The Two Virgin Queens

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The name Virgin Queen has long been attached to Queen Elizabeth I; it has not been as widely acknowledged, however, that her older sister Mary I attempted to manipulate her own identity in a similar fashion, particularly before her marriage to Prince Philip of Spain. Unlike Elizabeth, Mary traditionally has been portrayed by historians as a woman who did not possess the political skills to turn the handicap of her sex into an asset.1 Her reign, therefore, has been compared unfavorably with Elizabeth’s, and her actions as a ruler are most often described as merely providing a negative example for her younger sister.

Because Mary for the most part has been depicted as having failed to develop a satisfactory persona as queen, her use of language to control her image has not been examined with the same attention paid to Elizabeth’s expert manipulation. It is possible, however, to discern certain similarities between the two queens. Analyzing the language used by Mary and those speaking in her behalf during her marriage negotiations in late 1553 and early 1554 sheds light on Mary’s command of language and image: how she manipulated her image as queen in order to gain support for her choice of husband, and how she manipulated the accepted gender roles to counteract fears that she might lose sovereignty after her marriage.

Just as the theory of the king’s two bodies was of particular value to Elizabeth and her councilors during her later reign (Levin 121–48; Axton 38–39), so the same idea proved useful to Mary and those who spoke for her during the course of her marriage negotiations. By the reign of Elizabeth I the medieval concept had developed into the idea that

the King has in him two Bodies, Viz., a Body natural, and a Body politic. His body natural . . . is a Body mortal. . . . But his Body politic is a Body that cannot be seen or handled, consisting of Policy and Government, and constituted for the Direction of the People, and the Management of the public weal.2

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The theory and its characteristic language were certainly current in Mary's reign. During Wyatt's rebellion, for example, the Earl of Arundel wrote to the Earl of Shrewsbury: "God be thankyd the quenes highnes is in good helth of her body but syke in certeyn naughtie members of her common welth" (Fitzalan Fol. 5). The Queen's two bodies here included her natural body and that of the nation, or commonwealth, her body politic. Clearly a monarch could incorporate and rule the "body politic," even if that ruler's natural body was female.

Mary certainly made use of the concept of the two bodies, although during her reign the theory was complicated to some extent with the introduction of gender. Sometimes Mary made reference to her body politic as female, for example, by speaking of being "married to our realm" and by referring to the commonwealth as her "husband" (State Papers Domestic 11/2/19, State Papers Foreign 69/2/95). At other times her body politic was male, as when Mary or her subjects referred to her as "king" or "prince." Mary herself did so when she answered objections raised to a foreign alliance by the Speaker of Parliament and members of her Council on 16 November 1553. The Queen also spoke of herself as "prince" in the speech she gave at the Guildhall in London in February 1554 during Wyatt's rebellion, requesting Londoners to "stand fast with your lawfull prince against these rebelles both our enemies and yours" (Holinshed 4: 17). As Princess, Elizabeth famously referred to the masculine status now held by Mary, after the Queen had ordered her to be taken to the Tower in the aftermath of Wyatt's rebellion, writing, "If any ever did try this olde sayinge that a kings worde was more than a nother mans othe, I most humbly besche your Majesty to verifie it in me" (State Papers Domestic 11/4/2). Similarly, although he took part in the conspiracy against the Anglo-Spanish marriage, the Duke of Suffolk protested that he meant no harm to the Queen herself, saying: "[S]he is the mercifullest prince, as I have truly founde her, that ever reigned, in whose defence I am, and will be, readie to die at her foote" (Chronicle 123).

Although Mary would not refer to herself as "king" or "prince" with the same frequency that Elizabeth I later did, she too understood that her role as ruler had a masculine aspect to it, and that she played a masculine part as sovereign. Early in Mary's reign, Grace, Countess of Shrewsbury, wrote to her husband, the Earl of Shrewsbury, to inform him that when she had met with the Queen, "her hyghnes were so moche my good ladeyme that comauondid me what so ever I laked [lacked] I shuld be bold to