Semper Eadem:
The Virginal Image of Queen Elizabeth I

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Please note, this work includes content related to murder and execution.

Abstract

The life and reign of Queen Elizabeth I saw a plethora of change as England entered the early modern era, explored the world, and defended its shores, yet at its center, Elizabeth, by her own design, remained an image of carefully constructed familiarity, by remaining unmarried and a perpetual virgin. This image allowed Elizabeth to remain a constant in an ever-changing world and provide a sense of security to herself and her subjects. After the tumultuous reigns of her predecessors, Elizabeth's calculated image of virginity defied patriarchal beliefs about women in power, protected her kingdom from foreign influences, and helped her continually showcase a steadfast devotion to her subjects. In return, Elizabeth was revered as a maiden, mother, and heroine to her people: England's very own goddess.

Although Elizabeth's golden age ended over 420 years ago, the topic of her virgin image is as elusive and malleable in modern public discourse as it was during her reign and has survived in an abundance of plays, books, television shows, and films as both a positive and negative attribute of the queen. These characterizations of Elizabeth, regardless of their factual nature, have long reflected the societies that created them and general attitudes toward independent women. Thus, to better understand the role of Elizabeth's virginity in her reign, attention must briefly be paid to its complex artistic afterlife. The 20th and early 21st century, in particular, with their widespread availability of film, television, and mass-produced novels, provides a plethora of popular media speak to Elizabeth's virginity in the public imagination and popular memory. The first popular lens in which Elizabeth's virginity can be seen is as a marker of failure. This analysis of Elizabeth often shows her virginity as a double-edged sword, allowing her to be a publicly successful queen but privately unfulfilled woman due to lack of marriage, which only leads her to foolish relationships with younger men in her old age, such as in the 1939 film *The Private Lives of Elizabeth and Essex*.[1] Here, Elizabeth's relationship with favorite Robert Devereux, 2nd Earl of Essex, is molded to fit with notions that a woman cannot be happy without marriage, no matter her other accomplishments. The second lens is that of Elizabeth's virginity rendering her completely independent, with little focus on her private world. Portrayals such as these often focus on Elizabeth's determination through her navigation of politics and government, principally shown in works such as the 1971 BBC series *Elizabeth R*.[2] The third lens Elizabeth has been popularly viewed through

[1] David Grant Moss, "A Queen for Whose Time? Elizabeth I as Icon for the Twentieth Century," *The Journal of Popular Culture* 39, no. 5 (2006): 798.
[2] Moss, "A Queen for Whose Time?," 799.

is one of balance between both the public and private. In films such as the 1998 *Elizabeth*, viewers see Elizabeth, only publicly presenting as a virgin, use her virginal image to navigate the complicated world around her without sacrificing her private happiness, as found in a secret relationship with Robert Dudley, 1st Earl of Leicester, here she does not have to choose between the public and private image of herself instead, she has both.[3] The final lens Elizabeth's virginity has been viewed through is one of myth with an emphasis on deception.[4] In some popular historical romance novels of the early 21st century, Elizabeth's virginity has been used to characterize her as cunning and has served as a backdrop to plots full of feuding bastard children and even incest.[5] While historical romance novels, much like other artistic portrayals of Elizabeth, are rarely self-described historically accurate, often based on loose facts and timelines, they do impact the public's perception of Elizabeth when, at least in some part, these works parade as genuine events that could have happened. For instance, an Amazon.com review by a user named Faram gushed in a review of the 2001 novel *Oxford: Son of Elizabeth I*, focused on a bastard son of Elizabeth who is the 'real' playwright William Shakespeare, "I hope others will look at your facts and realize how we have all been duped by the very cunning/beautiful/enigmatic Queen Elizabeth…"[6] Comments such as these speak to the impact of Elizabeth's artistic afterlife, which has demonstrated, both positively and negatively through the centuries, the importance of her virginity as a continuously cultivated, celebrated, and questioned marker of her life and reign, whose purpose can shift and change, even within a century.

Regardless of artistic portrayals that try to decipher Elizabeth's virgin image, for the real Elizabeth, her decisions can undoubtedly be traced to her turbulent adolescence, whose many lessons laid the foundations for the private and public sides of her queenship. Elizabeth was born in 1533 to King Henry VIII and his second of six wives, Anne Boleyn. Her birth disappointed her father, who was desperate for a male heir and already had a daughter from his first marriage, Mary. Henry eventually had Anne executed on grounds of infidelity, two years later.[7] However, the line of succession was secured In October 1537 when Henry's third wife, Jane Seymour, gave birth to a son, Edward. Although much of Elizabeth's early childhood was marked by a sense of vulnerability, through her father removing and reinstating her in the line of succession and thus living in a precarious position away from court, the last years of his reign allowed Elizabeth to experience some form of paternal stability for the first time, her fourth stepmother Catherine Parr took an interest not only in connecting Henry back to his daughter but also Elizabeth's education which she excelled at.[8] Following her father's death, the fourteen-year-old Elizabeth briefly lived with Parr and her new husband, Thomas Seymour. During this period, Seymour made advances against Elizabeth, the nature of which is as perplexing as it is inconclusive. Seymour reportedly stole kisses from Elizabeth, tickled her in her nightgown, and flirted with her maids.[9] While Elizabeth reportedly blushed at the mention of Seymour's name, she also developed a habit of getting up early to avoid being

[3] Moss, "A Queen for Whose Time?," 800.
[4] Carole Levin, "All the Queen's Children: Elizabeth I and the Meanings of Motherhood," in *Elizabeth I and the "Sovereign Arts": Essays in Literature, History and Culture*, ed. Donald Stump, Linda Shenk, and Carole Levin (Temple, Arizona: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2011), 93.
[5] Levin, "All the Queen's Children," 93, 99-100.
[6] Levin, "All the Queen's Children," 99-101.
[7] Milton Waldman, *Queen Elizabeth I* (1952; repr., Hamden, Connecticut: Archon Books, 1966), 16.
[8] Mary Hill Cole, "The Half-Blood Princes: Mary I, Elizabeth I, and Their Strategies of Legitimation," in *The Birth of a Queen: Essays on the Quincentenary of Mary I*, ed. Sarah Duncan and Valerie Schutte (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 74; Larissa J. Taylor-Smither, "Elizabeth I: A Psychological Profile," *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 15, no. 1 (1984): 55.
[9] David Starkey, *Elizabeth: The Struggle for the Throne* (2000; repr., New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2001), 69.

in her nightgown when he came into her room.[10] On one occasion, Parr even participated in Seymour's behavior by pinning Elizabeth down as he cut Elizabeth's gown to shreds.[11] Regardless of whether Seymour's actions were genuinely playful, mildly flirtatious, or outright sexual abuse by the spring of 1548, the pregnant Parr was weary of her husband's behavior and sent Elizabeth away. By the autumn, Parr had died in childbirth, and Seymour, desiring to influence the boy King Edward VI, wanted to marry Elizabeth.[12] However, his brother, Lord Protector Edward Seymour, noticed his brother's intent and imprisoned him.[13] The ensuing scandal led Elizabeth to answer for her relationship and knowledge of Seymour's plans, of which she attested to the Lord Protector in a letter, that while her governess, Kat Ashely, had told her of Seymour's desire to 'woo' her she regarded these ideas with suspicion and affirmed she would never marry without proper permission.[14] Elizabeth's calm and collected nature under scrutiny for her relationship with Seymour was likely a turning point in her adolescence, as she defended her reputation, perhaps even more so after Seymour was executed for treason. If Seymour's advances had been reciprocated and a mutual relationship had occurred, then Seymour's beheading demonstrated a violent end to Elizabeth's first explorations of romantic love, which had not only ended in the humiliation of questions from the Lord Protector but also the death of someone she cared for.[15]

Consequently, the Seymour scandal may have cemented Elizabeth's internal aversion to marriage; at fifteen, she had seen a succession of volatile marriages around her. From her father, she had seen a succession of four stepmothers, each never lasting long enough to build solid relationships, which was only complicated by her father's decision to divorce and behead two of them. From her stepmother, Parr, she had seen a woman desperately in love with a man who simultaneously either abused or carried out some form of relationship with his stepdaughter. Though marriages in the 16th century were often made on the grounds of politics, economics, and personal advancement instead of love, Elizabeth saw an unusual amount of turmoil around her in her most formative years.[16]

In 1553, as Elizabeth quietly continued her education following the Seymour scandal, her half-brother Edward VI became deathly ill. Unmarried and without an heir, the succession was poised to go to Mary, but on the urging of John Dudley, Duke of Northumberland Edward changed the succession to favor Lady Jane Grey, removing Mary and Elizabeth due to what he saw as their 'half-blood' bastard status.[17] Northumberland's plans ultimately failed when Mary, with Elizabeth by her side, rode into London and ultimately took the throne from Jane.[18] Mary and Elizabeth appeared united at the beginning of Mary's reign, but the two half-sisters were soon at odds. Mary longed to return to England to Catholicism and decided to marry Philip II of Spain to aid her cause. The match was deeply unpopular, with the disgruntled politician Sir Thomas Wyatt attempting to lead a rebellion to put Elizabeth on the throne. Although Elizabeth's involvement with the plot was unlikely, Mary did not trust her and imprisoned her in the Tower of London before placing her under house

[10] Helen Castor, *Elizabeth I: A Study in Insecurity* (London: Penguin Random House, 2018), 15; Carole Levin, *The Reign and Life of Queen Elizabeth I: Politics, Culture and Society* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 243.
[11] Starkey, *Struggle for the Throne*, 69.
[12] Starkey, *Struggle for the Throne*, 71.
[13] Waldman, *Queen Elizabeth I*, 27.
[14] Elizabeth I, "Elizabeth to Edward Seymour, Duke of Somerset, Lord Protector, January 28,1549," in *Queen Elizabeth I: Selected Works*, ed. Steven W. May (New York: Washington Square Press, 2004), 102–4.
[15] Taylor-Smither, "Elizabeth I: A Psychological Profile," 58.
[16] Taylor-Smither, "Elizabeth I: A Psychological Profile," 58.
[17] Waldman, *Queen Elizabeth I*, 32; Hill Cole, "The Half-Blood Princes," 75.
[18] Waldman, *Queen Elizabeth I*, 32.

arrest.[19] Once more, Elizabeth's life was marked by precarious vulnerability and uncertainty, as her life was in the hands of another. When Mary died in November 1588 without an heir, having suffered at least one instance of pseudocyesis in the last years of her reign, Elizabeth, a most unlikely heir, became queen.[20]

Beginning with her triumphant coronation in January 1559, Elizabeth's virginity became central to her reign. Elizabeth had once been seen as a disappointment: from birth, she was seemingly destined never to succeed to the throne, had endured the Seymour scandal, Wyatt Rebellion and imprisonment, but now at twenty-five, as she held the orb and scepter and felt the weight of the crown upon her head; she was, undoubtedly, the Queen of England. Elizabeth's coronation seemingly drew upon the near-divine nature of her accession: oil supposedly from the Virgin Mary was used, for the last time, to anoint Elizabeth's skin while her long flowing hair, a symbolic reference to her virginity, angelically framed her face.[21] The coronation service was flanked by heavy Protestant imagery, with further illusions of the Virgin Mary that exalted Elizabeth, defining in a sense what was expected of Elizabeth by her subjects after the challenging, socially and politically, reign of Mary I.[22] Imagery of the Virgin Mary had long been employed in the coronation of medieval queens, including Elizabeth's mother, Anne. So, as Elizabeth proudly left Westminster Abbey to the sound of elated cheers from her subjects, they saw her virginity as a temporary state: a symbol of a young woman ready for marriage.[23]

As Elizabeth began her reign, her virginity continued to be exalted as a temporary and symbolic state, as Elizabeth's behavior and oration mirrored popular expectations and her predecessors. Medieval queens were often seen as virgin mother-like figures. Elizabeth's rhetoric that combined themes of masculinity, femininity, and the idea of being a virgin queen to make her sex more agreeable and, in turn, to have her queenship taken more seriously harked back to the early discourse of Mary I.[24] Elizabeth understood the assumptions placed upon her queenship, based not only on the reign of her predecessor, Mary I, the first Queen of England in her own right but also by patriarchal views about women in power. Classical beliefs persisted that women were ruled by uncontrollable and volatile desire, which, when played out under queenship, would leave a kingdom vulnerable to the influences of a queen's male lovers or foreign powers who took advantage of her general mood swings.[25] Perhaps this is why at her first parliament, Elizabeth declared that if she did marry, it would be to a man devoted to her, and by extension, England, and if she did not find such a husband: "And in the end, this shalbe for me sufficient that a marble stone shall declare that a Queene, hauing reygned such a tyme, lyud and dyed a virgin."[26]

Despite early wishes to remain a perpetual virgin for the good of her queenship and kingdom, many longed for Elizabeth to marry as the sanctity of matrimony was more agreeable with Protestant values than traditional Catholic vernations of virginity; furthermore, Protestants often believed that only a few people committed to celibacy could

[19] Starkey, *Struggle for the Throne*, 148,178-179.
[20] Starkey, *Struggle for the Throne*, 179.
[21] Helen Hackett, V*irgin Mother, Maiden Queen: Elizabeth I and the Cult of the Virgin Mary* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995), 19, 56.
[22] Hackett, *Virgin Mother, Maiden Queen*, 48.
[23] Hackett, *Virgin Mother, Maiden Queen*, 32.
[24] Hackett, *Virgin Mother, Maiden Queen*, 128; Sarah L. Duncan, "The Two Virgin Queens: Embodying Queenship in the Reigns of Mary I and Elizabeth I," in *Elizabeth I and the "Sovereign Arts": Essays in Literature, History and Culture*, ed. Donald Stump, Linda Shenk, and Carole Levin (Temple, Arizona: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2011), 37.
[25] Duncan, "The Two Virgin Queens," 42.
[26] Hackett, *Virgin Mother, Maiden Queen*, 53.

keep such a vow, but that most failed and turned to secret affairs.[27] Perhaps this is why, despite never marrying, Elizabeth did engage in marriage negotiations and suitors to appease her subjects. Particularly in the first several years of her reign, portraits of Elizabeth were sent to potential suitors, and early marriage negotiations were held.[28] During these negotiations, Elizabeth was adamant she would not marry a man based on portrait alone and desired to see all foreign suitors in person.[29] Perhaps because of Elizbaeth's criteria, many at court were restless and desired for Elizabeth to marry an Englishman, fearing a foreign husband may, among other risks, lead England into foreign wars.[30] The first suitors of Elizabeth's reign were James Hamilton, the Third Earl of Arran, Prince Erik of Sweden (later Erik XIV), Henry FitzAlan, the Earl of Arundel, and even her old brother-in-law Philip II.[31] The most serious of Elizaberth's suitors throughout her reign were Charles II, Archduke of Austria, and Francis, Duke of Anjou. Negotiations between Charles and Elizabeth originally began in 1559, but it was not until 1563 that they became serious.[32] Negotiations were only heightened when Mary Queen of Scots, the rightful heir to the English throne in the eyes of many Catholic sympathizers, delivered a male heir in the summer of 1566, Elizabeth's advisors pressured her to marry Charles quickly.[33] Nevertheless, As Elizabeth and Charles negotiated, one of the biggest conflicts was religion; Charles was Catholic and wanted to continue to practice mass in England. Elizabeth's privy council was divided over whether Charles retaining his Catholic faith in private yet appearing Anglican in public was a realistic choice or if it would cause religious strife. Despite roughly five years of negotiations, Elizabeth ultimately decided against the marriage.[34]

As Elizabeth entered the 1570s, having called off negotiations with Charles, her advisors grew anxious: she was nearing middle age and the end of her childbearing years and still had not named an heir. Elizabeth's ticking biological clock led to her most serious suitor, Francis of Anjou. During the 1570s and early 1580s, Francis visited England twice during negotiations. Surprisingly, Elizabeth's subjects loathed the idea of the union. After years of desiring a husband and, by extension, an heir for their queen, they found they enjoyed the comfort and protection of her alone.[35] However, Elizabeth reportedly gave Francis a ring on his second visit and promised to marry him. For all her kind words and tokens, however, Elizabeth had no intention of marrying Francis and ultimately called off the marriage.[36] While Francis's treatment appears to follow the same misleading flattery Elizabeth used on previous suitors, her feelings may have been more complex for him. Upon his departure after his final visit to England, Elizabeth penned a short poem: "I grieve and dare not show my discontent; / I love, and yet am forced to seem to hate; / I do, yet dare not say what I ever meant; / I seem stark mute, but inwardly do prate…"[37] It would appear that even if Elizabeth did not want to marry Francis,

[27] Hackett, *Virgin Mother, Maiden Queen*, 54.
[28] John N. King, "Queen Elizabeth I: Representations of the Virgin Queen," *Renaissance Quarterly* 43, no. 1 (1990): 39.
[29] Levin, *Politics, Culture and Society*, 70.
[30] Susan Doran, *Monarchy and Matrimony: The Courtships of Elizabeth I* (London: Routledge, 1995), 213.
[31] Levin, *Politics, Culture and Society*, 72,74,75,76. See Levin's chapter "Courtships and Favorites" for further details of Elizabeth's early and short lived marriage negotiations.
[32] Levin, *Politics, Culture and Society*, 77.
[33] Levin, *Politics, Culture and Society*, 78.
[34] Levin, *Politics, Culture and Society*, 79.
[35] Hackett, *Virgin Mother, Maiden Queen*, 95.
[36] Levin, *Politics, Culture and Society*, 80.
[37] Elizabeth I, "On Monsieur's Departure, circa 1582," in *Elizabeth I: Collected Works*, ed. Leah S. Marcus, Janel Mueller, and Mary Beth Rose (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 302.

she still enjoyed his company. After negotiations fell through, she continued to correspond with him, affectionately calling him 'Frog' and using their acquaintanceship to make him a valuable ally in England's ongoing conflict with the Netherlands.[38] Ultimately, Elizabeth skillfully played all of her marriage negotiations, willing to entertain but never submit to a marriage that could jeopardize her power as queen or upset her subjects. In this respect, Elizabeth had learned well from the Wyatt Rebellion and how easily she could upset her subjects, as her half-sister had.

While Elizabeth's court saw a steady flow of foreign men vying for the queen's hand, these were not the only men Elizabeth skillfully played. Throughout her reign, her court was full of male favorites, all used for their services to either enhance England's government prospects or simply provide companionship to Elizabeth herself. Of her platonic favorites, Sir Christopher Hatton was a lifelong devotee to the queen. Elizabeth likely met Hatton while he was enrolled at the Inner Temple in the early 1660s, noticing his handsome looks.[39] He soon became a gentleman pensioner and worked to become Lord Chancellor; throughout his service to the queen, he stayed unmarried, seeing his life's work as serving the queen.[40] Hatton represents an image of the favorites Elizabeth seems to have enjoyed most, those who perhaps set aside their own lives, as she had done, to serve the Crown. Another key platonic favorite of Elizabeth's was Sir Walter Raleigh, who first came to Elizabeth's attention in the early 1580s and soon began exploring the New World on her behalf; the two also enjoyed exchanging poetry.[41] Elizabeth's favorites, however, were not immune to the queen's beratement and banishment; in 1591, Raleigh married one of Elizabeth's ladies-in-waiting, Bess Throckmorton, who was pregnant. Though the couple tried to hide the marriage from Elizabeth, she found out shortly after Bess gave birth. Enraged by the behavior of her favorite, Elizabeth had Raleigh and Bess put in the Tower before banishing the two from court.[42]

Of Elizabeth's many favorites, one man in particular, Robert Dudley, 1st Earl of Leicester, is perhaps the closest companion Elizabeth ever had throughout her life. Their friendship and rumored relationship stretched from the beginning of Elizabeth's reign to its twilight years. Dudley's father had been a part of the failed Northumberland plot and was punished along with his sons by Mary I by being placed in the Tower; although Elizabeth and Dudley were confined at the same time, it is unlikely the two had any contact.[43] By the time Elizabeth ascended the throne, however, she had not forgotten the Dudleys and made the striking young Robert, who reportedly looked similar to Thomas Seymour, Master of the Horse.[44] The closeness Dudley's position afforded him to the young queen caused rumors to swirl of a romantic relationship between the two; indeed, by the spring of 1559, courtiers noted the significant amount of time the two spent together.[45] And at court festivities, Elizabeth enjoyed Dudley's company, especially when doing the volta dance.[46] Elizabeth's closeness to Dudley soon led to rumors of the two

[38] Hackett, *Virgin Mother, Maiden Queen*, 95.
[39] Levin, *Politics, Culture and Society*, 85.
[40] Levin, *Politics, Culture and Society*, 85.
[41] Levin, *Politics, Culture and Society*, 86. For an example of Elizabeth and Raleigh's exchanged poetry see Elizabeth I and Sir Wlater Raleigh, "Verse Exchange between Queen Elizabeth and Sir Walter Ralegh, circa 1587," in *Elizabeth I: Collected Works*, ed. Leah S. Marcus, Janel Mueller, and Mary Beth Rose (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 307–9.
[42] Levin, *Politics, Culture and Society*, 86-87.
[43] Doran, *Monarchy and Matrimony*, 40.
[44] Castor, *A Study in Insecurity*, 46; Doran, *Monarchy and Matrimony*, 41.
[45] Doran, *Monarchy and Matrimony*, 41.
[46] Levin, *Politics, Culture and Society*, 264.

having bastard children, all of whom were violently murdered to protect Elizabeth's reputation.[47] The early revels of Elizabeth and Dudley, even in the face of ghastly rumors, were not to last. In September 1560, Robert's wife Amy died after a mysterious fall from a flight of stairs.[48] By the time Dudley returned to court in October after a period of mourning, many speculated he had hopes of finally marrying Elizabeth.[49] However, Amy's death had left its mark and profoundly altered Elizabeth's relationship with Dudley. Elizabeth recognized that in marrying Dudley, she would raise suspicions that she had helped, or at least 'approved' of Amy's demise; she likely felt guilt, much as she possibly did from the Seymour scandal, regardless of its details. Here, another potential romantic relationship ended abruptly and traumatically. This likely reinforced Elizabeth's feelings of guilt and avoidance of marriage.[50] Dudley still hoped to marry Elizabeth and, in the summer of 1575, tried to woo her one last time into marriage through an elaborate display of pageantry that lasted just under twenty days. Elizabeth, however, was not fully impressed by the pageantry or with Dudley's new flirtations with Lettice Knollys, daughter of her cousin Cathrine. When Dudley and Lettice secretly married a few years later, Elizabeth was enraged.[51] Though Elizabeth knew she could not marry Dudley, she had expected his unwavering loyalty. She may have only accepted Francis, Duke of Anjou's visit in 1579 because she was upset over Dudley's secret marriage.[52] It was not only on the grounds of love that Dudley angered Elizabeth; when he accepted the governorship of the Netherlands in the 1580s against her will, Dudley received a harsh temper from her.[53] Nevertheless, when Dudley died shortly after the defeat of the Spanish Armada, Elizabeth locked herself in her private chambers, where she spent several days in emotional agony, grieving her friend, favorite and steady companion.[54] Indeed, when Elizabeth breathed her last fifteen years later, Dudley's last letter labeled as such in Elizabeth's handwriting was found kept safely in a silver-gilt casket beside her bed.[55]

Few favorites achieved the same sense of companionship and potential romance with Elizabeth as Dudley, except perhaps for his adopted son, Robert Devereux, earl of Essex, who dazzled the autumn of Elizabeth's life and reign. Essex first found favor with Elizabeth when she knighted him after returning from a stint fighting with his stepfather in the Netherlands in the 1580s.[56] Elizabeth was drawn to Essex's sense of self-assured confidence and arrogance, and although he repeatedly disobeyed her orders and attempted to demonstrate his military might in a series of unsuccessful and embarrassing military ventures, Elizabeth almost always forgave him.[57] Elizabeth's patience, however, was wearing thin when she eventually sent him to Ireland to suppress a rebellion, a task which Essex failed miserably, and her rage was induced fully when he left Ireland without her consent, returned to England, and burst into her bed chamber.[58] Properly rebuked by the

[47] Levin, "All the Queen's Children," 89. For detailed accounts of the rumors spread by subjects about Elizabeth and Dudley's supposed bastard children as well as the punishments and fines given in response see Levin, "All the Queen's Children," 90.
[48] Doran, *Monarchy and Matrimony*, 42.
[49] Doran, *Monarchy and Matrimony*, 45.
[50] Doran, *Monarchy and Matrimony*, 212; Taylor-Smither, "Elizabeth I: A Psychological Profile," 68.
[51] Castor, *A Study in Insecurity*, 64.
[52] Levin, *Politics, Culture and Society*, 218.
[53] Castor, *A Study in Insecurity*, 75.
[54] Castor, *A Study in Insecurity*, 84.
[55] Castor, *A Study in Insecurity*, 84.
[56] Levin, *Politics, Culture and Society*, 87.
[57] Levin, *Politics, Culture and Society*, 88.
[58] Levin, *Politics, Culture and Society*, 89.

startled queen for the first time and cut off from her financial aid and favor, Essex attempted to lead a rebellion against her. His treasonous plans were thwarted, and he was executed in 1601.[59]

While Elizabeth entertained many suitors, played platonic court favorites, and found companionship with a select few, Elizabeth remained a virgin throughout her reign. While many courtiers, advisors, and even her subjects expressed solemn wishes for their queen to marry and give England an heir, in the end, Elizabeth's virginity transformed from a marker of maidenhood and, by extent, readiness for marriage, into its own image of self-sacrifice. Elizabeth was only the second queen of England in her own right; sole queenship for the kingdom was still a starling idea. Therefore, Elizabeth understood that if she was to rule by herself, she needed to transform her womanly existence from one of presumed submission into a representation of pure altruism. By extent Elizabeth made her perpetual virginity, a personal sacrifice not a choice, for the betterment of her subjects. Elizabeth perhaps best summed up her sense of devotion when she once expressed to her goddaughter-in-law, Mary Harrington, "I keep the good will of all my husbands, my good people; for if they did not rest assured of some special love toward them, they would not readily yield me such good obedience."[60] By not marrying, Elizabeth pivoted herself as wholly devoted to her subjects; she was an image of sacrifice, a woman who denied herself marital and, to an extent, sexual happiness and motherhood for the goodwill of her people. Furthermore, Elizabeth's rhetoric was not simply flowing words of devotion; throughout her reign, she truly put her subjects above all else, most notably demonstrated when she became a valorous warrior queen in the face of the Spanish Armada. Throughout Elizabeth's reign, she despised war, not only for its economic effects but because, unlike the kings of old, as a woman, she could not go into battle with her men.[61] Nevertheless, by the late 1580s, growing tensions with the 'invincible' Spanish Armada had reached a fever pitch, and the fleet was heading for England. In the face of such a powerful navy, the outcome for England appeared bleak. With their looming ascent, Dudley suggested that Elizabeth visit Tilbury camp to 'comfort' her soldiers.[62] Appearing in a suit of armor before them, Elizabeth roused her army with a stirring speech, declaring, "I know I have the body but of a weak and feeble woman, but I have the heart and the stomach of a king, and a king of England too...I myself will take up arms, I myself will be your general...we shall shortly have a famous victory over those enemies of my God, of my kingdoms, and of my people."[63] Though Elizabeth could not go into battle with her men, her impassioned words reminded them that this was only because of her 'femininity'; beyond the realm of her sex, she was as much a king of England as her forefathers had been, she understood the gravity of the coming Armada but firmly believed England would ultimately revel in glory. Indeed, following her speech, Elizabeth stayed at camp, receiving news a few days later of Spain's mishaps and attempts to outrun the English navy, who were pursuing them with great speed.[64] Ultimately, England was victorious, aided most notably by the poor weather which wreaked havoc on the Armada, a sign that was stressed as evidence of God's

[59] Castor, *A Study in Insecurity*, 91-93; Levin, *Politics, Culture and Society*, 89.
[60] Alison Plowden, *Elizabeth Regina: The Age of Triumph 1588-1603* (1980; repr., Gloucestershire: Sutton Publishing, 2000), 192.
[61] Plowden, *Elizabeth Regina*, 88.
[62] Plowden, *Elizabeth Regina*, 10.
[63] Elizabeth I, "August 9,1588," in *Queen Elizabeth I: Selected Works*, ed. Steven W. May (New York: Washington Square Press, 2004), 77–78.
[64] Castor, A Study in Insecurity, 80.

commitment to protestant England.[65] Privately, Elizabeth thanked God for his role in keeping her subjects safe. Shortly after the defeat, Elizabeth composed a prayer that attested to her gratitude: "...[I] render my humblest acknowledgments and lowliest thanks; and not the least for that the weakest sex hath been so fortified by Thy strongest help that neither my people might find lack by my weakness nor foreigners triumph at my ruin..."[66] Even in her most private compositions, Elizabeth affirmed the weakness of her sex and marveled at her subjects for not finding fault in her because of it; in turn, for her self-sacrifice of perpetual virginity, Elizabeth's subjects rallied around their warrior queen, who was faithful only to England and led them into battle, not by sword, but in spirit.

With Elizabeth's use of virginity as a means of self-sacrifice, she became solely devoted to her subjects, and in turn, they revered her. From her accession, Elizabeth slowly sewed the seeds of her virgin image, building upon and expanding its connotations as she aged and suitors waned, and her subjects responded accordingly. In the early years of her reign, when her virginity was still seen as a marker of readiness for marriage, a popular love ballad between the personified England and yearning Elizabeth arose. Written by William Birch, the song ends with Elizabeth vowing "here is my hand, my dear love England", showcasing Elizabeth as married to a male-gendered England who later proclaims her as his virgin heir.[67] The ballad's presentation of England as a male husband invokes contemporary gender roles that render wives, and to an extent queens, as obedient to their husbands. This ballad, in turn, ties Elizabeth to her kingdom and subjects, proclaiming them as her duty above all else.[68] Works such as these reflect the fidelity felt between Elizabeth and her subjects in the early years of her reign. However, popular ballads would not be enough; Elizabeth shrewdly understood that in choosing perpetual virginity and ruling in her own right, she would have to continually reinforce the legitimacy of her queenship long after the jubilation of her coronation and young looks faded away. And yet, within this paradox, Elizabeth could not cement her rule in the same way as her forefathers in jousting, war, and other masculine pursuits. Therefore, Elizabeth learned to contort the red-blooded pursuits of her ancestors into her own feminine interpretation. This structuring of herself as a public spectacle to demonstrate legitimacy and win admiration began with Elizabeth each day, preparing mentally and physically within the inner world of her bed-chamber surrounded by her ladies in waiting. Here, Elizabeth's white face creams and powders, rouge, red lips, and set hair combined with heavy ornate gowns prepared her for the world outside.[69] Once made into a near-mythical image of femininity, Elizabeth was ready to face her court or the public and play into her solitary queenship and keep the attention on herself. Although Elizabeth could not participate in courtly jousting tournaments as her male predecessors had, she understood their importance as tools by which the public could see her. Therefore, they were often held in honor of holidays and important English victories in addition to the annual 'Accession Day' tournament.[70] In these public tournaments, subjects had a chance to see their elusive virgin queen as she presided over mythically dressed knights, acting

[65] Hackett, Virgin Mother, Maiden Queen, 128.
[66] Elizabeth I, "On the Defeat of the Spanish Armada, September 1588," in *Elizabeth I: Collected Works*, ed. Leah S. Marcus, Janel Mueller, and Mary Beth Rose (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 424.
[67] Hackett, *Virgin Mother, Maiden Queen*, 57-58.
[68] Hackett, *Virgin Mother, Maiden Queen*, 59.
[69] Castor, *A Study in Insecurity*, 54.
[70] Jane Stevenson, "The Female Monarch and Her Subjects," in *Queen and Country: The Relation between the Monarch and the People in the Development of the English Nation*, ed. Alessandra Petrina (Bern, Switzerland: Peter Lang, 2011), 28.

out scenes of courtly love for her and exalting her virginity, queenship, and devotion to her people.[71] Kings had once fought in jousting tournaments to prove their readiness for combat and cement their strength in the eyes of their subjects; Elizabeth reworked these notions, now presiding over knights as a queen inspecting the strength of her men to fight for her, to fight for England.

Furthermore, in the wake of a shift towards Protestantism, the veneration once given to Catholic saints was often transformed into the figure of Elizabeth as queen. Here, the jousting tournaments of Elizabeth's reign and popular miniature portraits of her replaced feast days and religious iconography; Elizabeth became an outlet for reverence left behind in Catholicism in her rich dress, splendor, and perpetual virginity.[72] In playing into her subject's desires, she cemented her reign by presenting herself as a safe image of womanhood and queenship while keeping attention on herself as a capable and trustworthy monarch.[73] Under Elizabeth's crafted direction, the admiration of her subjects was continually earned; verily, she mastered being a public spectacle while keeping a demure and enigmatic glow about herself. Even as Elizabeth reached and passed middle age, the very last of any possible childbearing years, her cult of virginity and everlasting beauty continued; veneration of Elizabeth at this time can apply be surmised accordingly "[i]t was as if she were eternally frozen in a bridal moment of virginal purity on the brink of conjugal amorousness and maternal fruitfulness."[74] In Elizabeth's twilight years, her subjects continued their reverence; the arts made her an eternally youthful and faultless virgin, even as the queen was now an old dame relying, more heavily than ever, on makeup and wigs to hide signs of aging.[75] Veneration of Elizabeth continued after her death when a flood of eulogies enshrined her near-divine image.[76]

Ultimately, Queen Elizabeth I's virginity came to define a reign that, upon her birth, had seemed implausible. Following a girlhood and adolescence marred by a sense of vulnerability as she was defined by the perceptions, actions, and turmoil of those around her, Elizabeth ascended the throne under the steady gaze of the patriarchal world around her. Recognizing these traditional limitations to her sovereignty and marred by the turmoil of her traumatic adolescence and the divisive reigns of her predecessors, Elizabeth sought to use her virginity as a means to ensure the success of her reign. Her virginity allowed her to consolidate power, as she played suitors and courtiers to advance the needs of England and keep her power while enjoying platonic and potentially romantic companionship. Elizabeth's private sacrifices of marriage and motherhood allowed her to focus solely on her subjects, whom she endeavored to keep safe even when she could not serve them as her forefathers would have, as expressed in her rousing speech to her forces as England prepared to face the Spanish Armada. In her devotion to her subjects, Elizabeth, in turn, became a muse of the arts and recipient of devotion once given to Catholic saints; her public spectacles and displays played upon her femininity to consolidate her power and inspire loyalty. Thus, Elizabeth's virginity has rendered her a complex icon of medieval queenship and womanhood; it simultaneously reinforced her femininity while

[71] Plowden, *Elizabeth Regina*, 50.
[72] Valerio De Scarpis, "The Music of the Spheres, Cosmography, and the Cult of Elizabeth I: Thomas Campion and John Davies, Sympathetic Bystanders," in *Queen and Country: The Relation between the Monarch and the People in the Development of the English Nation*, ed. Alessandra Petrina (Bern, Switzerland: Peter Lang, 2011), 143.
[73] Stevenson, "The Female Monarch," 30.
[74] Hackett, *Virgin Mother, Maiden Queen*, 78,111.
[75] Hackett, *Virgin Mother, Maiden Queen*, 179.
[76] Hackett, *Virgin Mother, Maiden Queen*, 215. See Hackett's chapter "Towards Death, and Beyond It" for specific examples of adulation for Elizabeth in eulogies after her death.

also defining it in the face of the patriarchal world she inhabited. In the centuries since her golden age ended, Elizabeth's virginity has lived on, and will likely continue to live on, as a subject of debate. But for now, Elizabeth's marble tomb in Westminster Abbey is not only an emblem of her queenship but of the ever-shrewd, ever-spirited, ever-independent Elizabeth Tudor.

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