A Brittle Gloriana: Staging the Deposition of Queen Elizabeth I

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Among the court gossip Ben Jonson shared with William Drummond in their extended 1619 conversation was an account of Elizabeth I’s relationship with mirrors: “Queen Elizabeth never saw herself after she became old in a true Glass,” Jonson reports, adding that the Queen’s attendants “painted her & sometymes would vermilon her nose” (“Conversations” 141–42). Jonson implies that the Queen’s vain refusal to view her aging face caused her to ban all mirrors from her presence, leaving her ladies-in-waiting free to play cruel tricks on their mistress by using cosmetics to give her the red nose associated with drunkards. While Elizabeth’s rejection of mirrors is in keeping with the Queen’s reputation as, in the words of the Spanish envoy Alvaro de la Quadra, a woman with whom “all is falsehood and vanity” (Neale, Queen 82), and also in keeping with the youthful face found in even the latest of her official portraits, it seems unlikely that the aristocratic women serving Elizabeth would take such a risk with a Queen whose anger had dangerous consequences. Yet even if Jonson exaggerates, he describes a court that, like the one Shakespeare creates for his Richard II, is full of destructive flatterers and a monarch similarly reluctant to confront and root out corruption.

While Jonson’s is the only surviving account of the Queen’s red nose, he is not the only one to report Elizabeth’s avoidance of mirrors. Several surviving accounts from the end of the Queen’s reign describe Elizabeth’s refusal to look at her own reflection. Each account offers a different interpretation of Elizabeth’s rejection of this particular form of self-scrutiny, showing that the Queen’s subjects were capable of a sophisticated range of readings of her actions. In addition to offering insight into the cultural tensions that marked the end of Elizabeth’s reign, these accounts also present an opportunity for Shakespeareans to re-examine the connection between the Queen and The Tragedy of Richard II. Shakespeare’s artistry, or our critical concentration on it, makes it difficult to include him in an examination of didactic and de casibus works such as Mirror for Magistrates that are less-than-subtle in their mission to offer moral guidance to rulers. But if we compare an incident in the deposition scene of Shakespeare’s Richard II—the moment when Richard calls for a mirror, scrutinizes his face, then breaks the mirror (4.1.263–91)—to Elizabeth’s behavior with mirrors at the end of her life, what emerges is an instance of life imitating art in a way that complicates our understanding of the relationship between Shakespeare and the Queen. Richard’s business with the mirror is innocuous or stagy enough to have invited little criti-
but his actions make it possible to read Elizabeth's 1601 comment to William Lambarde, her Keeper of the Records in the Tower, “I am Richard II. Know ye not that?” (Nichols 552) as an acknowledgment that Shakespeare was fulfilling one of his roles as a poet. When the playwright held this particular mirror up to nature, the Queen examined what she found there.

Mirrors played a dual, and in some ways contradictory, role in the early modern imagination. They were more widely available in late 16th-century England than ever before—Isabella Whitney’s 1573 mock will describes a mirror as a “needful knacke” (sig. E4r) and in the 1585 The Nomenclator they are included in a list of women’s “necessaries” (Junius 251)—but they were also icons of vanity—“the devills spectacles” (Stubbes sig. Gv)—as well as the only reliable guide to Renaissance self-fashioning. They are in part responsible for the age’s emphasis on gorgeous attire and new levels of hygiene, but they were also held up as cautionary devices: Queen Elizabeth’s first surviving public literary effort was her 1544 Christmas gift to Catherine Parr, a translation of Margaret of Navarre’s The Mirror of a Sinful Soul. This contradictory role—as an intensely private source for the examination of public appearances—is frequently exploited in early modern literature.

Among the published works from what John Marston calls “our polish’d times” (62) there are mirrors for or of magistrates, merchants, the multitude, monsters, maidens, mothers, matrons, loyal subjects, friendship, honor, policy, modesty, mutability, and madness. Self-scrutiny in this sort of mirror is meant to help improve the soul, which Measure for Measure Isabella calls the “glassy essence” (2.2.120), and to help the viewer discover the truth about him- or herself: Ben Jonson brings Truth on stage in the 1606 marriage masque Hymenaei wearing “A christall mirror . . . / By which mens consciences are search’d, and drest” (239), and moralist Thomas Salter, comparing real and metaphorical mirrors, notes “the one teacheth how to attire the outwarde bodie, so the other guideth to garnishe the inwarde mynde, and maketh it meete for vertue” (A6v). Such mirrors arrive from the same metaphorical realm as the glass in which Hamlet shows Gertrude her “[inmost] part” (3.4.20).

Shakespeare’s references to mirrors reflect the early modern duality: according to Lear’s Fool, no woman is exempt from vanity when using a mirror: “For there was never yet fair woman but she made mouths in a glass” (3.2.35–36), and mirrors are frequently associated with deception: “glass-fac’d” flatterers haunt Timon (1.1.58), lovers serve as the beloved’s flattering mirror in As You Like It, and Cymbeline’s Cloten reaches new depths of self-deception when he claims “it is not vainglory for a man and his glass to confer in his own chamber” (4.1.7–9). But like the historical figures John Hayward asserts should serve as “lively patterns, both for private directions and for affayres of state” (sig. A3r), Shakespeare’s more heroic male characters become mirrors in which we can observe model behavior: Ophelia declares Hamlet “the glass of fashion” (3.1.153); Kate Percy twice remembers Hotspur as the glass and mark by which others lived (2 Henry IV, 2.3.21–22; 31–32); Cassius offers to serve as the glass that will tell Brutus the