THE *ARMADA PORTRAIT* : COSTUME AND THE BODY POLITIC

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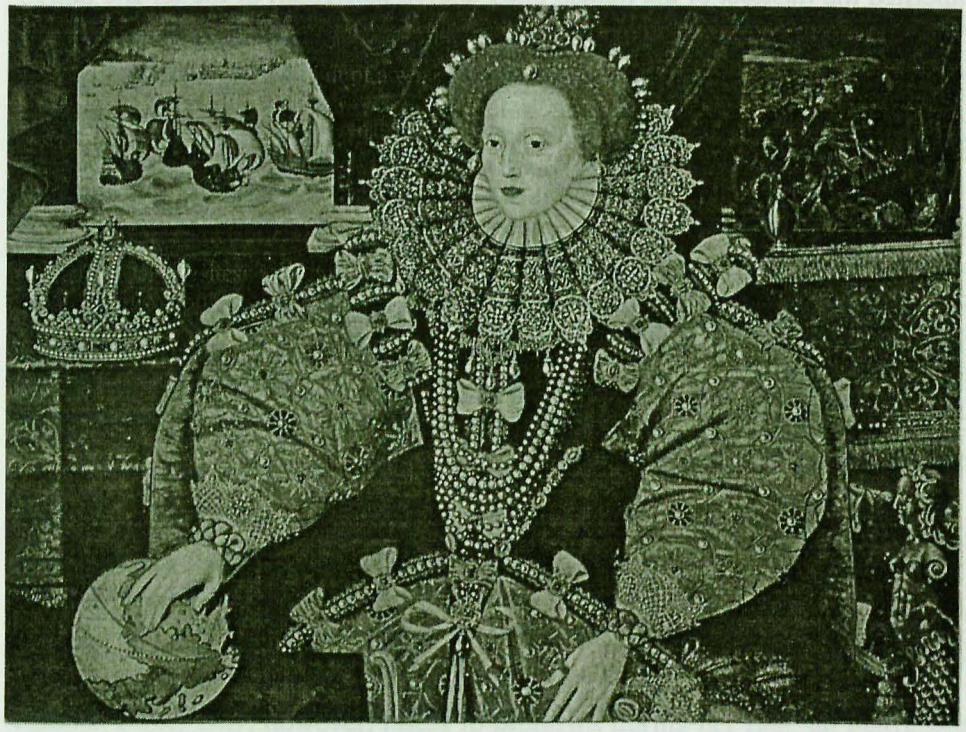

I know I have the body but of a weak and feeble woman;

But I have the heart and stomach of a king, and of a king

of England too ....[1]

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1 Elizabeth I, "Speech to theTroops at Tilbury"; in *The Norton Anthology Of Literature By Women: The Tradition in English* (New York and London: W.W. Norton, 1985), p. 30.

With these words, Queen Elizabeth I (1533-1603) sent her troops, gathered at Tilbury, to fight the Spanish *Armada*, in 1558. And it is this body, clad in ostentatious costumes, that functioned as an emblem of the body of imperial England and its politics. Image-making intervened: the queen's heavily structured, padded, stiff and richly embroidered costumes were meant to counteract any impression of a soft female shape and thus female frailty, for, despite the Italian rediscovery of physical beauty, the Renaissance, as Sara F. Matthews Grieco points out, in "The Body, Appearance, and Sexuality", inherited the mistrust of the human body and, in particular, of the female body[2]. Natalie Zemon Davis, in "Women in Politics", points to the suspicion "that women would be subject to male favorites and would be changeable and irrational."[3] What Dominic Baker-Smith, in "The Cultural and Social Setting: Renaissance and Reformation", refers to as "the anomaly of a female ruler" had then to be rendered less threatening by a wardrobe that exuded *gravitas* and power[4]. Her wardrobe, demonstrating strength and invincibility, had to ward off serious threats and accusations: Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar , in "Queen Elizabeth I", state that, the daughter of Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn, the queen had been stigmatised as illegitimate by Pope Clement VII, who opposed her father's remarriage; as queen, she had to face the opposition of both the catholics and protestants and deal with the threat that Catholic Spain and France represented for herself and England[5].

The myth of Elizabeth's virginity- she was also known as the Virgin Queen- that was encouraged by her refusal to marry, although she allegedly took several lovers, strengthened her claim to the royal office. Once again, her costume played a vital part in projecting her image as virgin. Davis remarks that "Dressed in stiff ornate garments, her body was as inaccessible as if it were under armor[6]." Her virginity meant the freedom to serve her entire country, not

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2 Sara F. Matthews Grieco,"The Body, Appearance, and Sexuality", eds. Natalie Zemon Davis and Arlette Farge, in *A History of Women in the West: Renaissance and Enlightenment Paradoxes* , 2nd ed., 4 vols. (Cambridge et *al.* :Belknap P of Harvard UP, 1994), vol. 3, p. 47.

3 Natalie Zemon Davis, "Women in Politics", in *A History of Women in the West: Renaissance and Enlightenment Paradoxes* , p. 170.

4 Dominic Baker-Smith, "The Cultural and Social Setting: Renaissance and Reformation", in *16th Century Britain: The Cambridge Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1992), p. 25.

5 Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar , "Queen Elizabeth I ", in *The Norton Anthology Of Literature By Women: The Tradition in English* , p. 28.

6 Davis, "Women in Politics", p. 170.

a single man, she being "the mistress, wife and mother"[7] of no one but England. The queen herself put it thus: "I am already bound unto an Husband, which is the kingdom of England." Baker-Smith notes that her celibacy moreover exalted her as another Virgin Mary, a holy, saint-like spiritual leader of her country[8].

The need for such image-making that would promote Elizabeth I as a strong and invincible ruler also arose from yet another circumstance: England had suffered thirty years of commotion and chaos, during the Wars of the Roses (1455-1485). As both the House of Lancaster and the House of York claimed the English crown by right of descent from Edward III, civil wars broke out between them. The Lancastrian Henry VI, an incompetent ruler, failed to prevent the warfare between the Lancastrian Beauforts and Richard Plantagenet, Duke of York, and the Earl of Warwick. After York's death, his son seized the crown in 1461, becoming Edward IV, to be supplanted, in 1470, by Henry IV, only to be restored to the throne, after his victory at Tewkesbury. His successor was Richard III, who was defeated by Henry VII, in 1485, and, in 1487, all Yorkist opposition was crushed. Such insurrection and chaos then, John Guy, in his chapter, "The Tudor Age (1485-1603)", comments, seriously "undermined confidence in monarchy as an institution: the king was seen unable, or unwilling, to protect the rights of all his subjects", rather than those of his favourites[9]. The fear of a weak and undisciplined monarch thus running high, the Tudors demanded restoration of absolute centralised power.

Fashion and image-making were hence a pivotal strategy in transforming a 25-year-old woman into a much revered queen, indeed, it encouraged the cult of Gloriana, the virgin queen, who, during her 45-year reign, defeated the Spanish *Armada* and thus saved Protestant England from Spanish catholic domination as well as led her nation to prosperity, peace and primacy as a great colonial force. Guy, however, refers to problems during her rule: an inefficient tax system, corruption in central administration and favouritism[10]. During the Renaissance, fashion became an important though costly pastime for both the nobility, in particular, courtiers, and the rising middle class. Bronwyn Cosgrave, in *The Complete History Of Costume & Fashion: From Ancient Egypt To The*

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7 *Ibid* . , p. 171.

8 Baker-Smith, "The Cultural and Social Setting: Renaissance and Reformation", p. 38.

9 John Guy, "The Tudor Age (1485-1603)", in *The Oxford History Of Britain* , ed. Kenneth O. Morgan (Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 1988), p. 266.

10 *Op . cit.* , p. 311.

Present Day, notes that the expansion of transportation made possible the merchandise of luxury goods, while the increasing number of tailors and their guild's insistence on high quality ensured that they were fitted to the body of the individual client- and the body politic[11]. She continues to argue that thus fashion spread; indeed, Queen Elizabeth was known as a woman of great style, though not of beauty; her personal wardrobe, upon her death, is said to have consisted of 3.000 dresses and head pieces[12]. Most important of all, her image was promoted by her portraits, which were copied and distributed throughout the land in order to engage the loyalty of her subjects who had no access to the court. Maurice Howard and Nigel Llewellyn, in "Studies in the Individual Arts", comment that "painting served in various ways to promote the image of the sovereign. As part of court spectacle and pageantry, the visual arts were a means of demonstrating the power of the figure in the centre[13]."

The *Armada Portrait* - displaying patriotic self-confidence in the face of the defeat of the Spanish ships that were wrecked against the Scottish rocks- constitutes an important example of paintings that reveal Elizabeth's traditional look: on the one hand, it is in keeping with the feminine ideal of the time, but, on the other hand, every thread, pattern and ornament exudes power. Her adoption of an all too masculine identity might have stigmatised her as an unfeminine, or worse, monstrous creature- neither man nor woman- who mistook her sex. Baker-Smith, however, states that the queen's 'masculinity' was lessened by a revival of the courtly love convention, she playing the part of the lady, her courtiers that of the knights owing her service. He points to "Hilliard's portrait of ... Robert Devereux, Earl of Essex, which shows him in jousting armour with the queen's glove tied to his right arm[14]." Moreover, well known for her diplomacy and tendency to choose the middle way- for example, when merging catholicism and puritanism into anglicanism- the queen once again opted for a compromise: female charm as well as male power.

In the *Armada Portrait* , the dominant colours of the queen's costumes are black and red, the traditional royal colours of *gravitas* and power, yet they are also emblematic of masculinity and femininity. Her black sleeveless mantle

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11 Bronwyn Cosgrave, *The Complete History Of Costume & Fashion: From Ancient Egypt To The Present Day* (New York: Checkmark Books, 2000), p. 123.

12 *Ibid* . , p. 126.

13 Maurice Howard and Nigel Llewellyn, "Studies in the Individual Arts", in *16th Century Britain: The Cambridge Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1992), p. 25.

14 Baker-Smith, p. 37.

that falls down her back and sides is adorned with a great number of red ribbons- a happy merging of masculinity and femininity. Thus Queen Elizabeth adhered to the desired ideal of female beauty, yet a depersonalised ideal that allowed for no individualising characteristics. In the portrait, she is shown to possess the ideal female silhouette that emphasised wide shoulders, a long, narrow waist and full hips. A narrow face, narrow chin and forehead as well as shapely long and thin hands were features that distinguished a beautiful woman. Queen Elizabeth also followed, Cosgrave notes, the tradition of plucking her brows, eyelashes and hairline, the latter, in order to achieve the impression of a higher- and thus nobler- forehead, and ultimately to create the picture of delicate beauty. Her complexion strikes the onlooker as pale- indeed, her face is mask-like yet the cheeks and lips are suffused with an orange-tinted red. In fact, she was known to follow the fashion of applying red and white paint- toxic white lead – to her face in order to achieve this effect[15]. Grieco states that whiteness was not only emblematic of purity and femininity, but "[white] was the color of the 'female' heavenly body, the moon, as distinct from the more vibrant hues of the 'masculine' sun[16]." She is thus also linked with the virgin goddess, Diana, this 'kinship' reinforcing the cult of her own virginity. Moreover, her white light shines in the darkness and thus gives comfort to her people. That she be furthermore associated with a huntress, on the other hand, refers to Elizabeth's courage in personally leading her troops at Tilbury and aptness for warfare. That her delicate white right hand be placed on the globe, her left holding the sceptre, is an unmistakable assertion of her power as monarch. The queen's upper lip is not only tinged with colour, but also drawn as rather thick and sensuous. That her lips should be closed, and not express a smile, however, counteracts the image of an all too female attraction and seductiveness; a grave and dignified air is maintained. This is after all a portrait of the head of both the church and state. Her eyes that look inward create an image of saintly otherworldliness and thus immediately remove the threat of too alluring a female body.

A queen cultivating a delicate and sensuous image, would certainly not encourage much faith in her subjects, still shaken by the aftermaths of the Wars of the Roses. Delicacy meant weakness and sensuous attraction, as the story of the fall demonstrated, an absolute peril. *Gravitas* and power, dignity and poise were what the people demanded and what her costumes exuded. Indeed, one of

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[15] Cosgrave, *The Complete History Of Costume & Fashion*, p. 139.

[16] Grieco, ,"The Body, Appearance, and Sexuality", p. 62.

the dominant principles in the patterns of these costumes is a striking centrality as emblematic of her central position as ruler, her centralised government, success in elevating England to a primary world power, England's central position to its colonies and, still on a larger level, of the centralised Ptolemaic cosmology. First of all, the queen is the figure in the centre of the *Armada Portrait* and thus England is in the centre of the world and universe. On Elizabeth's head, in mid-position, are fastened a gem and a pearl studded and feathered ornament. On her wig, a central pearl is placed, while more pearls surround the wig entirely. The royal head itself is placed in the centre of a stiff lace collar. The narrowly shaped, flat-chested upper body that ends in a V-shaped waistline constitutes still another focal point. The centres of the many red ribbons that decorate her black sleeveless mantle and front hold gems set in gold, while, in the centre of the flower patterns that decorate her ostentatious greenish sleeves and lower part of her dress are placed pearls. Apart from creating the image of central power, the V-shape or triangle, asserts her link with the holy Trinity- as does the reversed V-shape of the ornament fastened on her head- and legitimises her authority as deriving from god.

Ptolemaic cosmology argues the central position of the earth and of humanity, transparent spheres of huge magnitude moving concentrically around them. This presentation of planned and patterned regular circularity devises a perfectly constructed universe, the circle- as well as circular spheres- constituting an ancient symbol of immutability, perfection and the after life. In the *Armada Portrait* , Queen Elizabeth's pale head, the noblest part of the human body, corresponds to the earth, and the round, stiff and delicate collar encircling it, to the transparent spheres rotating around the earth. The collar itself features a white "plate" with fragile lacing at the fringe. Its delicate lace, bordering on nothingness, evokes the immaterial emanations of heavenly bodies that guard her spirituality. This idea is repeated in the position of the wig to the pearls, the one corresponding to the fixed earth, the other to the spheres that are rotating around it. Another such representation we find in the central pearl and the flower design around it. The queen thus lays claim on god's central position, enjoying the homage of her lesser creations. Consequently, her image and authority are not man-made, rather, they derive their legitimacy from a divine and universal source.

The regularity and orderliness that, in Ptolemaic cosmology, denote a perfectly designed universe also find their correspondence in the regular

symmetrical pattern of Elizabeth's ornaments. The pearls on her wig are grouped in two, her wig itself being dressed in perfectly regular rows of tight curls. The lace collar consists of even plaits and perfect symmetry is observable in the distribution of the many ribbons and pearls. Perfection hence also characterises the queen herself.

Another striking feature of the queen's costume is the broad and stiff structure of the tailoring, an effect achieved through the technique of padding that accentuates the shoulders and arms with the object of projecting an image of great and grave authority. Drama, movement, freedom of form are then practically entirely absent from the portrait and the aura the queen's costumes exude. A stiff unbending will, rather than a soft submissive attitude was to distinguish the ruler of a powerful country which claimed the position of a world power.

Naomi Tarrant, in *The Development of Costume,* points to this obsession with heavy structures and consequent confinement. She states that "The use of padding, interlinings and boning to create shapes is the most noticeable feature of late sixteenth-century garments[17]." These shapes are meant to create a stiff and lofty look- and the image of a strong ruler and England. Just as the earth, which was supposed to be fixed upon its foundation, not to be moved ever, the queen and her nation were to remain immune to anxiety-inducing change. Tarrant also draws attention to the tight-fitting bodice, imported from French fashion, that "probably had canvas backing to achieve the very smooth surface", the lack of bust darts making the bosom- and thus female frailty- appear non-existent[18]. Cosgrave notes that a stiff stomacher would fill the gap at the front of the dress[19]. Among the stiffening material, Tarrant lists "Canvas, wood, cardboard and whalebone, while padding could be of cotton, wool or horsehair[20]." She moreover explains that "the skirt was pinned to an understructure known as a wheel farthingale", which was imported from Spain, and which made the skirt and hips appear as broad and round as a wheel[21]. The Ruff, epaulets and wig would reinforce this impression of a rigid structure and *gravitas*. The overall effect was a triangular upper-body, wide shoulders, a flat

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17 Naomi Tarrant , *The Development of Costume* (London and New York: National Museums of Scotland, Edinburgh in conjunction with Routledge), 1996, p. 93.

18 *Ibid* . , p. 56.

19 Cosgrave, p. 125.

20 Tarrant, p. 62.

21 *Ibid* ., p. 60 and p. 57.

front and a long narrow waist, while the lower part was characterised by ostentatious width. The padding, exaggerated shoulders, sleeves and hips, transformed the body of a 'mere' human being, a woman, into the larger body of entire England, her 'bulk' demonstrating its power and primacy. The royal costumes thus nearly replaced the sceptre, crown and orb- that are also shown in the portrait- as the insignia of power.

Yet the gems and pearls that the queen's costumes and crown are studded with are the riches of the East, and, though, in her own times, they demonstrated and celebrated England's power as a colonial force, today, they rather point to the fact that much of England's wealth, so pompously displayed, were carried off from the colonies. Cosgrave states that pearls were her favourite; probably hundreds of them ornament her dress, her hair and neck, in the *Armada Portrait*[22]. The centres of the many red ribbons that decorate her black mantle and front hold gems set in gold. Gold also holds the gems of her head piece and her crown. Gold's traditional association with the sun and light- just as all the gems stun the beholder with their sparkling light- as well as its position at the top of the hierarchy of the different groups of metals, in the great chain of being, once again demonstrate the queen's primary position and glorify her as the source of light in the world.

Fashion and image-making were then an indispensable strategy in, first of all, asserting Queen Elizabeth's right to the throne. For a woman, an 'illegitimate' child, an excommunicated monarch, hard beset by both catholics and puritans, such manifestation of the legitimacy of her rule appeared to be absolutely necessary. Her body, dressed in splendid costumes that dazzled the eyes, also functioned as an emblem of the body of a powerful and prosperous England and its politics. Fashion consequently was not mere fashion, but a most attractive and entertaining- though expensive- means to a political end.

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22 Cosgrave, p. 135.

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