Milkmaids and Kings:
Elizabeth’s Gender and
The Judgment of Paris

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This essay interprets the 1569 painting attributed to the monogrammist H.E.¹ (fig. 1) and known variously as The Judgment of Paris, Queen Elizabeth I and the Three Goddesses, or The Confounding of the Three Goddesses² in the context of patriarchal anxiety about a female monarch. Roy Strong calls the painting “a revised version of the Judgment of the Paris” (Portraits 79). Building on the work of Strong and others, the argument of this essay has two principal points: first, that unflattering dimensions of the Judgment of Paris myth revised in the painting destabilize its status as a gesture of praise; second, that the painting may be read as an attempt by Elizabethan culture to understand the synthesis of the male body of kingship and what Elizabeth herself called the body of “a weak and feeble woman” (qtd. in Sommerset 464).

In this painting, Elizabeth is presented as Queen, with a crown on her head and the orb and scepter of state in her hands. The orb’s reddish color combined with the assemblage of Juno, Minerva, and Venus is a complicated reworking of the Judgment of Paris myth. In the painting of Elizabeth in her Coronation robes, the orb of state is black,³ whereas in this painting the golden apple from the myth is transformed in Elizabeth’s hand into a red orb of state. The subject of the Judgment painting and the orb’s reddish tones figure it as both apple and orb. A review of the details of the Judgment of Paris myth suggests one interpretation of this apple/orb.⁴
Fig. 1. Hans Eworth (1520-1574), *Elizabeth I and the Three Goddesses* (or *The Judgment of Paris*)
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