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Dread of Disease and Disfigurement

Smallpox at the Court of Elizabeth I

Just four years into her reign, on 15 October 1562 Queen Elizabeth abruptly finished off her letter to Mary Queen of Scots claiming, "My hot fever prevents me writing more."[1] The following day Bishop de Quadra, the Spanish Ambassador informed the Duchess of Parma "the malady has now turned to smallpox... [t]he eruption cannot come out and she is in great danger.... If the Queen die it will be very soon."[2] The condition of the twenty-nine-year-old Elizabeth worsened, she lost consciousness, and during the night it was reported from Hampton Court that people were "all mourning for her as if she were already dead."[3] The councillors gathered in despair. Finally, on 17 October Elizabeth regained consciousness. Yet the terror caused by the disease did not subside, nobody knew how her body would heal. The possibility of an infection was still acute, and the rashes on her face could cause lifelong scarring or even blindness. However, the next dispatch of de Quadra on 25 October was reassuring, the queen was out of bed, and she quarantined herself "attending the marks on her face to avoid disfigurement."[4]

Elizabeth's illness brought about an instant political turmoil. The Queen had no issue, she had refused consistently to name a successor to the throne, and there was no guarantee for a peaceful Protestant succession. The severity of her afflic-

1 "Elizabeth to Mary, 15 October, 1562", *Calendar of State Papers, Scotland: 1547-63***.** Ed. Joseph Bain. Edinburgh: General Register House, 1898. 660.
2 "Bishop Quadra to the Duchess of Parma, Letter of October 16", *Calendar of State Papers, Spain (Simancas), Volume 1, 1558-1567***.** Ed. Martin A. S. Hume. London, 1892. 262.
3 "Bishop Quadra to the Duchess of Parma, Letter of October 17, 1562", *Calendar of State Papers, Spain*. 262.
4 „Bishop Quadra to the Duchess of Parma, Letter of October 25, 1562", *Calendar of State Papers, Spain*. 262.

tion highlighted the precariousness of an unsettled succession to the throne, focused attention on the urgency of the Queen's marriage, and brought about an assertiveness of male conciliar advice. For the Protestant political elite, the experience was shocking. For the next decade the belief that advice of councillors should be enforced upon a monarch became the norm. Furthermore, the propaganda value of the incident, the miraculous healing of the Queen as a sign of God's hand and a blessing on her reign, was substantial and contributed to many later works that set out to legitimize the Queen's female power. However, on a more personal note, the young Queen's pain and suffering proved to be a unique experience that shaped her female rule. As Robert Dudley remarked in his letter of 27 October to the Scottish Secretary William Maitland, it had more than just political reverberations: "... this sharp sickness hath been a good lesson and as it hath not been anything hurtful to her body, I doubt not but it shall work much good otherwise... [f]or ye know seldom princes be touched in this sort." (Adams 2002, 137–138)

The present paper examines the Queen's encounter with the near fatal attack of smallpox and her personal testimony of it as reflected in a set of prayers that was published under her name within a year. Her writings as well as her visceral aversion from those whose face was marred by the scars of the disease highlight a specific feminine concern about the nature of smallpox accompanied by the heightened awareness of the importance of the soundness of one's body.

Elizabeth's illness

In 1562, the disease probably entered the palace through a visit of Margaret St John in the summer, who died after her return to Woburn on 27 August. (Merton 1992, 95) Smallpox was highly contagious, and with an incubation period of twelve days, the virus was transmitted widely, visiting people of all walks of life. It was one of the most agonizing diseases of the period with extreme high temperatures, splitting headaches, vomiting and rashes appearing first on the tongue and throat making eating, drinking and speaking very painful. After another three days rashes also spread to the hands, arms, body and face of the patient covering even the eyelids. The sixth day was the worst when the disease attacked the central nervous system causing delirium (Snowden 2020, 83–101).

As the Queen survived this most hazardous turning point of her illness, 17 October, the Privy Council issued an order to Edmund Grindal, the Bishop

of London to make the news public and offer thanksgiving the next day at Paul's Cross in order to prevent that gossip "maye be spread abroade of this matter." (Mears et al. 2013, 55) The Spanish envoy's account about the same period sheds light on the Queen's private emotions and actions. According to de Quadra, Elizabeth

> ... on recovering from the crisis which had kept her unconscious and speechless for two hours the first thing she said was to beg her Council to make Lord Robert protector of the kingdom with a title and an income of 20,000 *l.* Everything she asked was promised, but will not be fulfilled.[5]

Although it is difficult to establish how far de Quadra's letter may be accepted at face value, his report mirrors the shaky position of Queen Elizabeth's female rule.

De Quadra's letter also hints at anxieties about Elizabeth's moral stance in the eyes of her subjects:

> The Queen protested at the time that although she loved and had always loved Lord Robert dearly, as God was her witness, nothing improper had ever passed between them. She ordered a groom of the Chamber, called Tamworth, who sleeps in Lord Robert's room, to be granted an income of 500 *l.* a year.[6]

Rumours were ripe about the Queen's relationship to Dudley, but it was not until April of 1562, just six months before contracting the virus, that Elizabeth was confronted with the devastating effect of such reports through a leaked document shown to her by the secretary of the Spanish envoy. (Doran 1996, 58–59) Elizabeth's worry highlights that in early modern England women were judged first of all by the moral principle of chastity from which not even queens were exempt. De Quadra's dispatch, while reporting about Elizabeth's insistence on her virginity, also hints at the possibility of silencing servants with bribes. Thus, although seemingly exonerating the Queen, the letter deliberately cast doubt on her conduct. The report's truth value may be confirmed by the rash action of

5 "Bishop Quadra to the King, Letter of October 25, 1562," *Calendar of State Papers, Spain.* 263.
6 "Bishop Quadra to the King, Letter of October 25, 1562," *Calendar of State Papers, Spain.* 263.

promoting Dudley to the Privy Council in late October, even before she had fully recovered from smallpox. (Adams 2002, 137) A further significant aspect about Elizabeth's position as a female ruler is the account in the letter of such a humiliating incident where Elizabeth on her sickbed is compelled to explain her conduct in front of male councillors. If this is how it really happened, it would signify a severe emotional trauma and physical weakness on the part of Elizabeth, one that she would not display any more during her reign.

The effects of smallpox

As the Queen recuperated, a further tormenting anxiety loomed ahead of her: the extent of the recovery of her looks. The threat of becoming disfigured was perhaps even more threatening for women than the extreme pain entailed by the illness that lasted nearly a month. The speckled monster – as smallpox was often referred to – was especially frightening for women as it could ruin their future. Though the fatality rate was considerably lower than in the case of plague, yet more than two thirds of the survivors were marred by permanent pockmarks and pits on the face, one third suffered significant scarring, and about ten per cent were disfigured, some beyond recognition. (Williams 2010, 22) Mirrors around the survivors were often hidden until patients were deemed strong enough to deal with what they saw in it, and – especially in the case of women – the effects sometimes led to suicide. (Williams 2010, 34–35) Smallpox was often dreaded by women more than plague or childbirth. (Guy 2009, 67) An analysis of the female diaries surviving from the 17th century – a corpus of 20 out of the 332 extant writings – shows that smallpox was the most feared disease, as it could destroy one's chance to success in life, and could reverse the fortune of envied young beauties among rivals as a scarred face meant an impediment to the possibility of a good marriage. (Reinke-Williams 2018, 474–472) The significance of looks in both male as well as female complexions in early modern England can be gauged from a pamphlet of 1567 which claims that a woman could lawfully decline her guardian's choice of a husband if he was "disfigured."[7]

Though no effective ailment was known against smallpox, there was attention given to save the face from excessive pitting. While hygiene could lower the risk

7 *A Letter Sent by Maidens of London.* London: Henry Binneman, 1567. B1v.

of infection, a more ancient and traditional belief was to apply the red treatment to patients. Described by the tenth century Persian physician Rhadez, it meant that only red things were allowed to be placed around an ill person's bed. (Finer 2004, 24) In 1314 John of Gaddesden gave an account of this procedure which he applied to Edward I's son: "take a scarlet or other red cloth, and put it about the pox; as I did to the King of England's son when this disease seized him, and I permitted only red things to be about his bed, by the which I cured him, without leaving a trace of the smallpox pustules on him."[8] Queen Elizabeth was handled similarly, yet after she was out of bed, she kept to her own rooms to further attend to her scars, presumably to carefully open up the pustules with a golden pin and apply some ointment as described in a treatise of 1656.[9]

The letter of Mary Queen of Scots sent on 2 November to Elizabeth further underlines this important aspect of the virus. Putting aside all political disagreement about not reclining her right to the English throne, she expressed deep sympathy with Elizabeth, offered comfort by reference to her own afflictions, and established a sisterly bond on the basis of a shared female anxiety about good looks:

> I cannot but rejoice ... that so soon after evil, comes the good news by your own hand of your recovery, for which I thank God with all my heart, especially since I knew the danger you were in, and how you have escaped so well, that your beautiful face will lose none of its perfections.[10]

There is no precise information about how much damage Queen Elizabeth's face suffered. Robert Dudley's letter of 27 October claims that no hurt was done to her body. (Adams 2002, 137) It seems that Elizabeth was spared the worst

8 John Gaddesden. *Rosa Anglica*. Ed. Winifred Wulf. London: Simpkin Marshall Ltd, 1929. 315.
9 "Short Treatise of the Small Pox, shewing the Means how for to govern and cure those which are infected therewith." In *Queen Elizabeth's Closet of Physical Secrets, With certain approved Medicines taken out of a Manuscript found at the dessolution of one of our English Abbies: and supplied with the Child-bearers Cabinet, and Preservative against the Plague and Small Pox. Collected by the Elaborate paines of four famous Physitians, and presented to Queen ELIZABETHS own hands*. London: Will Sheares Jr., 1656. 59.
10 "Mary to Elizabeth 2 November, 1562." *Calendar of State Papers, Scotland*. 666. Mary Queen of Scots contracted smallpox during her childhood in France where Henry II's royal physician, Jean Fernel attended her.

effects of the disease. However, de Quadra reported on 7 February that she did suffer some irreparable harm to her skin. According to him, when Elizabeth was petitioned in Parliament by the Lords to marry, she retorted angrily that "the marks they saw on her face were not wrinkles but pits of smallpox."[11] It is also conspicuous that her early "fresh" look admired by the Venetian ambassador at the beginning of her reign changed on her portraits by the mid-1560s to a face pattern characterized by the excessive use of cosmetics. (Borman 2017, 321; Finer 2004, 24)

The unhappy memories of smallpox meant that Elizabeth did not return to Hampton Court for the next five years, and even after so long an interval she was uneasy about the place: "she does not like the house, and would never go to it only that she does not wish it to fall into decay... [s]ince she was ill of smallpox, she has been much afraid of the place, and this is the first time she has returned to it."[12] (Cole 1999, 19–20) A similar aversion was responsible for the emotional alienation of Elizabeth from one of her most intimate companions, Mary Dudley Sidney, the sister of Robert Dudley. Mary, a gentlewoman of the Privy Chamber, nursed Elizabeth through her attack of smallpox and contracted the disease herself. While she survived, she became severely disfigured. Her husband, Henry Sidney twenty years later still remembered the shock of first seeing her wife after returning from France: "When I went to Newhaven I left her a full faire Ladie in myne eye at least the fayerest, and when I returned I found her as fowle a ladie as the small poxe could make her."[13] Mary's ruined looks led to her partial withdrawal from court as Elizabeth emotionally discarded her, and finally to her retirement in 1579. (Guy 2017, 44–45)

While the young Queen's encounter with pain and suffering was in no way unique, yet the record left about her emotional trauma and personal reflections is exceptional. The most telling testimony of the psychological effect of her afflictions is a bunch of prayers composed within a year of her recovery. These render a rare insight into the female experience of smallpox and the anxiety about the soundness of the female body.

11 "Bishop Quadra to the King, Letter of 7 February, 1563." *Calendar of State Papers, Spain*. 296.
12 "Letter of 13 October, 1567." *Calendar of State Papers, Spain*. 445.
13 Quoted in Kay 1992, 19.

Prayers about the health of the body

Diaries written by women at this early age are very rare, but educated ladies often expressed their innermost feelings in devotional works that were considered a proper literary genre for female authors. These texts included translations, paraphrases, or original meditations and prayers. By the time Elizabeth became queen she already completed several translations, among which her rendering of Marguerite de Navarre's *Le Miroir de l'âme pécheresse* at the age of eleven for her stepmother Catherine Parr was printed in 1548.[14] This early public image that associated Princess Elizabeth with devotional writing was further strengthened by the first document to be published about her reign, the account of her entry into London preceding the day of her coronation in 1559. Rather than reporting a political speech by the new Queen, the pamphlet recorded a prayer uttered by her at the Tower. Her words emphasized humility and God's grace associating herself with the prophet Daniel who was delivered by God.[15] Four years later, regaining her health after the attack of smallpox, another set of prayers in Latin was published under her name (*Precationes privatae*) which also had a similar tone.[16] At a time when sickness was regarded as God's punishment for sin, the prayers served as a means to position the Queen's infirmity and recovery as another divine deliverance. The choice of writing in Latin – at a time when all religious services were held in English – meant that the pamphlet was conceived with an eye to an international readership to which it proclaimed that Elizabeth was spared by God's grace, and her female Protestant rule was maintained by God's will. However, the words and ideas within the prayers also shed light on the Queen's private thoughts.

The set consists of four prayers complied from free paraphrases of the psalms. The topic of the first three follow the basic structure of prayers – preparation to meet God, confession of sins, and thanksgiving for benefits – to which a fourth prayer was added, a supplication for the kingdom. Each piece was accompanied by a collect stressing Elizabeth's humble position as the handmaid of God ('Ancilla

14 Marguerite de Navarre. *A godly medytacion of the Christen Sowle, concerninge a loue towardes God and hys Christe.* Wesel: Dirik van der Straten, 1548.

15 *The Passage of our most drad Soveraigne Lady Quene Elyzabeth through the Citie of London to Westminster, the daye before her Coronacion, Anno 1558.* London: Richard Tottel, 1559. E4r–v.

16 Elizabeth I. *Precationes privatae.* London: T. Purfoot, 1563. See the modern edition in Elizabeth I. *Autograph Compositions and Foreign Language Originals.* Ed. Janel Mueller and Leah S. Marcus. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2003. 109–123.

tua'), a major trope in the early self-fashioning of Elizabeth. After these collects, three more prayers closed the group that emphatically addressed concerns connected to Elizabeth's position as Queen: her sickness, her female rule, and her prayer for wisdom. All of them echoed the theme of deliverance from danger and her elevation to the throne of England by God's mercy alone, arguments that were used to justify her female sovereignty. However, beyond the political propaganda value of the collection, Elizabeth's heightened attention to the soundness of her physical body conspicuously points at her female experience of smallpox. Though ample space is given to highlight the importance of spiritual features and mental abilities, the physical fitness and the health of the body is treated as a major issue.

This voice stands in marked contrast to Elizabeth's earlier self-representation where she regarded only her mental capacities as worthwhile. Accompanying a portrait sent to her brother Edward VI in 1549, her lines call attention to the insignificance of looks:

> For the face, I graunt, I might well blusche to offer, but the mynde I shal newer be asshamed to present. For thogth from the grace of the pictur the coulers may fade by time; may give by wether may be spotted by chance, yet the other nor time with her swift winges shal overtake, nor the mistie cloudes with ther loweringes may darken, nor chance with her slipery fote may overthrow.[17]

As opposed to this stance, the prayers of 1563 also appreciate the physical characteristics of the Queen. Though still esteeming mental and spiritual qualities, the Queen turns to God not only for spiritual benefits and wisdom, but also for a sound body. In her "Thanksgiving for Benefits" she indulges in mentioning bodily traits as well, and her tone little disguises her pride in them:

> When I consider how many – not only from among the common people but also from the nobility as well as royal blood ... – some are miserably deformed in body, other ... destitute of wit and intelligence, still others ... disordered in their mind and reason... Indeed, I

17 Elizabeth I. *Collected Works.* Ed. Leah S. Marcus, Janel Mueller, and Mary Beth Rose. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2002. 35. For the original Latin see *Autograph Compositions.* 26.

> am unimpaired in body, with a good form, a healthy and substantial wit, prudence even beyond other women, and beyond this, distinguished and superior in the knowledge of literature and languages ...[18]

A similar emphasis appears in her "Thanksgiving for Recovered Health" where the Queen prays for a sound body. Although it comes after the supplications for a healthy soul and mind, the ultimate position of the request does not diminish its importance, on the contrary, it adds emphasis on the significance of a healthy physique:

> ... and furthermore at the same time heal my body, so that it may straightway be without any remains of sickness ... Impart purity and restore soundness throughout, so that Thy handmaid, by medicine made by Thee Thyself, may recover from all sickness equally of body and soul...[19]

God's healing of the body is a special aspect of these first published prayers of the Queen. The theme disappears in her second set printed six years later as part of the *Christian Prayers and Meditations in English, French, Italian, Spanish, Greek, and Latin.*[20] This bunch of foreign language prayers served as a political statement, as the individual compositions targeted through their language specific nations and moulded their subject matter accordingly, fashioning the image of both the country and its sovereign with an eye to its audience abroad. (Clement 2008, 1.1–26) Another aspect of this collection was that its compilers attached a veiled message to the Queen through the manipulation of the margins. The editorial decision of John Day to print a sequence of a female *dance macabre* next to the lines of the Queen foregrounded the opinion of the radical Protestant fraction at court who demanded in both of the Houses of Parliament a decision from Elizabeth on her marriage and the succession. The illustrations emphasized a general warning about the last judgment day which all people had to face, and served as a menacing *memento mori* addressed to the Queen. (Stróbl 2012, 26–30) Thus neither the text nor the borders mirrored any intimate female concern over the soundness of the body that could be found in the earlier compositions.

18 Elizabeth I. *Collected Works.* 141; for the original Latin see *Autograph Composition.* 121.
19 Elizabeth I. *Collected Works.* 140; for the original Latin see *Autograph Compositions.* 120.
20 *Christian Prayers and Meditations in English, French, Italian, Spanish, Greek, and Latin.* London: J. Day, 1569.

However, in front of the officially proclaimed royal prayers of the 1569 publication, John Day placed several well-known English language prayers that were mostly lifted over from Henry Bull's compilation published a year earlier.[21] Among these, two prayers were included that were the English translations of two pieced from the Queen's earlier 1563 Latin volume. Their appearance in the section of common prayers is momentous, as it shows that in six years the Queen's prayers were popular and used widely in the vernacular. One of these prayers was the English translation of "Gratiarum Actio Pro Sanitate Recuperate," the Queen's thanksgiving for recovery from illness. It was added to other compositions to be used in time of sickness, yet it stands out with its emphasis on "having a whole minde in a whole body."[22] While the other prayers in this section treat afflictions as "bitter, but yet wholesome medicines" of the soul, and ask for "joy after this sorrow," the Queen's words reflect a deep concern about one's physical body.[23] Thus within this second volume both the official royal voice and the more private concerns of the Queen are documented.

Conclusion

Queen Elizabeth was not the only royal to contract smallpox, and especially the 17th century saw a row of royal children, queens and siblings who lost their life to the disease.[24] However, Elizabeth's near fatal experience of smallpox is exceptional as it offers a rare glimpse into a woman's personal thoughts and emotional reaction to the dreaded speckled monster. Evidence suggests that the Queen suffered a considerable trauma which had a specifically gendered aspect: letters and rumours register her anxiety about her moral uprightness. Furthermore, her prayers written shortly afterward her illness mirror her dread of disfigurement and a fear about bodily blemishes which could ruin earthly possibilities despite all heavenly rewards.

21 Henry Bull. *Christian Prayers and Holie Meditations.* London: Thomas East, 1568.
22 *Christian Prayers and Meditations.* L2r.
23 *Christian Prayers and Meditations* I3r, K1r.
24 The best-known example is Mary II who died at the age of 32 in 1694.

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