SCRITTURE D'OLTREMANICA

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Vai al contenuto multimediale

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Queens on Stage

Female Sovereignty, Power and Sexuality in Early Modern English Theatre

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Contents

9 Introduction. Staging Queenship
Bianca Del Villano

17 Translating Gender, Power and Fate in *The Tragedy of Dido, Queen of Carthage*
Carmen Gallo

43 Between Power and Desire. Kings and Queens in *Edward II*
Paola Di Gennaro

67 Margaret's Queenship: A Mirror for Kings
Savina Stevanato

89 The Lily and the Rose. Queen Isabel and the Prophetic Vision of a New Lineage of Kings
Paolo Pepe

105 Queens on Trial: the Staging of Passions in Shakespeare's Theatre
Simonetta de Filippis

123 "Queen of silence". Questioning Female Royalty in *The Lady's Tragedy*
Tommaso Continisio

137 An Evil Queen: Hengist's Daughter Roxena
Daniela Guardamagna

151 Queen Anne and the Staging of Female Sovereignty in *The Masque of Blackness*
Marina Lops

163 Uncertain Creatures: Playing the Quean in Shakespeare and Early Modern Drama
Roger Holdsworth

187 Afterword. Elizabeth I 'in sight and view of all the world'. An Unpublished Spanish Letter
Carlo M. Bajetta

197 Contributors

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Introduction

Staging Queenship

BIANCA DEL VILLANO[1]

In recent decades – at least since the first generation of new-historicism (the 1980s) – Queen Elizabeth's influence on the cultural life of the time has been an essential focus of analysis in the field of Renaissance Studies.

Seminal studies, such as those of Greenblatt (1980) and Montrose (1988, 2006), have discussed at length the role played by the Monarch in matters concerning theatre, but also the ways in which theatre, as well as literature and the arts in general, functioned as a sounding board for the construction of her political image and charisma (Strong 1977, Doran 2015, Frye 1993, Levin 1994). On the one hand, "Elizabeth's conscious sense of her identity as at least in part a *persona ficta*" (Greenblatt 1980: 167) was partially expressed by her self-fashioning with trappings of ancient androgynous goddesses or virginal and motherly icons inspired by the Marian cult; on the other, her presence was influenced by the authority she represented, for the *literati* of the time were entitled to write by her permission and favour, which gave them some obligation to take a position towards her (on this see Eggert 2000).

As expected, the social energy channelled by and through the queen's presence in the arts was not only massive in quantitative terms but also discursively multifaceted, mainly because she represented a sovereign empowered by a transcendent body politic but also a body natural subjected to (and limited by) patriarchal laws:

[1] University of Naples "L'Orientale".

> Herself a gendered and historical situated subject, Elizabeth Tudor was a privileged agent in the production of the royal image, but she was not its master. Her power to shape her own strategies was itself shaped – at once enabled and constrained – by the repertoire of values, institutions, and practices (including the pictorial and literary conventions) available to her for appropriation and innovation (Montrose 2006: 2).

Being an absolute female sovereign placed her in an unusual position, carved out from the clash between the male symbolic space that she occupied and the fact that she was a woman:

> In sixteenth-century Europe, public authority was invested in positions normally occupied by men, in their roles as fathers, husbands, masters, teachers, clerics, magistrates, or lords. The body politic of kingship with which she was endowed at her coronation rendered Queen Elizabeth as spectacular exception to this rule (Montrose 2006: 2; see also Mucci 2009: 7).

Though Elizabeth was "a spectacular exception" to the laws of politics, her paradoxical condition – viewed from a certain angle – might be taken as paradigmatic of a more general situation, directly connected to the crisis of politics in England during the sixteenth century. The crisis developed as a response to the collapse of the medieval feudal system on which the Tudors' absolute monarchy was built and to the simultaneous, rapid changes affecting society: from the economic transformations that would later lead to the rise of the middle classes to the conflicts between different systems of thought of a religious or scientific nature. In this climate, a new sense of the self emerged, characterised on the one hand by the attachment to a world view that left little room for individuality and on the other by a newly 'proactive' attitude towards knowledge (Belsey 1985). Still influenced by what Tillyard notably termed the Great Chain of Being, the Renaissance subject was discursively brought to believe in a cosmic order of which society was a mere reflection (Tillyard 1943). The syntagmatic and paradigmatic chain linking humans and other beings in this world created a rigid framework of correspondences and oppositions, in

which each was assigned a precise place and role. To rebel against this 'order' was considered an act against God and his counterpart on Earth: the Monarch.

However, this discursive structure was undermined by social instability and by the centrifugal counter-discourses identified with religious dissent and the new scientific thought, paving the way for the development of alternative visions. In particular, the transition from the Ptolemaic to the Copernican/Galilean world – alongside the dissemination of scientific knowledge and its various branches (anatomy, astronomy, cartography) – and the Protestant Reformation – together with the consequent heated debates over Biblical exegesis – worked to replace the old attitude of passively receiving given truths with an active one, aimed at *interpreting* data from the cultural tradition as well as from the tumultuous present.

Yet it would be simplistic to analyse this period in terms of a neat transition between old and new. This is true not only because even those changes that seem more markedly to point to Modernity were far from linear and undeviating, but primarily because the epistemic fracture described above did not result in an obliteration – albeit partial – of vertical hierarchies, but rather in a different distribution of Power, which became as pluralised as the counter-discourses that undermined its centrality. To quote Foucault, it might be said that this historical period sees the beginning of a process that could be expressed as follows:

> Power's condition of possibility […] must not be sought in the primary existence of a central point, in a unique source of sovereignty from which secondary and descendant forms would emanate; it is the moving substrate of force relations which, by virtue of their inequality, constantly engender states of power, but the latter are always local and unstable (Foucault 1978: 93).

Thus, whilst new-historicist and cultural-materialist critics have reconsidered the oppositions between 'old' – monarchical and religious discourse/Power – and 'new' – alternative counter-

discourses – in terms of ‘containment’ vs ‘subversion’, a different line of thought could read the Renaissance in terms of institutional macro-power vs. cells of micro-power characterised by alternative cognitive attitudes.

It is in this macro-micro confrontation that minority groups of racial, sexual and religious ‘others’ emerge as both defying and appropriated by (states of) Power, in accordance with a logic that sees resistance as “tak[ing] place only within a social context which has already construed subject-positions for the human agent” (Smith 1988: 25). This perspective complements Greenblatt’s conclusions that in early modern England “the human subject began to feel remarkably unfree, the ideological product of the relations of power in a particular society”, and that “traces of free choice” were “among possibilities whose range was strictly delineated by the social and ideological system in force” (1980: 256).

The sense of constraint Greenblatt attributes to the male aristocracy and middle class (for this is what emerges from his case studies) could be generalised to various subjectivity categories. What must necessarily be seen as diversified, nevertheless, are the discursive typologies of macro-micro interaction affecting specific social groups. Indeed, the gradual disruption of the Chain followed a path that led on the one hand to the ‘emancipation’ of white men, projected towards a Cartesian construction of the self as unitary and independent, and to a democracy based on private property/capitalism and on a proto-Lockean social contract; on the other, to the marginalisation of ‘others’:

> As Englishness gradually came to be defined through the association with masculinity, Protestantism and whiteness, it was also positioned against ‘definitional others’ who were often allied to the feminine, disorderly women and gender inversion. Gender thus served the complex formation of collective as well as individual identities (Dolan 2003: 11).

Elizabeth I thus found herself occupying a crucial position in this process, as she simultaneously embodied the top and bottom

of the social scale, staging and interpreting a scenario in which looming confusion, convergence or inversion between these opposites certainly meant political threat but inevitably also semantic richness.

Queens on Stage aims to explore this richness by extending the paradigm of female sovereignty to historical figures of queens as well as queenly characters as filtered through the lens of the theatre of the Elizabethan period and its aftermath.

The reasons for choosing theatre among the other discursive genres available as documentary texts lie in the desire to offer a textually cohesive approach to the topic and in the conviction that the aesthetic nature of drama might allow for a more efficacious insight into the cultural, specific 'formations of compromise' implied in Renaissance social and gender relations. In all the essays presented here, the queens are shown to be palimpsests through which the constant oscillation between the two positions of 'being subjected to' and 'being subject of' is more creatively problematised, while *power* and *sexuality* emerge as markers of particular importance for delineating the interpersonal dynamics of the characters.

The volume is organised chronologically. It opens with two essays on Marlowe, respectively by Carmen Gallo – who analyses *The Tragedy of Dido, Queen of Carthage* – and Paola Di Gennaro – who focuses on *Edward II*. Gallo shows how Marlowe's characterisation of Dido subverts and even parodies Renaissance cultural and literary schemata as well as the rhetorical conventions surrounding gender roles at the time. This issue returns in Di Gennaro's essay, where the lability of the boundaries between male and female is staged in terms of a continuous negotiation of kingly and queenly roles within the triangle composed of the royal couple and Edward's favourite.

A Shakespearean 'block' follows, with papers by Paolo Pepe, who writes on *Richard II*, Savina Stevanato, who analyses *Richard*

III, and Simonetta de Filippis, who offers a survey of Shakespeare's queens, evoked through her analysis of *Henry VIII*. In each case, the analytical focus coalesces around the performative power of the queens' speeches.

Tommaso Continisio and Daniela Guardamagna focus on two tragedies by Middleton. Continisio reads *The Lady's Tragedy* as a response to the smothering effect of gender stereotypes on the seventeenth-century Protestant tendency to promote women's function in the family. On this view, Middleton attempts an independent approach to female identity through the characterisation of the female protagonist of the tragedy. Guardamagna focuses on the two queens – the virtuous Castiza and the sinful Roxena – in *Hengist, King of Kent, or, The Mayor of Queenborough*, juxtaposing their contrasting behaviour in a male world of plotting.

Marina Lops examines the specific performative nature of the masque through Jonson's *The Masque of Blackness*; her analysis allows for a more incisive incursion into the courtly cultural circuit when the Queen (consort of James I Stuart) is Anna of Denmark and for a reading of the complex rhetorical and symbolic pattern emerging from the masque with its political and ideological implications.

Roger Holdsworth strategically concludes the 'close-reading section' with a lexical survey of the words used in the Renaissance to refer to the disorderly female, among which he selects "quean". Holdsworth reconstructs the occurrence of these words in English drama, stressing that the "queen"/"quean" homophony implies puns and linguistic games, whose performative power lies not only in the entertainment generated by the confusion between "quean" and "queen" (with all its disruptive potential), but also in the immediate capacity of both to encapsulate the common meanings connected with female sovereignty and express the semantic instability evoked by the very concept of a 'woman on top'.

The afterword is devoted to Carlo Bajetta's remarkable discovery of an unpublished letter in Spanish written by Queen Eliz-

abeth I to Emperor Maximilian II's wife Maria. The letter – part of the marriage negotiations between the Queen of England and Charles, Archduke of Austria and Maximilian's brother – interestingly shows, as Bajetta emphasises, the peculiar tone of Elizabeth's overture to Maria, surprisingly more deferential than that employed in other epistles to address the Emperor.

This historical document allows us to circle back to Elizabeth, who, as is well known, described sovereignty as being "set on a stage" (2000: 194). To paraphrase Bajetta's concluding words – "Elizabeth was always on a stage. Hers, however, was frequently not a monologue" – commenting on the outcome of the studies presented in this volume, we could say that even in the case of fictitious queens, given the polyphonic net of textual intersections, the semantic richness and the cultural and historical implications their figures evoked through early modern drama, theirs too were not monologues.

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