Childhood Reflections: Elizabeth I’s *The Glass of the Sinful Soul* and a Rhetoric of Indeterminacy

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In 1544, eleven-year-old Elizabeth Tudor composed a prose translation of Marguerite de Navarre’s *Le Miroir de l’Âme Pecheresse*, as a gift for Queen Catherine Parr, Henry VIII’s last wife. The translation was likely written while the Princess was under banishment from the court of Henry, and sent as a thank you to Parr for always speaking kindly on her behalf to the King during her year of disfavor, which ended in September 1544 with a “general blessing to all his children” (Ames 13). This work, *The Glass of the Sinful Soul*, which made its way into print before Elizabeth even took the throne, demonstrates a style that would become an important feature of her political rhetoric and that rhetoric’s reliance on indeterminacy.

Elizabeth’s rhetoric demonstrated a flexibility of styles, so that while at times she offered extremely clear expressions, such as in her speech at Tillbury, the Queen could also exhibit a more complex or convoluted style, one marked above all by its indeterminacy. This indeterminate style functions by troubling the process of meaning-making by explicitly discussing the problems of meaning and language and by exercising language in a way that takes advantage of these problems. These approaches can be seen not only in later performances, but also in Elizabeth’s early translation. As an effort to comprehend certain unfathomable features of Christian belief, such as the infinite nature of God’s grace, or the relationship of the elements of the Trinity, *The Glass of the Sinful Soul* is necessarily composed in a language built to capture the quality of mystery. The piece functions through suggestion, rather than directly, and the writing gains its effects through attempting to hold multiple, often conflicting, meanings, rather than through clear and direct expression. These efforts to capture the ineffable are present in the original and in Elizabeth’s translation. Applied to subjects of mystery, like the Trinity, the mode could be called mystical. Applied to other endeavors, however, the mode would be called indeterminate. This indeterminacy is significant for Elizabeth’s
larger rhetorical practice insofar as many of the structures—rhetorical, grammatical, logical—that are prominent in The Glass are also prominent in Elizabeth’s later writing and rhetoric, especially in moments where she works to defer, rather than to make, decisions. This essay will consider how this indeterminate style functions in this early translation, and then how the same style operates in the debate over marriage and the succession during Elizabeth’s second Parliament.

Elizabeth’s rhetoric was, no doubt, most heavily influenced by the tenets of humanist rhetoric as delivered to her through her tutors. These involved methods of organization of speeches and other communications, and procedures for the processes of argument (what kind of evidence is acceptable, what kind of claims can be made based on what kinds of evidence and reasoning, what sort of styles are appropriate or effective for any of these). However, these elements do not account for the totality of Elizabeth’s practice. A number of conditions made Elizabeth’s position as a writer and rhetor unique: that she was the center of power in England, and that she was a woman, were both factors that made her rhetorical situation exceptional, while the fact that she was extremely well educated, but received her education outside the normative spaces of grammar schools and universities, also would suggest that she might have a different take on what exactly constituted acceptable rhetorical practice. In Elizabethan Rhetoric, Mack offers a sustained examination of the ways that training in humanist rhetoric in the grammar schools, universities, and Inns of Court produced the norms of discourse that would constitute effective or even comprehensible debate in the Elizabethan period. However, while he acknowledges her excellent training in these norms, Mack also points out that at times the Queen’s rhetoric works in a different way. Mack calls these instances of the Queen’s style “oblique” and “glancing” (249), and while he does offer an analysis of her work that employs some formal humanist or classical perspectives, this is balanced with thematic claims that make that formal analysis seem somehow not entirely relevant. Describing one such moment, Mack says, “Elizabeth carefully doubles her epithets and balances her phrases to give an impression of distinction and seriousness, but her subject is the impossibility of being understood” (247). This sentence can be expanded to apply to much of the Queen’s rhetoric. In fact, if not her subject, then her strategy is at times “the impossibility of being understood.” Mack’s approach to Elizabeth’s rhetoric is different from his approach to other rhetors because, as he notes, her situation is different than her fellow rhetors’. There was not in the strict sense pressure on Elizabeth to persuade her audience, as she was the Queen.