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THE CULT OF ELIZABETH I

Ideology, Representation and Ritual

Summary and Conclusions of the PhD Dissertation

Consultant: Dr. György Endre Szőnyi DSc

Budapest, 2009
'Of the place where and howe an assembly should be made, in the presence of a Prince, or some honourable person,' in George Gascoigne, *The Noble Art of Venerie or Hunting* (London, 1575), sig. F5v
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The dissertation set out to study the cultural discourses that developed around the figure of Queen Elizabeth I as a result of, and as an answer to the political, social and religious issues that England’s twenty-five-year old Protestant female sovereign had to face at her accession to the throne and during her forty-five-year reign. The discourse is known as the “Cult of Elizabeth” as it shows features corresponding to the mental, ritual, and linguistic attitudes of pagan and Christian cults. The basic assumption of Louis Montrose was adopted by the work, which treated the phenomenon as a richly figurative and ideologically unstable discourse that was present not only in the works of the panegyrists of the court, but also in the broader layers of society, including areas of civil entertainment, religious observance and private devotion. The work throughout relied on the close reading of documents and contemporary literary texts in order to observe the emergence and workings of the expression of the “love” of the subjects towards their queen.

The dissertation chose the entry of the queen into London as a starting point. The procession through the city before the coronation of a monarch was an old custom, but Elizabeth’s program was far more elaborate than previous similar occasions. It answered the political and religious challenges to the rule of the queen, and created a pattern for the later representational strategies of the monarch, which included her own image forming techniques, and her reliance on an openness and availability to her subjects in the first part of her reign.

Another point of departure was the gendered nature of Elizabeth’s rule. Early modern society was fundamentally biased against female authority, and the queen constantly had to compensate for challenges attacking her majesty and respectability. Through the comparison of two pamphlets from the beginning of the reign the dissertation drafted the arguments and counter-arguments on gynaecocracy, which were spiced by religious fundamentalism as opposed to the moderate interpretation of the Bible.

The first part of the dissertation also analyzed the only “official” source and basis of the queen’s cult: her public speeches, and outlined those metaphors that Elizabeth and the authors of the speeches chose to fashion the image of the English queen.

The second part of the work addressed the public image of Queen Elizabeth on her yearly progresses. This relatively new area of study analysed a broad spectrum of cultural phenomena: representational strategies of local communities, their mode of engaging in dialogue with the sovereign, the nature of the entertainments with which the queen was received, the individual lobbying of private hosts, and the language of poetic or less-poetic tributes to the queen. A chapter argued for the importance of these progresses in formulating the myth of the queen, embedded in the symbolic “wonder working” power of
Elizabeth, both as a monarch and as a maiden queen. A further chapter analyzed the influence of the Elizabethan progresses on literature and in particular on Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene*.

The third part of the dissertation examined the poetic imagery of the queen in courtly genres. The study of the text and the representational techniques of Peele’s *The Arraignment of Paris* emphasized that in this play the elements of the traditional courtly masque were present, as well as the new Renaissance eulogy of the queen with tropes from classical mythology. John Lyly’s early prose and dramatic works served as an example of the possibilities a poet had in shaping the imagery of the panegyric of the queen, and the limitations he had to experience in aspiring to higher court office as a writer. The last example of courtly tribute to the queen was the poetry of Sir Walter Ralegh, a member of the inner circle of the court, whose success was partly due to his ability to manipulate the images of the cult rhetoric of the queen and to form them into lyric songs.

After outlining the basis of the cult, its popularisation through the progresses, and its refinement at the court, the last part of the dissertation examined the institutionalized and ritualized acts of the “worship” of the queen, which were manifested in the celebrations of the Accession Day on 17th November. The prayers and sermons for this day were one of the most effective means to reach out to all layers of society and to implant the reverence for the queen into the people. The dissertation examined a little researched area: the prayers written for Accession Day. The courtly tilts of this day received much more scholarly attention in the past, so in this work through the comparative analysis of two documents about the tilt of 1590, only the complexity of the representational strategies was outlined. As a result of the transformation of the popular and courtly celebration of the queen into an official holiday, and as a consequence of the economic, social, and political strains of the last decade of the queen’s rule, the discourse of the cult underwent a substantial change and a mode of extreme and extravagant flattery emerged.

The central metaphor of the late excessive cult of the queen was the virgin goddess, Astraea. Her figure was able to synthesize both the religious and secular tropes of the queen’s praise. Such a highly complex visual image is the ‘Rainbow’ portrait of the queen, and the poem cycle of Sir John Davies *The Hymns of Astraea*. Astraea’s imagery was used to propagate the expansionist policies of certain factions of the court. As one of the earliest poetic expressions of the imperial Astraea, the work of the Hungarian Stephen Parmenius had been examined. The *De navigatione* has received relatively little attention in the study of Elizabeth’s cult, and its importance in influencing later works, such as Ralegh’s *The Discovery of Guiana*, has not been argued yet.

The final chapter of the dissertation examined the dissenting voices of the last decade of Queen Elizabeth’s reign, which were to a great extent based on the strengthening Catholic criticism of the female rule of Elizabeth. Arguments
of Cardinal Allen’s pamphlet demonstrated well how in this final decade the queen was attacked again mainly for her sex, and that the slandering of her moral integrity reflected the growing misogyny of the age. The poets and playwrights of a new generation were also ready to explore the erotic and negative associations of images that were used in the cultural discourses of the queen’s eulogy, thus casting a shadow on the glorious image of the queen.

The cult of Elizabeth did not end with the queen’s death. Through its complex cultural significance, it has become part of the historic mythology of the English nation. This posthumous cult, similarly to the one during the lifetime of Elizabeth, has been fashioned not so much by official governmental regulations, but by the people who expressed their prevailing concerns about national political interests, religious independence, and feminine authority through the image of one single individual, Elizabeth Tudor.

My working method has mainly been literary text analysis, providing the close reading of the selected sources and concentrating on the verbal and cultural significance and complexities of the utterances. The work intentionally transgresses the borders of the classical disciplines such as literature, art history, history, social history or political philosophy, to provide an interdisciplinary study of a phenomenon that exerted its influence on all the segments of society and art.
OUTLINE OF THE DISSERTATION

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Introduction

Part I – Legitimating Female Rule
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2 Theories on Female Power
3 The Self-fashioning of Queen Elizabeth’s Speeches and Writings

Part II – Elizabeth’s Public Image on the Progresses
4 The Progresses and the Formation of Elizabeth I’s Cult
5 Working Wonders: The Metaphor of the Wild Man
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Part III – Courtly Images of the Queen
7 George Peele’s The Arraignment of Paris
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**Main Findings of the Individual Analyses**

**Part I – Legitimating Female Rule**

The queen’s public appearance at her coronation entry was the first instance which aimed to answer challenges to female rule and to fashion the queen’s image on the grounds of earlier Tudor iconography and Protestant rhetoric. The analysis of the text of Richard Mulcaster’s pamphlet about the London entry proved that the text was the work of refined propaganda. It not just described the pageants and events of the day, but its subjective tone about the city’s rejoicing and the details about the queen’s reaction disseminated an intentionally gendered image about Elizabeth’s rule.

The year of Elizabeth’s accession to the throne brought forth two important documents on the issue of female power. Both were written by zealous Protestants defending their religion, both used the same authorities and line of arguments, but their ultimate message was exactly the opposite. While Knox’s *The First Blast of the Trumpet against the Monstrous Regiment of Women* attacked the notion of letting women exercise power, Aylmer’s *An harborewe for Faithfull and Trewe Subiectes* claimed to justify the rule of women elected by God’s special providence. The comparison of the texts outlined the major Protestant challenges to Elizabeth’s reign and the answers given to them. The dissertation argued that both documents had a decisive influence on the early image of Queen Elizabeth, whose later self-fashioning showed a direct reaction to and adoption of the theories published in the pamphlets.

Aylmer’s treatise comprised all those ideas that appeared in the early propaganda of Queen Elizabeth. While Aylmer did not question the existence of differences in virtue between the male and female sex as mapped out in ancient and medieval texts, he foregrounded certain womanly virtues which could be helpful in governing. The pamphlet also summarized models of virtuous godly women for the queen and set a basic tone for her representation as one of them, emphasized the capability of women to be educated and presented Elizabeth as an example, and underlined the importance of the continuity of the royal succession, and justified it with the political theory of the mixed government.

In her public speeches and her private writings Queen Elizabeth followed closely the claims of John Aylmer’s pamphlet and fashioned her early image along those lines using a feminized discourse of authority donning the roles of the godly and educated monarch. Nearly all of Queen Elizabeth’s speeches offered instances of deliberate self-fashioning. Though the extant texts are unstable, and the charm of the performances has vanished—except for occasional remarks about low voice, stretching out her hand, or standing up in thank of the praise of an orator—, the queen’s speeches are still impressive and work through their fashioning of the positive aspects of femininity, - gentleness, caring, and
love, - to balance contemporary misogynistic opinions. Throughout the forty-five years of her reign Elizabeth’s rhetoric showed only slight changes in its stresses and articulation of one or another theme. The germ of most of her later utterances had been present already in her earliest speeches.

**Part II – Elizabeth’s Public Image on the Progresses**

The progresses of Queen Elizabeth to the countryside created an opportunity of public celebration that contributed largely to the development and popularization of the queen’s public image. Her personal insistence of engaging in dialogue with her subjects in the first twenty years helped in the mystifying of her presence into the wonder working divinity she was enlarged into by the last decade of her reign. For the representational strategies of the queen her ability to transform a barbaric countryside and people into a cultivated landscape and loyal subjects was the most important contribution of the progresses to the rhetoric of the queen’s cult.

In Elizabethan literature the tradition of representing wild men was emphatically used in a courtly context. Drawing on both the chivalrous medieval romances and on antique mythological figures a new type of wild man was represented, one that was benevolent, acknowledged the virtues and humanity of the queen, and was ready to offer his services for her protection. In the progresses of Queen Elizabeth this type of wild man always confronted its audience in his own environment, the countryside, which offered adequate space to this new aspect of the wild man. Wildness, in the context both of the wild man metaphor and the Elizabethan gardens, was not presented as a threat to civil order but as an uncorrupted state which the court could regard as a model for correct knightly behaviour. The wild man tradition was not only an integral part of the artistic imagery of early modern England, but epitomized the essence of the propagandistic discourse of the court on progress.

The cultural influence of the progress entertainments on the subconscious of an age can be estimated by the mark it left on one of the most ambitious works of Elizabeth’s reign, *The Faerie Queene*. A close correspondence between the imagery, the representational forms, and the structure of the entertainments prepared for the queen and Spenser’s work testifies that the quasi-literary genre of the progress show was of vital importance in the formation of later works of literature, especially those that chose as their subject matter the eulogy of the queen, that is, the rhetoric of the queen’s emerging cult.

In the accounts of the progress entertainments two further tendencies can be noticed that exerted their effect in the 1580s when the queen chose not to undertake any extensive travels during the summer months. Firstly, the importance of the author of pageant scripts increased by the end of the 1570s, as the accounts underlining individual invention testifies. Secondly, closely connected with the first, the language of the eulogy of the queen and its scope of poetical invention broadened. While in the account of the early visits of
Elizabeth (for instance, in the Coronation Entry, or the visit to the university towns) the joint effort of the communality was foregrounded, from 1575 onwards, the conjurer of the various devices would emerge to personally offer his service to his sovereign and to seek preferment as a reward. As a result the status of celebrating the queen by poetic methods increased, and the language of eulogy of the queen developed in an unprecedented way to prepare the next decade’s literary interest: the celebration of the cult of Elizabeth in the true literary genres of court drama and lyric poetry.

**Part III – Rituals and Reactions**

George Peele’s *The Arraignment of Paris* is a play in which the discourse of the cult of Elizabeth and the formal courtly setting of the performance become important elements of the drama. While the excessive praise of the queen in the fifth act can be criticized as flattery, from a formal point of view, it is an organic part of the general structure of the drama, which shows strong ties to the devices performed on the progresses of the court.

*The Arraignment of Paris* was written in a period when the cult around the queen was gathering momentum and broadening its expressive devices. The play captures the moment when the progress entertainment was turned into refined courtly drama. In later dramatic works, such as the plays of John Lyly, an analogue between a character of the play and Queen Elizabeth was often drawn, but the queen was distanced from the action, she remained a spectator, and the actors did not speak to her or hand over gifts. With these plays the discourse of the cult of Elizabeth entered the terrain of true drama.

Lyly’s encomium of Queen Elizabeth encompasses three distinct phases of the cult discourse. His prose work belongs to the late 1570s, and synthesizes the diverse figures, allegories and emblems which the Queen had been associated with in the first half of her reign. Yet from a stylistic aspect it points to the future where its language of refined elaboration was imitated. The early drama of Lyly was conceived in a period when the Diana cult of the queen was developed and the themes of the conflict between love and chastity were explored. *Endimion, The Man in the Moon* stands out as the most important manifestation of the Diana cult and as the first play which employed the lunar imagery to celebrate the queen on stage. Yet this play already foreshadows the third phrase of Lyly’s treatment of the imagery of the cult, one that explores the negative connotations of lunar symbolism and air a critical opinion about the panegyric of the queen.

*Endimion* occupies an important station in the cult development also as it investigates the possibilities of relationship between the queen and her subjects. The attitude due to the impeccable, unapproachable, distanced deity, into which Queen Elizabeth metamorphosed in his panegyric of the late 1580s, is loyalty and service, where love becomes an impersonal chivalrous act.
In the 1580s there was a growing interest in love poetry which honoured also a virtuous, beautiful and unattainable lady. While in *Endimion* the affection was allowed only to be termed loyal service, the Neoplatonic love discourse encouraged the intimacy of the language of love for a chaste lady.

Ralegh’s lyric poetry was embedded both in his political ambition for self-advancement and his bewilderment and wonder at the unattainable lady of the court, the queen. He skilfully assimilated his first hand knowledge of the official cult discourse of the court in his early poetry and extended it with his own device of the sea imagery. His *The Ocean to Cynthia* written in years of disfavour draws on the images of the eulogy of the queen, but daringly applies the device of complaint against the unrequited love of the queen. The passionate flow of verse unveils also a critical tone that reflects the negative opinions about female rule appearing in increasing number in the post-Armada years.

**Part IV – Rituals and Reactions**

In the last decade of Elizabeth’s reign the representations about the queen became more fanciful and hyperbolic. The emergence of the Accession Day as an institutional religious and civic festivity led to the formalization and ritualization of celebrating the queen. Both the emergent discourse of Biblical typology and secular eulogy tended towards the overuse of symbolic figures. The growing complexity of such a formalized language created – especially in the civic panegyric - a set of standardized linguistic modes of expression that stifled the imaginative playfulness of the language invented by the courtly drama of Lyly or the poetry of Ralegh.

The description of the 1590 Accession Day tournament demonstrates the thickening of the layers of symbolism that were used for the praise of the queen. The language of Protestant advocates of the Queen’s Day celebrations possessed a moral seriousness, yet it was not free of a tendency for overstatement and exaggeration. As a result the development of the queen’s cult in the next decade was twofold: one conformed to the language initiated by the Accession Day ceremonies, while the other reacted against it with a critical tone.

The adoption of the Astraea trope comprised the propagandistic ideas of immutability, just government, peace and plenty within the country, principles which became challenged and disputed by the economic, social and political troubles of the last decade. The need to veil the dissenting voices brought about the excessive eulogy of the queen. Yet the representational strategies of this cult discourse were abused by courtiers and self-seeking subjects to achieve their own interests at court, which arouse further resistance.

While the queen was praised in poetry, prose, painting, and music, the discrepancy between her panegyric and the growing discontent of the people was ever more obvious. Negative representations about the aging queen appeared in growing numbers as the century was drawing to its end. The greatest threat to the queen’s female authority was posed by accusations that attacked her
femininity and her chastity. The slanders about her licentious acts were expounded fully in the pamphlets of Catholic propaganda that found their way to the households of the English. In these writings the cult of the queen was regarded as shameless flattery and its chief day of celebration, the Accession Day, as the manifestation of idolatry. The absolute value of individual figures within the queen’s cult, as for instance the moon and the Fairy Queen, was challenged by exploring the negative associations of the symbols. Thus the vocabulary of the queen’s cult became a means to criticise the reign of Elizabeth and to express the growing desire of the English nation for a king after the fifty-year-rule of queens.
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