“A Goodly Musicke in Her Regiment”: Elizabeth, Portia, and the Elusive Harmony of Justice

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Thomas Drant preached before Elizabeth and her court in January of 1569 (old calendar), delivering a sermon that Peter McCullough describes as a “chastisement” of the queen (92). In this sermon, Drant repeatedly compares Elizabeth unfavorably to the biblical David, bluntly asserting, among other things, that the Queen has failed to exercise justice properly and punish sinners as she should: “David destroyed all Gods enemies; her Majestie hath destroyed none of Gods enemies. David did it in the morning of his kingdome; it is now farreforth dayes since her Majestie beganne to raigne, and yet it is undone” (K1r). David, says Drant, played a song of judgment and mercy, plucking both strings and creating a harmonious kingdom as a result. “Our Prince,” says Drant, “hath yet but stricken the one string and played upon mercy: but if she would now strike upon both the stringes, and let her song be of mercy, and judgment, then there would be a goodly musicke in her regiment” (K2r).

This complaint about Elizabeth’s supposedly excessive clemency is not unique to Drant. In sermons, in speeches, in letters written by her councilors, the complaint is often voiced that the queen is too lenient, foolishly merciful. Yet her mercy was also celebrated and was an important part of her image, for many reasons. For one thing, queens had long been popularly imagined as merciful intercessors, a tradition suggested by the medieval adage, “If the king is law, the queen is mercy” (Parsons 147). Queen consorts often exercised their power by interceding with the king to sway him to clemency, a process familiar in the Middle Ages, but one that can also be seen in a famous sixteenth-century example: Catherine of Aragon’s successful intercession with her husband, Henry VIII, on behalf of hundreds of Londoners awaiting execution in the aftermath of the Evil May Day riot of 1517.1 Shakespeare uses this image of the queenly intercessor to depict Catherine in Henry VIII, introducing her in a scene in which she sues for mercy on behalf of the weavers who have rebelled against a decree of harsh taxation. Her first act in the play is to kneel before her husband; her first line is “Nay, we must longer kneel; I am a suit-
or” in response to Henry’s attempt to raise her to her feet (1.2.9). Thus Elizabeth, and Mary before her, inherited a strong cultural expectation that queens should advocate clemency. Furthermore, not only queens but women in general were supposed to possess merciful dispositions; they were expected to be compassionate by nature, and early modern culture placed a high premium upon feminine “tenderness” and mercy. To quote one of the many sources that express this idea about feminine nature, the seventeenth-century *Ladies Dictionary* identifies “Compassion and a Merciful Disposition” as principal virtues of the female sex:

This chiefly should reign in the lovely tender breasts of the female sex, made for the seats of mercy and commiseration. They being made of the softest mould, ought to be most pliant and yielding to the impression of pity and compassion. (136)

In Christian tradition, the Blessed Virgin Mary is the role model for women, and particularly for queens, since she is usually depicted as the Mother of Mercy and an advocate for sinful humanity. As Dante imagines her, she is that merciful lady whose “compassion breaks Heaven’s stern decree” (12). The historical expectation that a queen consort would serve as a Marian intercessor along with the cultural expectation that women should be compassionate by nature work together to create the ideal image of the queen as wellspring of mercy. Along these lines, Helen Hackett suggests that the image of Queen Elizabeth as a merciful mother and channel of divine grace was a “safe” way of representing female power: “Mercy and grace were virtues that could comfortably be identified with a female monarch without suggesting either that she was inadequate as a ruler, or that she was unnaturally mannish” (168-9).

While preachers like Drant, Edward Dering, or Richard Fletcher may not have suggested that Elizabeth was inadequate as a ruler, all claimed that her leniency was a serious flaw. Thus the queen faced a paradox: she was praised as a mild and merciful prince of peace, yet at times was severely chastised by some of her own subjects for that same mildness. The strongest objections to her clemency emerged at moments when actual rebellion or the danger of rebellion and overthrow loomed: the Northern Rebellion, for example, and the various crises surrounding Mary Stuart, including the final struggle over her execution. Drant’s sermon exhorting Elizabeth to be more punitive was preached in January of 1570, when the Northern Rebellion had just occurred at the end of 1569, and the process of punishing the rebels was underway. Drant assures Queen Elizabeth that it is “both good policie and good divinitie, to punish Gods enemies, and