Female Piety in the Reign of Elizabeth I

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In her well-known speech at Tilbury (1588), Queen Elizabeth declared, “I know I have the body but of a weak and feeble woman, but I have the heart and stomach of a king” (326). Elizabeth’s rhetoric here, as elsewhere, both acknowledges and challenges contemporary views of women and of female rule. When she replaces her own “weak and feeble” feminine “body” with “the heart and stomach” of a masculine ruler, Elizabeth affirms the theological principle that woman is, according to I Peter 3:7, the “weaker vessel” and thus less capable of governance than man. By calling on the concept of the “king’s two bodies,” however, Elizabeth also distances herself from common assumptions associated with female physicality by asserting her special status as divinely ordained. In part, Elizabeth privileges her body politic over her body natural in this way in order to legitimize her political sovereignty, despite her femininity. Yet, by using rhetoric that both reflects and resists contemporary attitudes towards women, Elizabeth simultaneously addresses a set of strictly spiritual concerns.

This essay examines the cultural connection between female physicality and spirituality, specifically as it relates to the reign of Elizabeth I, whose body was the object of constant scrutiny and appraisal. As Maureen Quilligan notes, “The queen’s virginitiy conflicts with the broad sweep of the Protestant redefinition of the family—and therefore of women and of sexuality itself” (177). The reformers’ “redefinition of family” included the rendering of female piety as a product of marriage and maternity. That is, a woman’s spirituality was considered contingent upon her physicality. The soul that headed England’s church resided in a female body that was, famously, unmastered and “unproductive.” Elizabeth was, of course, aware of the contradictions she embodied. By briefly exploring some Protestant revisions of female piety and reading some of her own religious writings against them, I will show how Elizabeth I reconciled her reign with the Protestant conflation of female domesticity (marriage and maternity) and female piety.
The case of Phillips Stubbes’ wife affirms the popular early modern notion that the status of women’s bodies indicated the status of their virtue. In *A christal glasse for Christian Women* (1592), Stubbes expounds on the goodness of his deceased wife Katharine, offering to other women what he calls a “rare and wonderfull example of the virtuous life” (A2r). According to her husband, among Katharine’s many virtues were her ability to suit her mood to his fancy—“If she saw her husband merry, then she was merry: if he were sad, she was sad: if he were heavy or passionate, she would endeavoure to make him glad”—and her submissive nature—“she would never contrarie him in anything, but by wise counsaile, and sage advice, with all humilitie, and submission, seeke to perswade him” (A3r). Stubbes goes to great lengths to emphasize his wife’s piety as well:

for her whole heart was bent to seeke the Lord, her whole delight was to be conversant in the Scriptures, and to meditate upon them day and night: in so much that you could seldome or never have come into her house, and have found her without a bible, or some other good booke in her hands. (A2v)

Stubbes’ portrait of Katharine shows a woman who is, impossibly, wholly devoted to her husband’s will and well-being, yet wholly immersed in spiritual activity, such as devotional reading. In his opening description of Katharine, Stubbes proclaims that “whilst shee lived” she “was a myrroure of womanhood,” but “now being dead, is a perfect patterne of true Christiani­tie.” (A2r) Death transforms Katharine’s spiritual status from the reflective (“myrrour”) to the representative (“perfect patterne”). That is, this transformation shifts the deceased woman’s role from stereotype to prototype.

While embodied, a woman’s spiritual capacity was subordinated to her physical productivity. This notion explains why Katharine’s “virtuous life” can be read not merely as a guide for other women, but as an example of spiritual steadfastness and strength—indeed, as the “perfect patterne” of such—once her soul has passed on to heaven. As Shakespeare’s Antony says of his dead wife, Fulvia, “she’s good, being gone” (1.2.126). Further, by rendering his wife’s death as the necessary precondition for the full realization of her spirituality, Stubbes suggests that the female body and the infinite soul are incompatible. Like Dante, whose Beatrice is “conveniently dead,” as Philippa Berry notes, Stubbes can portray his beloved as “an immaterial, indeed an angelic figure” precisely because she is no longer embodied (19). Macduff conveys a similar notion when in *Macbeth* he scolds Malcolm for his supposed wickedness by reminding him of his mother’s piety: “the queen that bore thee, / Oft’ner upon her knees than