, in Favouris of you... **providit always that oure Intereft to that Crown**, failzeing of zour felf... may thairwithall be put in gude Suretie, with all Circumftances ncefiar and in forme requifit.⁴³

This letter is significant as it showcases Mary's ambition that her contemporaries would have condemned. She argues that she will respect reasonable demands set by Elizabeth I, as long as her interest in the English Crown is assured. For Mary to explicitly ask for an opportunity for more power was inappropriate female behavior, and it also exacerbated tensions between the two sovereigns as it contributed to feelings of insecurity that Queen Elizabeth I had throughout the duration of her reign.⁴⁴ Queen Elizabeth I was aware that Mary threatened the stability of her reign, as she desired to occupy the English throne and restore England's official faith to Catholicism. For this reason, Elizabeth necessarily distinguished herself from her Scottish counterpart in visual culture to validate her reign and denounce the reign of her cousin.

Elizabeth I would have been privy to knowledge of circulating traducing bills and placards concerning the nature of Mary's reign in Scotland. One such placard that highlights the perception of Mary as a power-hungry figure is the *Bothwell Symbols* or *Sketch of Mary Queen of Scots* (Fig. 7). This placard, or public sign, was erected in Scotland around 1567 and features the Queen, represented as a mythical nude figure, wearing a crown and holding a scroll and a

⁴³ Samuel Haynes, *A Collection of State Papers, relating Affairs in the Reigns of King Henry VIII, King Edward VI, Queen Mary, and Queen Elizabeth, transcribed from original letters and other authentic memorials, left by William Cecil Lord Burghley*. Vol. 1. 1542–1570 (London: 1740), 377.

⁴⁴ Queen Elizabeth I had her parents' volatile relationship to thank for this, as it instigated the ever-present "legitimacy question" that loomed over the line of Henry VIII's succession.

flagellum-like object. Of note is her placement in the composition above an assemblage of a hare, concentric circles, and a ring of swords.

The timing of the erection of the *Bothwell Symbols* placard is significant, as it occurred when Mary's reputation was soiled in Scotland. Her reputation suffered when she married James Hepburn, the Earl of Bothwell, as it seemingly implied Mary's complicity in the murder of her second husband, Henry Stuart.⁴⁵ This placard is particularly useful in illustrating Renaissance fears of female tyranny and proclivity to evil. It is particularly notable as one of the most prominent testaments to the pejoration she experienced by John Knox's characterization of her body as housing "the spirit of Jezebel."⁴⁶ It conjures an association with Mary, established with her unabashed wearing of a crown and her and her husband's initials featured in the composition. The *Bothwell Symbols* comments on Mary being represented as an unjust ruler, as she holds a flagellum-like object that continues to puzzle art historians.

Various explanations have been offered in recent decades regarding the identification of the symbol, with largely similar interpretations despite varying conclusions. Alison Weir's (2004) biographical account of Mary characterizes the symbol as a whip.⁴⁷ Diverging from Weir's attribution, Debra Barnett-Graves (2013) analyzes iconography connected to Mary and ascribes the symbol as a fish-like tail.⁴⁸ Michael Bath and Malcolm Jones' (2015) in-depth study of the placard in conjunction with contemporary literature reveals a direct antagonism between earlier attributions, writing that "this is what the placard's mermaid is waving in her right hand: it

⁴⁵ E. Deanne Malpass, "Mary, Queen of Scots" In Salem Press Biographical Encyclopedia (2020), 4. This source is particularly helpful for a succinct biographical overview of the life of Mary, Queen of Scots.

⁴⁶ Knox, *The First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women*, 6.

⁴⁷ Alison Weir, *Mary, Queen of Scots, and the Murder of Lord Darnley* (United Kingdom: Random House Publishing Group, 2004), 355.

⁴⁸ D. Barnett-Graves, "Mermaids, Sirens, and Mary, Queen of Scots: Icons of Wantonness and Pride," in *The Emblematic Queen: Queenship and Power* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 70.

is not a whip or a fish's tail... there is no doubt to what it represents: a lure."⁴⁹ Despite the differences in attribution of the symbol, what the authors have in common is a sense that it represents tyranny and authoritarian injustice.

Mary, in this depiction of her in the *Bothwell Symbols*, is insatiably power hungry. This ambitious quality, as previously established, was undesirable for the time period. To satirize Mary as a megalomaniacal figure was consistent with the disdain generally associated with female authority. The amalgamation of the symbols of the crown and lure culminate in a message that she wields power unjustly. This placard communicates the perception of Mary as a female tyrant, with the crown actively placed on the figure's head elucidating an imperious claim to authority.

The pejorative iconography adds significance to art historical studies and provides an astute comparison with the positive propaganda documented in Queen Elizabeth I's *Armada Portrait*. To conflate an elite figure in society with a symbol of despotism, as the anonymous artist did within the *Bothwell Symbols*, was incredibly offensive. The *Bothwell Symbols* placard directly contrasts with the image of Elizabeth in the *Armada Portrait*, who indirectly looks at her crown passively in a way that her contemporaries would have perceived positively. The general message within the *Bothwell Symbols* illustrates that Mary actively seeks power and status in an amoral fashion. Within the *Armada Portrait*, the artist portrays Elizabeth as acknowledging her power and accepting the status quo. Elizabeth would have approved of a visual program to distinguish herself from rulers like Mary, as she understood the need to avoid a conflation with the image of a tyrant while simultaneously demonstrating the strength that counteracted notions of female frailty.

⁴⁹ Michael Bath and Malcolm Jones, "'Placardes and Billis and Ticquetties of Defamatioun': Queen Mary, The Mermaid, and the Hare" *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 78 (2015): 227.

The *Armada Portrait*, and Elizabethan portraiture more generally, serve to exhibit Elizabeth I as a virtuous and capable queen. The artist underscores Elizabeth's fictional, but perceived, passive approach to reign. This emphasis was useful as it counteracted contemporary visual culture concerning female rulers that demonstrated a vile ambition to rule more, as was the case in the *Bothwell Symbols*. A testament to the artist's virtuous delineation of the English queen in the *Armada Portrait* lies within the placement of the crown— not on the top of Elizabeth's head, but rather by her side. This arrangement of the crown was intentional, portraying Elizabeth ruling constructively, yet gently. The presence of the crown itself is a manifestation of the Queen's claim to power, but it again is delicately balanced with a lens of passivity. On the other hand, Mary is seen as an immoral, megalomaniac in the *Bothwell Symbols*, reflective of male fears of corrupt women in power that Queen Elizabeth would have had to circumvent during her reign.

THE ULTIMATE DICHOTOMY:

THE VIRGIN AND THE WHORE

In Renaissance Europe, women were valued for submission, sexual innocence, and passivity and accursed for disobedience, promiscuity, and agency. To further explore the ways in which Queen Elizabeth I utilized the visual arts to overcome gendered biases and legitimize her regime, it is necessary to consider the societal condemnation of female sexuality. Within a patriarchal society, property was inherited through male heirs. As such, virginity was a requisite for marriage for women to ensure the legitimacy of male heirs produced during marriage.⁵⁰ Illicit

⁵⁰ David G. Berger and Morton G. Wenger, "The Ideology of Virginity" *Journal of Marriage and Family* 35, no. 4 (1973): 669.

sex outside the bounds of marriage, for a woman, became profoundly entangled with familial shame.

Baldassarre Castiglione, in his *Book of the Courtier*, provides insight into the sheer value that female chastity secured in the sixteenth-century in an episode where he comments on the women in the court of Urbino: “Just as once a woman’s reputation for purity has been sullied it can never be restored.”⁵¹ Given a context in which princely figures utilized art to legitimize their power, it is fitting to recognize Queen Elizabeth I’s adoption of a virginal persona to establish her virtue and just rulership.

Within the *Armada Portrait*, the artist crafts an identity for Queen Elizabeth I that cements her virginity as a crucial trait. The emblem of Queen Elizabeth I’s virginity was a political tactic utilized by her administration once it became evident that all marriage negotiations concerning the Queen came to be fruitless (since elite women were largely valued for the dynastic value that they were able to provide.).⁵² As such, symbols of chastity became deeply integrated into her official iconographic program, an aspect that differentiated Elizabeth from other Tudor monarchs in her absolute control of her public image.⁵³ She famously crowned herself the “Virgin Queen” in order to adjust for her female identity as a monarch, contending that “in the end this shall be for me sufficient: that a marble stone shall declare that a queen... died a virgin.”⁵⁴ This speech highlights her commitment to the image of eternal virginity, which was certainly accomplished as public notions of history still render her so, regardless of veracity.

⁵¹ Baldassare Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier*. Introduction and translation by George Bull. (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1976), 57.

⁵² Adam Eaker, “Icons of Rule,” in *The Tudors: Art and Majesty in Renaissance England* (London, UK: Yale University Press, 2022), 266.

⁵³ Helen Hackett, “Anne Boleyn’s Legacy to Elizabeth I: Neoclassicism and the Iconography of Protestant Queenship,” in *Queens Matter in Early Modern Studies, Queenship and Power* (New York, 2017), 157–80.

⁵⁴ Elizabeth Elzbieta, *Elizabeth I: Collected Works*. (United Kingdom: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 58.

The *Armada Portrait* aligns itself with the prototype prescribed by Queen Elizabeth I, particularly as it represents her public virginity. One feature that the artist employs is the conspicuous use of white throughout the composition, seen in Elizabeth's complexion, pearls, ruff, and ostrich feathers. The use of the color white is significant, as it long reflects notions of innocence and purity in Western cultures.⁵⁵ The concept of purity was a significant one in the Elizabethan era, which existed in the confines of Christendom. The *Armada Portrait*, a response to the era, embodies this notion through the use of visual language. This, again, is important to consider when examining the portrait because it was done so in a Christian context, and one that valued the absence of sexuality for females. Elizabeth is adorned with pearls that convey her sexual propriety, as they drape off of her bodice.⁵⁶

Just as the padding of her garments reinforced an amalgamation of the masculine and the feminine and conveyed her military prowess, so too did it emphasize the impregnability of England, as well as her body itself.⁵⁷ Her public display of virginity enabled her to convey her dedication to her kingdom, which Elizabeth herself characterized as her husband.⁵⁸ Not only did it demonstrate her commitment to her regal duties, her virginity was also an adept tool that allowed for her characterization as a saint-like leader of spirituality fitting for her title as Head of the Anglican Church.⁵⁹ This artistic and political tool was useful to Elizabeth in legitimizing her reign while also maintaining cultural barriers that women experienced in the Renaissance.⁶⁰

Her emphasis on her spiritual virtue was written into her visual propaganda, and one example of this can be prominently seen the precedent of Elizabethan portraiture in her adoption

⁵⁵ For a discussion on the symbology of the color white, see: "White," White, accessed March 20, 2023.

⁵⁶ For more information on the significance behind pearls, see: Pearl," Pearl, accessed March 20, 2023.

⁵⁷ Davis, "Women in Politics," 170.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 171.

⁵⁹ Dominic Baker-Smith, "The Cultural and Social Setting: Renaissance and Reformation," in *16th Century Britain: The Cambridge Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 38.

⁶⁰ Carol, Blessing, "Elizabeth I as Deborah the Judge: Exceptional Women of Power," in *Goddesses and Queens: The Iconography of Elizabeth I* (Manchest, UK: Manchester University Press, 2017), 19.

of the Deborah symbol. Deborah is a figure introduced in Abrahamic Scripture as a female judge, anomalous in ancient Israel for her degree of agency and influence; she was a fitting figure for Queen Elizabeth I to align herself with as she did not radically challenge patriarchal barriers, but rather, navigated them to achieve a limited degree of autonomy.⁶¹ Both figures do not seek to antagonize a culture hostile to women by elevating their status; instead, they assert their peculiarity (and not their exemplary status) in their ability for female agency.⁶² While the Deborah figure is not present within the *Armada Portrait* explicitly, it is important to note that Elizabethan courtiers were conscious of the visual arts to convey the idea of monarchy. Symbols and patterns manifested in ways that allowed portraits of the Queen to become “a form of book... which called for reading by the onlooker.”⁶³

As a strategy to reconcile Elizabeth’s status as a woman in the Elizabethan context that persisted in its suspicion of the female nature, the artist implements various elements of design in the *Armada Portrait* to emphasize her piety. Such elements of design that accomplish this are the inclusion of the ruff and use of color in the hair. The placement and shape of the ruff runs parallel to depictions of haloes in Western art. This can be seen in Renaissance works, as figures of divinity are shown with haloes behind the head, as seen in many Italian Renaissance paintings, such as in Giotto’s *Last Judgment* (Fig. 8).

This imagery of flat round forms in this position indicated a sense of otherworldliness that would have been consistent with Christian intent behind the art. Elizabeth and her courtiers, as well as the artist responsible for this high commission, would have been aware of this artistic precedent, rendering Elizabeth’s ruff and hair color analogous to haloes in the *Armada Portrait* to propagate a message of Elizabeth’s authority and virtue. Elizabeth is documented to have

⁶¹ Ibid., 21.

⁶² Ibid., 24.

⁶³ Roy Strong, *The Spirit of Britain* (United Kingdom: Hutchison 1999), 177.

auburn hair, but in this portrait, the color leans gold to help further the sense of otherworldly beauty, which was visually cognate to the luscious gold in the *Last Judgment*. Furthermore, there is a vibrant precedent in Elizabethan portraiture of visual parallels between Elizabeth and Christ. One such example of portraitists casting Elizabeth in the light of a holy figure is in the *Ditchley Portrait*, in which she is shown standing on a map of England (Fig. 9).⁶⁴ Roy Strong (1969) characterizes this parity as an explicit comparison between monarch and the figure of Christ.⁶⁵

Noting Elizabeth I's meticulous crafting of her image as an efficient, virtuous female sovereign, it is useful to again compare the *Armada Portrait* to the iconographical program of the *Bothwell Symbols*. It is necessary to discuss Mary being portrayed as a nude mythological creature—and more specifically a mermaid. One can identify the mermaid based on the evidence that she has the head and breasts of a woman, but the body of a fish.

This symbol represents fatal attraction, as in Western literature, mermaids lure men to their deaths with their beauty and enticing songs.⁶⁶ More interestingly, mermaids were attributed to be an ancient symbol of prostitution and whoredom more generally, working in conjunction with persevering perceptions of women as tempting bodily vessels with a propensity for evil.⁶⁷ Throughout history, mermaids and sirens were considered to be “strong whores that drew men that passed by to poverty and mischief.”⁶⁸ As established earlier, this characterization implies anything but reverence toward Mary, and to closely associate a monarch with this symbol was disparaging in nature.

⁶⁴ Lorne Campbell, *Renaissance Portraits: European Portrait Painting in the 14th, 15th, and 16th Centuries* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 25.

⁶⁵ Strong, Roy, *The Elizabethan Image: An Introduction to English Portraiture, 1558-1603* (London, UK: Yale University Press, 1969), 104-107.

⁶⁶ Pierre Grimal, *Dictionnaire de la Mythologie Grecque et Romaine*, with preface by Charles Picard, 3rd corrected edition, Paris, 1963), 425.

⁶⁷ J. Laurence Schaack, “‘We are the lost’: Recovering the Feminist and Transcultural Complexity of Mermaids in Literature” *RMA Thesis Comparative Literary Studies* (Utrecht: Utrecht University Press, 2018), 10.

⁶⁸ Beatrice Phillpotts, *Mermaids* (United Kingdom: Ballantine Books, 1980), 34.

One of the most prominent examples to further support the perception of Mary as a sexually vile figure, stem from her imprisonment in Edinburgh, at which crowds notoriously screamed “burn the whore... kill her, drown her!”⁶⁹ The *Bothwell Symbols* are not unique in their attribution of Mary to the icon of a mermaid; in fact, the symbol carried into the realm of popular culture.

In the Elizabethan era, people of all social classes came together in the realm of the theater.⁷⁰ Renaissance theater, thus, was an excellent medium to propagate political and social ideas and ideological portraits of monarchs.⁷¹ This can be prominently seen in William Shakespeare’s 1594-1596 *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* which demonstrates the playwright’s tendency to complement and flatter Queen Elizabeth I.⁷²

In an episode in which Oberon relates his witnessing of Cupid unsuccessfully shooting an arrow at a “mermaid on a dolphin’s back,” Shakespeare makes reference to Mary particularly as her sweet song provokes stars to shoot from their spheres.⁷³ While seemingly whimsical, the illusory nature of Shakespearean politics forges an implicit connection between the figure of the mermaid and Elizabeth’s Scottish counterpart, evidenced by the fact that “the stars (in this episode) were meant to represent Bothwell,” and the linguistic connection between the English word “dolphin” and the French word “dauphin.”⁷⁴ English and French were the predominant languages spoken at the vibrant court of Queen Elizabeth I, and so a familiarity between the two

⁶⁹ S. Dunn-Hensley, “Whore Queens: The Sexualized Female Body and the State,” in *High and Mighty Queens of Early Modern England: Realities and Representations, Queenship and Power*, 101–116. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 101.

⁷⁰ A.L. Rowse, *The Elizabethan Renaissance* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1972), 353; Jean Howard, *The Stage and Social Struggle in Early Modern England* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 75.

⁷¹ James Emerson Phillips, *Images of a Queen: Mary Stuart in Sixteenth-Century Literature*. (S.l., California: Univ of California Press, 2021), 6.

⁷² Edith Rickert, “Political Propaganda and Satire in a *Midsummer’s Night Dream*,” *Modern Philology* (August 1923): 53.

⁷³ William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 2.1.150-154.

⁷⁴ Fraser, Antonia. *Mary Queen of Scots* (United States: Random House Publishing Group, 2014), 309; Allen, Edward A. “English Doublets.” *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 23, no. 2 (1908): 184–239.

words would not have been uncommon. The rationale behind such an emphasis on the French word “dauphin” is grounded in the fact that Mary was once married to the dauphin of France, Francis II.⁷⁵ The episode in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is inherently sexual, drawing connections between Mary's first and third husband, as the mermaid rides the back of the dolphin, while capturing the attention of Lord Bothwell. The link between Mary and the mermaid symbol was not a positive one, and in fact reveals profound ideas condemning female sexuality contemporaneous with the Elizabethan era.

At this time, the widespread dislike of Mary stemmed from her association with whoredom, which contradicted prevalent Western and Christian norms of female morality. This concept intersects with Elizabeth and Mary's gender-sex identities as women because this discussion would not be nearly as important if they were kings, rather than queens. This gendered double standard can be evidenced by Henry VIII, a King who notoriously had six wives and sexual escapades throughout his reign, despite holding the title *Defender of the Faith*.⁷⁶ Church leaders were willing to overlook his extramarital affairs because he was an elite man, and not a woman. His contemporaries very rarely criticized his sexual behavior, despite that being a leading factor in the characterization of Mary's historical and political construction; in fact, kings were often praised for their virility.⁷⁷ Henry VIII is a quintessential example of male sexuality not being under as much scrutiny as female sexuality in the Christian and social contexts, especially since he was a contemporary of both Elizabeth I and Mary.

The artist of the *Armada Portrait*, I argue, makes commentary denouncing illicit female sexual behavior by applying the iconography of the mermaid to Mary in the bottom right of the

⁷⁵ Malpass, “Mary, Queen of Scots”

⁷⁶ Retha M. Warnicke, "Sexual Heresy at the Court of Henry VIII" *The Historical Journal* 30, no. 2 (1987): 258.

⁷⁷ Even in the 21st century, people have a fascination with Henry's sexual and romantic life. Showtime had a very popular show called *The Tudors* that ran from 2007-2010 that primarily focused on Henry VIII's personal life, often showing scenes with graphic sexual images with relation to the King, and this is a testament to the modern fascination over his sex life that still sees double standards when it comes to women.

composition. This decision simultaneously bolsters Queen Elizabeth's reign, while condemning the regency of Mary. Prefacing this argument, it is important to reiterate the use of iconography to provoke judgment in Elizabethan visual art. The iconography in the *Armada Portrait* reenforced Elizabeth's efficacy as leader and savior of England, and the mermaid attribute is not unique in doing so, in a commentary on the reign of Mary.⁷⁸

The historical chronology coupled with Mary's long-term association with the symbol of the mermaid can be read as the attribute's connection to the Scottish queen. Just as the seascapes of the naval battle and the globe reinforce Queen Elizabeth's global and military dominion, the mermaid possibly represents a political success over a potential invader. Not only is it likely that the mermaid represents Mary, but this connection makes commentaries on Elizabeth's conquest over Mary and asserts her regal superiority and fortitude. This idea is reinforced by the fact that the mermaid is armless, and hence, rendered powerless in a struggle against Queen Elizabeth I.

Pertinent to an investigation of the mermaid's symbolism lies within the date of the portrait's commissioning: 1588. A year prior to this, Mary was executed for treason at Fotheringhay Castle, albeit with reluctance on the part of Elizabeth I.⁷⁹ Elizabeth wrote to her cousin in 1586, in an explanation for the political necessity of her imprisonment, that Mary "[had] planned... to take [her] life and ruin [her] kingdom... I never proceeded so harshly against you."⁸⁰ While it was evident that Elizabeth made sacrifices for the benefit of her allegorical husband, her kingdom, it is also part of an intrigue to present herself in a selfless light

⁷⁸ Blyth and Riding have asserted that the mermaid present in the bottom right corner of the portrait reflects Elizabeth's victory over the Spanish seamen. This is consistent with the overall military context of the *Armada Portrait*; however, one could argue that it would be redundant to emphasize Elizabeth's success in this same way through several attributes, as the seascapes were sufficient in displaying her military prowess and triumph over the seas.

⁷⁹ Malpass, "Mary Queen of Scots," 4.

⁸⁰ G. B. Harrison, ed. *The Letters of Queen Elizabeth I*. (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1968), 181.

within the visual culture. Mary's possible representation as a mermaid reinforces contemporary popular belief that she sought status and power in a way unsuitable for a female monarch. The artist makes use of graceful bodily comportment on the part of Queen Elizabeth I in the *Armada Portrait* to comment on the inappropriate trait of Mary's lust for power and supposed whoredom. She does not acknowledge the mermaid figure, and similarly to the way that she turned her back to the jarring scenes of battle in the seascapes. In favor of a prosperous future, she rejects ancient immoral traditions, and simultaneously bolsters her individual femininity through an optimistic, virginal, strong gaze, while being careful to not elevate the status of the everyday woman.

One way in which this manifested is through establishing the successes under the regency of the queen through the anonymous artist's use of attributes. Economic splendor at the brilliant court of England is seen in Elizabeth's sartorial power that communicates regal magnificence; her military prowess is asserted through the seascapes displayed in the background that highlight England's triumph of the naval arena; her aptitude for international and domestic affairs are exhibited in the symbols of the crown and the globe. She has conquered the economic, international, domestic, and military spheres.

CONCLUSION

By analyzing the iconographic program of the *Armada Portrait*, this essay has demonstrated the various visual strategies that Queen Elizabeth I employed in order to navigate certain gendered, cultural barriers present in Early Modern England. I have argued throughout this essay that Elizabeth was meticulous in her delicate dance of bolstering her individual

authority, while not radically undermining the patriarchal dispensation in which she lived and ruled. In particular, I demonstrated that Queen Elizabeth I effectively utilized the visual arts to control the public perception of her reign in ways unique to female regnants, as she both confirmed and denied her femininity. Cognizant of cultural barriers experienced by women, the artist of the *Armada Portrait* employed iconography that acknowledged and challenged values that condemned women rulers who sought power and praised those who passively acknowledged their position. The attributes embedded within the composition of the *Armada Portrait* perform several functions, including allowing for ambiguous public perception of the Queen as both uniquely competent, yet also culturally complacent.

Queen Elizabeth I defied expectations of Elizabethan gender roles and achieved agency by “circumventing rather than confronting or altering conventional norms.”⁸¹ While doing so, she was still complicit with the persisting patriarchal regime given that she presented herself as a peculiar anomaly, rather than an exemplary figure for women. The *Armada Portrait* demonstrates the capacity of the visual arts, and of Queen Elizabeth herself, to legitimize her reign, while simultaneously criticizing the regime of Mary— a parallel figure unusual in her degree of power as a female ruler.

Together, these circumstances reveal that even during opportunities for female agency, as evidenced in the reigns of Queen Elizabeth I and Mary, that there still existed cultural barriers for women, such as prevailing conjectures of their natural inferiority. Through the investigation of

⁸¹ Martha Howell, “The Problem of Women’s Agency in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe.” in *Women and Gender in the Early Modern Low Countries*, edited by Sarah Joan Moran and Amanda Pipkin (Publisher?2019), 24.

the *Armada Portrait*, I have expanded the scope for exploring the efficacy of portraiture as propaganda and a tool to navigate femininity in a sea of patriarchal systems.

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Illustrations



Fig. 1, Attributed to George Gower, *The Armada Portrait*, ca. 1588, oil on panel, 105 x 133 cm, Woburn Abbey Collection, United Kingdom.



Fig. 2, Unknown English Artist, *The Armada Portrait*, ca. 1588, oil on panel, 98 x 72 cm, Collection of Tudor and Jacobean Portraits, National Portrait Gallery, London.



Fig. 3, Unknown English Artist, *The Armada Portrait*, ca. 1588, oil on panel, 110.5 x 125 cm, Royal Museums Greenwich Collection, United Kingdom.



Fig. 4, Attributed to George Gower, *The Armada Portrait* (Detail of Peaceful Seascape), ca. 1588, oil on panel, 105 x 133 cm, Woburn Abbey Collection, United Kingdom.



Fig. 5, Attributed to George Gower, *The Armada Portrait* (Detail of Chaotic Seascape), ca. 1588, oil on panel, 105 x 133 cm, Woburn Abbey Collection, United Kingdom.



Fig. 6, Unknown English Artist, *The Armada Portrait* (Detail of Globe), ca. 1588, oil on panel, 110.5 x 125 cm, Royal Museums Greenwich Collection, United Kingdom.

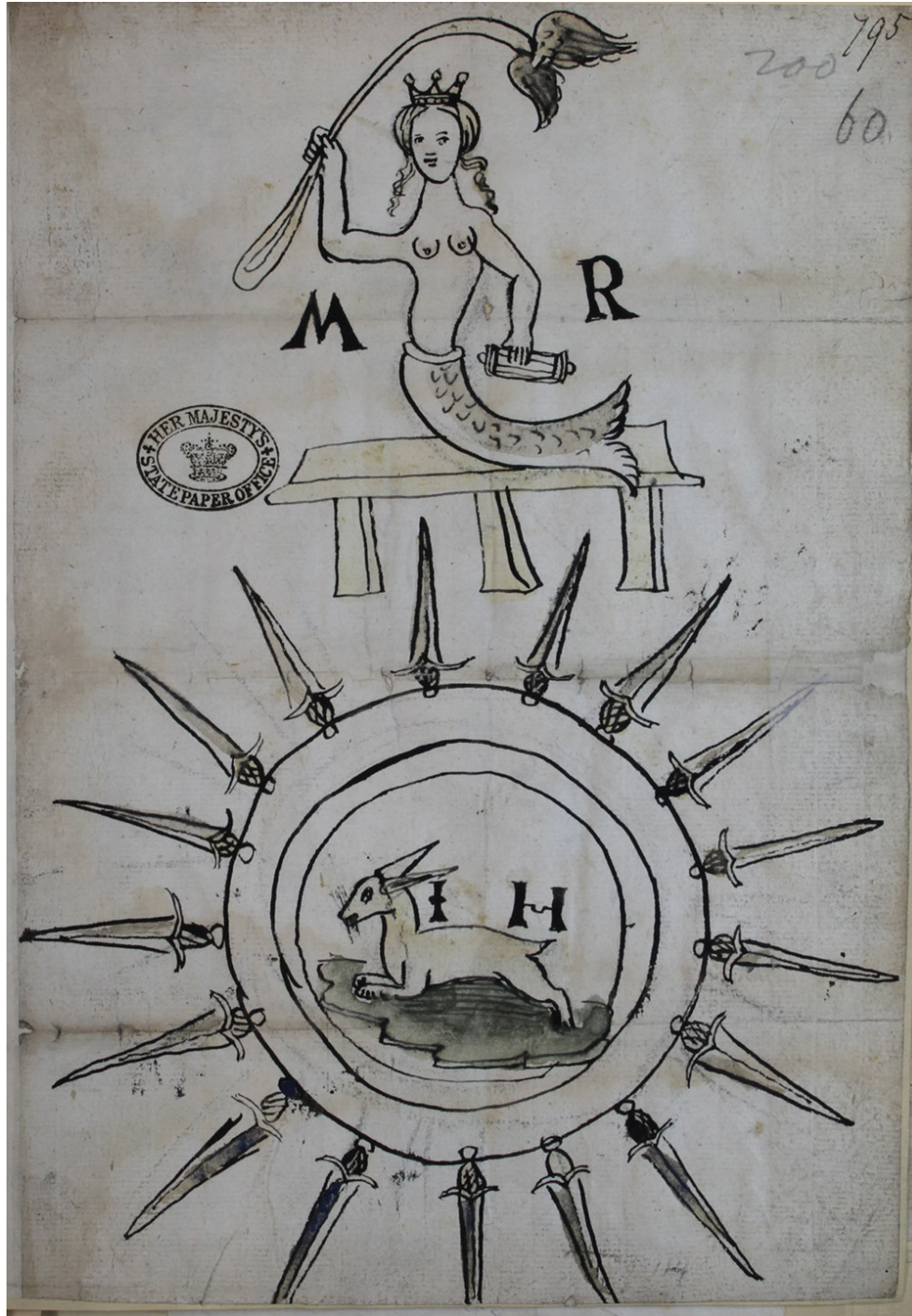


Fig. 7, Unknown Artist, *Sketch of Mary Queen of Scots*, ca. 1567, Placard, 27 x 20 cm,
Collection of the National Archives, United Kingdom.



Fig. 8, Giotto di Bondone, *The Last Judgment* (Detail of Halo Convention), ca. 1304, Fresco, 1000 x 840 cm, Scrovegni Chapel, Padua, Italy.



Fig. 9, Marcus Gheeraerts the Younger, ca. 1592, oil on canvas, 241 x 152 cm, National Portrait Gallery, London.