

Beyond the Mask: Strategic Symbolism in the *Rainbow Portrait*

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Out of all the known portraits of Queen Elizabeth I, the *Rainbow Portrait* has long been viewed as one of the most mysterious by viewers and scholars alike. What is often overlooked in the examination of its complex iconography, however, is the direct correlation that exists between the painting's striking symbolic imagery and the particular issues confronting Elizabeth at the time when the portrait was made. Ultimately, the portrait reflects a desire to reaffirm the Queen's authority and splendor in the midst of adverse circumstances. Through its treatment of Elizabeth's age, virtue, and power at a time when economic and political tensions in England were increasingly pronounced, the painting both reflects and responds to the anxieties of English citizens toward the end of Elizabeth's reign.

The *Rainbow Portrait* currently resides at Hatfield House, a residence in Hertfordshire, England, once owned by Robert Cecil, son and successor of Elizabeth's chief minister, William Cecil. Although undated, the portrait is thought to have been painted around the year 1600 and is one of the last known portraits made of Queen Elizabeth before her death in 1603. The artist of the painting is

also unknown, but scholars have generally attributed the portrait to Isaac Oliver, a well-known French-English miniaturist of the late Elizabethan and Jacobean periods who studied under Elizabeth's official limner, Nicholas Hilliard, and was brother-in-law to another of Elizabeth's notable portraitists, Marcus Gheeraerts the Younger.

The *Rainbow Portrait* depicts Queen Elizabeth, vibrant and youthful, standing regally before a dark archway and dressed in a lavish white gown embroidered with spring flowers. A jeweled serpent with a heart-shaped ruby hanging from its mouth adorns her left sleeve, and a copper-colored cloak, curiously decorated with eyes and ears, drapes over the Queen's shoulder and wraps around her waist. Around her neck, the Queen wears a delicate white ruff, along with a cross pendant and a lengthy string of pearls. A semitransparent veil and an elaborate lace collar, evocative of wings, fans out from her neck and shoulders, while on her head rests an intricately decorated headdress and the royal crown, encrusted with jewels, one of which bears the shape of a crescent moon. Elizabeth herself gazes stoically towards the viewer, her eyes calm and her lips conveying a vague suggestion of a smile. In her right hand she holds the rainbow for which the portrait is named, and above it, written in Latin, is the inscription: "Non sine sole iris," which means "No rainbow without the sun."

Perhaps the most striking aspect of the *Rainbow Portrait's* enigmatic imagery is the curious manner in which the Queen herself is depicted. For although Elizabeth is thought to have been approaching the age of seventy at the time when the portrait was painted, she is nevertheless portrayed not as a seasoned monarch nearing the conclusion of her reign but as a buxom and "legendary

beauty, ageless and unfading" (Strong 753). While this dazzling representation of the elderly Queen's countenance denotes a clear attempt to "[rewrite] the decaying visage of the aging ruler," however, the underlying reasons for the discrepancy between the portrait's idealized portrayal of Elizabeth and her true appearance can be attributed to far more than the mere indulgence of vanity (Riehl 150).

As a reigning monarch, Queen Elizabeth was expected to embody the strength, power, and virtues of her kingdom. Presenting an idealized version of herself to her subjects through her portraiture, therefore, enabled Elizabeth to assert her "political viability" and thus "sustain the illusion of sovereignty" during the troublesome years which marked the last decade of her reign (Fischlin 179). Consequently, official portraits of the Queen were focused not so much on achieving an accurate likeness of Elizabeth's features as on conveying the admirable qualities with which Elizabeth wished to be associated. As Andrew and Catherine Belsey have noted, with regard to her portraiture "Elizabeth had no need ... of illusionistic techniques, of resemblance, or even of identity in the obvious sense of the term. Portraits of the Queen are a record not of her subjectivity but of her authority, wealth and greatness, the qualities that require absolute obedience" (32). Thus, more than serving as indicators of the Queen's natural appearance, Elizabeth's official portraits serve as indicators of how she wished to be seen, thereby functioning as public statements of her royal power. Likewise, since visible signs of weakness or physical decay within painted depictions of the Queen could potentially be read as reflections of weaknesses or deficiencies within the nation itself and Elizabeth's ability to govern it, as Elizabeth grew older, maintaining

a public image of youth and vitality became an increasingly important consideration in the production of her portraiture, as the *Rainbow Portrait* indicates.

Beyond reflecting the vibrancy of Elizabeth's kingdom and reaffirming her power over it, however, the mask of youth which the Queen exhibits in the *Rainbow Portrait* and in many of her other late portraits serves another significant purpose as well. It is probable that, by presenting herself to her subjects as a youthful and vivacious beauty when she was in fact in her late sixties and nearing the end of her reign, Elizabeth hoped to distance herself from the limitations of mortality and thus place herself—at least in the eyes of the people—"outside the normative conception of time," having transcended the constraints of physical aging as well as the expected weaknesses of femininity. As a result, the *Rainbow Portrait* can in many ways be interpreted as an "illusory [image] of absolute power," a visual tool with which to combat the anxieties of succession that had troubled Elizabeth's subjects since she had first come to power roughly four decades earlier (Fischlin 179).

Such fears, which had even been given voice through the works of many Elizabethan writers of the period, can perhaps be best summed up in a line from George Puttenham's *Partheniads*, which asks, in an implicit reference to the Queen, "Why fades this flower and leaves no fruit nor seed?" (9.15). In a response to the widespread concerns over Elizabeth's eventual death and her failure to either produce or designate for herself an heir, therefore, many late portraits of the Queen reflect an effort—epitomized by the *Rainbow Portrait*—to raise Elizabeth to a status of virtuous excellence which "claimed the monarchy was impervious to the weaknesses of age,

sex or disability which might afflict the natural body" (Doran, "Virginity, Divinity and Power" 188). Such a connection, which constitutes a recurrent theme in Elizabeth's portraiture, is further reinforced by sundry poetic portrayals of the Queen, including Thomas Blenerhasset's poem *A Revelation of the True Minerva*, which, written in celebration of Elizabeth, boldly declares of the Queen that "virtue may mortal immortal make" (2). The poem goes on to state, moreover, that because of Elizabeth's great virtue:

She is not now as other princes be
Who live on earth, to every tempest thrall;
Desert hath crowned her with eternity.
Her godly zeal in seat sempeternal
Hath set her now; from thence she cannot fall... (8-12)

Through its artistic conflation of Elizabeth's moral supremacy and her subsequent claim to immortality, this passage demonstrates the manner in which Elizabeth's representation as a virtuous Virgin Queen became a means not only of asserting her immunity to the ravages of age, but also of reassuring her subjects of her constancy and stability. These qualities, which were frequently emphasized in portrayals of Elizabeth, are even echoed in the Queen's own personal motto—*semper eadem*—which means "always the same."

In the *Rainbow Portrait* in particular, this "immortalization of the great and virtuous" in the person of Queen Elizabeth is illustrated through the painting's iconographic emphasis on Elizabeth's wisdom and chastity, which, being juxtaposed with her mystical defiance of bodily decay, emblematically establishes a link between the Queen's virtue and her "superhuman transcendence" of physical weakness (Strong 763; Belsey and Belsey 33). The virtue of

wisdom, specifically, having long been a central component in Elizabeth's self-representation, is symbolized within the painting's imagery by the ornately jeweled serpent embroidered upon the Queen's sleeve. Serpents—despite the negative connotations with which they are often associated—were, at times, utilized by Renaissance artists to signify wise counsel and prudence, as had been done in a literary portrayal of Elizabeth from Puttenham's *Partheniads*. In a passage highlighting the Queen's magnanimity, wisdom, and beauty, respectively, the poem states:

In woman's breast by passing art
Hath harbored safe the lion's heart
And featly fixed, with all good grace,
The serpent's head and angel's face. (4.15-18)

In the *Rainbow Portrait*, then, the inclusion of the jeweled serpent highlights Elizabeth's possession of an "understanding heart" which enabled her, as she herself had written in a prayer shortly after ascending to the throne, to "know what is acceptable in [God's] eyes at all times and ... to judge [His] people justly and distinguish right from wrong" (121). Furthermore, since the serpent is depicted with a ruby-colored heart—a symbol of passion—hanging from its mouth, it also signifies the triumph of Elizabeth's wisdom over her personal desires, a theme which correlates with the virtue of chastity also permeating the painting's symbolism.

In fact, as is frequently the case among portraits of Queen Elizabeth, symbols of chastity and virginity form an extensive and integral component of the *Rainbow Portrait's* imagery. The unbound locks of Elizabeth's coppery gold-colored hair, for instance, dangle

down to her shoulders in the style of a virgin, emphasizing both her maidenhood and her remarkably youthful appearance at this late point in her reign. Curiously, this portrayal of Elizabeth bears striking similarity to the poetic representation of Aurora, goddess of the dawn, which immediately precedes Elizabeth's arrival to the camp at Tilbury in James Aske's *Elizabetha Triumphans*. In the poem, Aske describes Aurora "putting forth" her "curled head with wiry hanging locks / ... whence did newly shine / Her clearest streams and never-darkened lights" (2-5). This description, when juxtaposed with the artist's depiction of Elizabeth in the *Rainbow Portrait*, paints England's queen as the embodiment of the rising sun, a source of radiance whose virtue and chastity illuminate the realm both spiritually and intellectually and make possible the rainbow of peace which she supports in her right hand.

Providing another prominent means of emphasizing Elizabeth's chastity in the *Rainbow Portrait* are the sumptuous pearls—traditionally associated with purity—which can be seen in various sizes adorning Elizabeth's gown, ruff, jewelry, hair, headdress, and crown. The sheer number of pearls depicted in this portrait emphatically attests to the vast grandeur of Elizabeth's wealth, but more notable is the fact that Elizabeth's crown—perhaps the most obvious emblem of her royal position—not only is itself covered with pearls but also rests upon her elaborate pearl-encrusted headdress, thereby proposing a direct connection between Elizabeth's sovereignty and her celibacy. Such a connection is corroborated by works of literature from the period, such as another of George Puttenham's poems, "Her Majesty Resembled to the Crowned Pillar," which claims that Elizabeth's "maiden reign" and "womanhead" are the "Parts that maintain" the "Chapter and head"

of the metaphorical “Pillar” of England (8, 7; 6; 5; 23). This assertion—that Elizabeth’s success as a monarch is not only supported by but also largely dependent upon her virginity—is evidence of the significant shift that occurred in portrayals of the Queen during the latter part of her reign when she was no longer expected to marry. For, while earlier representations of Elizabeth “deployed emblems of virginity” in order to present her as a “marriageable queen,” depictions of the monarch in later works such as the *Rainbow Portrait* present her instead as “one whose power rested on her celibacy” (Doran, “Why Did Elizabeth Not Marry?” 690).

This visual connection between Elizabeth’s chastity and her monarchical power is further demonstrated in the painting by the prominent knot the Queen wears in her pearl necklace. This knot, which—like the pearls that comprise it—serves as yet another symbol of virginity, can be compared to the tied ribbon on the dress Elizabeth wears in the “Armada” portraits celebrating England’s victory over the Spanish Armada in 1588. According to Louis Montrose’s analysis of these paintings, the strategical placement of the knotted ribbon on Elizabeth’s dress “suggests a causal relationship between her sanctified chastity and the providential destruction of the Spanish Catholic invaders,” thereby posing a direct relation between Elizabeth’s virginity and the strength and protection of her kingdom. When extended to the iconography of the *Rainbow Portrait*, then, this interpretation of the “virgin-knot” reinforces the portrait’s assertion of the Queen’s virtuous autonomy and, in doing so, reiterates the idea that Elizabeth’s power is integrally linked to her ability to withstand threats to her own purity (Montrose 147).

In addition to Elizabeth's lavish assemblage of pearls, the prominently displayed crescent moon jewel affixed to her crown in the *Rainbow Portrait* provides another significant iconographic link to Elizabeth's persona as the Virgin Queen. Specifically, the jewel is a subtle reference to Diana, the virgin goddess of the moon and of the hunt, with whom Elizabeth increasingly came to be identified as the years of her reign progressed (Stump and Felch 577). As Susan Doran has pointed out, "[t]he identification of the queen with the chaste goddess Diana ... was the perfect image for a queen who had remained unmarried, ruled a country at war and was nearing death" ("Virginity, Divinity and Power" 189). As Elizabeth's age had increased, so had anxieties concerning the succession of the monarchy and the subsequent safety and stability of the kingdom. Thus, when coupled with the continued political unrest and economic difficulties which troubled the final decade of the reign, these issues necessitated an appropriate iconographic response within Elizabeth's portraiture. Consequently, representations of the Queen as Diana and other associated moon goddesses, as is illustrated in the *Rainbow Portrait*, became frequently utilized in Elizabethan art and literature, employing Elizabeth's perceived virtue and chastity as a means to elevate the Queen to a level of divinity from which she could—at least visually—transcend the concerns of frail immortality.

Furthermore, since Diana is considered to be the goddess of the hunt as well as the moon, she functions not only as a symbol of virtue but also as a "suitably independent and assertive figure for a female ruler at war" (Doran, "Virginity, Divinity and Power" 190). As a result, just as Diana is often depicted holding a bow—as she does, for instance, in the portrait of her attributed to Frans Floris

which shares residence with the *Rainbow Portrait* in Hatfield House—so Elizabeth in the *Rainbow Portrait* is also seen with a bow held strongly in her grasp. This connection reinforces the implied parallel between Diana and the Queen and, in doing so, signifies Elizabeth's ability as a female leader to provide for and to defend against danger both herself and her realm. In addition, the fact that the bow Elizabeth wields is not a hunter's bow but a rainbow allows the symbol to take on dual layers of meaning within the painting's context. While the rainbow's reference to the bow of Diana connotes Elizabeth's possession of military and imperial strength, as an emblem of hope and goodwill it moreover identifies Elizabeth as a bringer of peace and stability, two things England was particularly desirous of toward the end of the sixteenth century when bad harvests, economic depression, ongoing conflicts with Spain and Ireland, and even plots of rebellion threatened to unravel the country.

Beyond serving as an emblem of Elizabeth's benevolence and control over England, however, the rainbow in the Queen's hand also highlights the *Rainbow Portrait's* theme, repeatedly incorporated among late portrayals of the Queen, of Elizabeth's authority over the natural—and even cosmic—realm. In the "Armada" portrait, for example, the defeat of the invading Spanish ships by stormy winds and seas can be seen through a window behind the Queen as she sits with her hand resting upon a globe—indicative of her claim to international power—and confidently gazes on as if having orchestrated the storm herself. Similarly, the "Ditchley" portrait depicts Elizabeth standing upon a map of England, her back to a sky split between sunlit clouds and lightning-filled darkness in order to "signify ... the heavenly glory and divine power of which the Queen

is the earthly mirror" (Montrose 129). In correlation with each of these representations, then, the *Rainbow Portrait's* association of Elizabeth with the sun, moon, and rainbow can be interpreted as a means of framing the Queen as the "Vindicator of loyalty, peace, nobility, / To whom God, the stars, and [her] own virtue / Have assigned the highest station" (qtd. in Seagar 460). By placing Elizabeth at this celestial vantage point, the portrait accredits the Queen with a power that surpasses that of the earthly realm and thus enables her to serve as a "heavenly intermediary," a chosen facilitator of God's justice and blessings upon the land of England (Frye 111).

This level of authority is hinted at even by subtler elements of the *Rainbow Portrait's* iconography, such as the armillary sphere which hangs unobtrusively above the serpent's head on Elizabeth's sleeve, as well as the many eyes and ears which decorate the Queen's mysterious cloak. However, while the armillary sphere is an easily recognized symbol used frequently in Renaissance paintings to represent heavenly wisdom and authority, the cloak's eyes and ears provide a more ambiguous and inventive means of conveying Elizabeth's unearthly insight and power. Signifying that Elizabeth sees and hears all throughout her realm, these eyes and ears act as a reassurance that Elizabeth, as the guardian of England, watches over and provides for the needs of her people. Furthermore, by instilling a "disquieting suggestion of ... governmental surveillance," they likewise convey Elizabeth's ability to detect and expunge both external and internal threats to her power, thus placing her above and beyond the realm of vulnerability to which even the greatest of mere earthly princes would otherwise be subject (Frye 103).

All in all, the *Rainbow Portrait*—like virtually all official depictions of Queen Elizabeth—serves as a bold visual statement of the monarch’s honor and sovereignty. At the same time, however, when considered within the broader context of Elizabeth’s reign it can be read as a calculated and creative means of contending with the many challenges facing the Queen at the time when it was created. Having been painted during a tumultuous period in Elizabeth’s reign, the *Rainbow Portrait* demonstrates Elizabeth’s keen awareness of the need to utilize her portraiture as a means of addressing the widespread uncertainties plaguing her kingdom during the final years of her rule, and in doing so, it reveals both the genius and the limitations of a queen who so influenced the course of the Britain’s history and whose extraordinary life and accomplishments continue to fascinate us even today.

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