ADDRESSING THE QUEEN: COSTUMES AND ELIZABETH I IN FILM

by

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Under the Direction of Frances Teague

ABSTRACT

This work focuses on how costumes convey meaning about Queen Elizabeth I in her biopics. First, I will examine the queen’s costume in the final scene of Shekhar Kapur’s 1998 film Elizabeth as a response to the heritage film debate. By conflating two famous portrait gowns, Kapur plays upon the audience’s visual expectations of historical film, thereby separating his film from those that had been criticized as “heritage films.” After using Elizabeth to complicate questions of genre, I will turn to Henry Koster’s 1955 film The Virgin Queen in order to examine how Elizabeth’s costumes depict her as a frustrated, passive figure juxtaposed against Sir Walter Raleigh, who actively fashions his identity by choosing his own clothing.

INDEX WORDS: Queen Elizabeth I, Cate Blanchett, Bette Davis, Shekhar Kapur, Henry Koster, costumes, historical film, heritage film, national identity, British national identity, royal portraits, iconography
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DEDICATION

To Mom and Nana, for all your generous gifts; my love of stories comes from you.

To Michael, my dear husband, who takes this journey with me.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In 1998, historian and film theorist Tony Barta pointed out that while scholars have grown more accepting of the demands genre and even commerce place upon historical films, “The costume department, though, should get things right” (qtd. in McKechnie 217). While Barta’s comment pokes fun at the accuracy debates raging at the end of the twentieth century, we cannot ignore the importance of aesthetics in historical film, for a film can hardly be considered “historical” without visually representing the period in which it is set. How “accurately” a film visually represents history, of course, depends on the film, and to a great extent, the film’s own historical context. According to George Custen, by the 1920s most major studios had established research departments to meet the “demand for accuracy” reflected in “letters from fans who wrote gleefully to point out real or imagined mistakes” (35-6). More than half a century later, we are still pointing out mistakes, but we are also exploring the backlash that occurred when historical films that emphasized visual authenticity were condemned for the vision of national identity that their “accurate” aesthetics helped portray. In this study, I will examine the costumes in two biopics of Queen Elizabeth I, neither of which should be considered “heritage films,” Shekhar Kapur’s Elizabeth (1998) and Henry Koster’s The Virgin Queen (1955), in relation to recent scholarship on historical film. I will focus first on Elizabeth because it is through the lens of the heritage debate’s heightened concerned with aesthetics’ relationship to British national identity that it becomes possible to read The Virgin Queen as something more than a melodrama.
The heritage film debate

Since the 1980s, the term “heritage film” has been used to describe many different kinds of films; unfortunately, many of those who use it have avoided “awkward questions of definition,” so few, if any, are really sure what it means (Monk 182). During the last twenty years, films with “accurate” period mise-en-scene became “automatically categorized as a ‘heritage film’, suggesting an unhealthy and conservative concern with nostalgia” (McKechnie 219). Ultimately, because the term is used inconsistently and usually derisively, I concur with Claire Monk’s description of heritage film “as a critical construct rather than as a description of any concrete film cycle or genre” (Monk 183).

According to Monk, Charles Barr first used “heritage film” in 1984 to describe “patriotic” but not exclusively historical British films¹ of the 1940s that “had drawn upon aspects of the ‘national heritage’” (Monk 187). Monk explains that even though some of the films Barr studied, like Olivier’s Henry V, “were officially-sponsored government propaganda,” his use of the term did not contain the ideological critique that later became linked with it when “anti-heritage-film criticism began to emerge journalistically in 1987-8, doubtless in reaction against the media saturation surrounding A Room with a View” (Monk 187). Released in 1985, A Room with a View is the film Monk lists as the most notable example of films that “were received warmly by critics of most political/aesthetic persuasions on their release…yet became widely excoriated by the early 1990s” (187). Monk attributes critics’ change of heart to discontent with the conservative “cultural policy of the Thatcher government…and specifically, that National Heritage Acts of 1980 and 1983”:

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¹ Monk lists This England (David MacDonald, 1941), Henry V (Laurence Olivier, 1945), and A Canterbury Tale (Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, 1944) as examples (187).
Those Acts set in statute Thatcher’s wider official national promotion of a heritage industry defined by the preservation of the landscapes and private-built properties of the past by means of their commodification and exploitation. […]

For Wright and his contemporaries, a national heritage was constructed by installing and maintaining a particular dominant conception of the national past. The activities of the conservative lobby were the central tool of this hegemonic process. Their activities were said to identify with the private property of the upper classes as in the public interest, and thus to secure public acceptance of the values and interests of the propertied classes as national values and the national interest. (Monk 187-8)

Political criticism thus “was applied to ‘heritage films’ with virtually no translation” (188), which Monk says “explains the heritage-film critique’s lack of rigour, since it presumed a reader who was already broadly acquainted with anti-heritage industry arguments and pre-disposed to agree with them” (188).

The conservative Right responded with open disdain for the heritage film critics and the “depressing” films\(^2\) they upheld as better, or at least different, versions of British national identity, films with “a firm location in a contemporary, culturally and sexually diverse and socially divided Britain far away from the corridors of power, the wealth of the City or the complacent prosperity of the shires” (Monk 187-8). Thus, “By the end of the 1980s, the Thatcher government’s friends in the media had emphatically defined both the British political landscape and the field of British cultural production -- and hence film—in highly polarized and combative terms” (Monk 188). These “binaristic simplifications” wrought from political

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ideologies have resulted in inattention to or dismissal of other film elements that might complicate those binaries (191), an error several critics have been trying to correct during the last few years.

**Constructing the Queen**

Ironically, in appropriating “authentic” images of Queen Elizabeth, we appropriate fictions. Every film about Queen Elizabeth I must construct its Elizabeth in relation to the public identity she constructed for herself, an enterprise in which we must wonder if any “truth” can be found. As monarch, Elizabeth had two bodies: her private body, or “body natural,” and her public body, or “body politic” that housed the concept of the sovereign (Axton 12). As we can see from her portraits, clothing was part of the historical Elizabeth’s carefully constructed iconography, which was designed to impose the meaning of her body politic upon her body natural. Therefore, when biopics portray her in clothes that replicate or at least refer to specific portraits, they appropriate images that were designed to mask Elizabeth’s actual body, which would age and die, and support her public image of goddess-like youth, beauty, and eternal power.

As almost everyone who writes on the portraits explains, Elizabeth and her government actively tried to control public representations of her image. As early as 1563, when the queen was only thirty, a never-enacted draft proclamation gives the right to reproduce her likeness only to “some speciall person” whose work other artists would copy (Strong, *Gloriana* 14). After one artist created an approved portrait, the government released the pattern to the great workshops for production on a large scale (Strong, *Gloriana* 13-14). Roy Strong, the first scholar to suggest that Elizabeth’s government deliberately appropriated the iconography of the Virgin Mary, explains:
The pattern process is important, in that it explains how so many different hands could produce the same face mask. No particular pattern was the exclusive monopoly of a single studio, and several may have been producing the same type simultaneously. The pattern became a studio lay figure which was periodically reversed or reattired [...]. The cut-out head is covered with pin-pricks following the main lines of the features, so that it could be applied to panel or canvas and a tracing made by means of rubbing coloured chalk through the holes. [...]. Around [the] head the artist, with the help of his apprentices and assistants, would build up the portrait. (Gloriana 16-17)

Since the proclamation was never enacted, nor did Elizabeth follow the French example and employ a permanent portrait painter, she gradually lost control over her image. As Elizabeth’s reign progressed, demand for her portrait increased; especially after her excommunication in 1570, displaying the Queen’s portrait became a popular Protestant affirmation of loyalty and support (Pomeroy 64). Therefore, many paintings of poor quality, or even worse, portraits that depicted her as an aging woman, were in public circulation. By July 1596, the Privy Council ordered “public officers to aid the Queen’s Serjeant Painter in seeking out unseemly portraits which were to her ‘great offence’ and therefore to be defaced and no more portraits produced except as approved by the Serjeant Painter” (Strong, Gloriana 14). Thus, in the official portraits her face appears ageless, the icon look we now describe as the “Mask of Youth” (Strong, Gloriana 147).

These portrait fictions, of course, reflect little or nothing of Elizabeth’s private self, so their transposition to the screen can prove problematic if they are supposed to show Elizabeth as anything other than an icon. That tension is precisely what Shekhar Kapur exploits in his
interpretation of the queen in *Elizabeth*. Some critics believe that Kapur meticulously replicates portraits of the queen in order to support their story’s manipulation of time and facts: “Kapur and Hirst are […] playfully rather than painfully aware of having to fulfill visual expectations. They thus embrace the heritage principle of authentic pictorial detail, while rejecting or subverting other heritage conventions in order to gain freedom for Elizabeth’s narrative inventions” (McKechnie 233). In my chapter on the film, however, I will show that Kapur rejects the “heritage” principle of visual authenticity by creating an illusion with Elizabeth’s final costume that plays on and with our visual expectations of historical film.

**Fashioning and Refashioning**

We typically think of costumes as revealing something about the characters who wear them. While that is still true for costumes that represent Renaissance clothing, it is important to understand that those costumes recreate clothing that imposed its meaning upon the wearer. As Ann Rosalind Jones and Peter Stallybrass explain,

> To understand the significance of clothes in the Renaissance, we need to undo our own social categories, in which subjects are prior to objects, wearers to what is worn. We need to understand the animatedness of clothes, their ability to “pick up” subjects, to mold and shape them both physically and socially, to constitute subjects through their power as material memories. (2)

In a way, then, Renaissance costumes both reflect and impose meaning. In Koster’s *The Virgin Queen*, Sir Walter Raleigh, played by Richard Todd, embodies this concept in the way he

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3 For clarity’s sake, I refer to specific versions of the portraits. I have chosen the Gheeraerts and Gower portraits because they seem to be the most frequently reprinted, both in reference books and on the internet. It is important to note that multiple versions exist of each portrait; those versions, however, differ mostly in background elements and not in Elizabeth’s dress.
chooses clothing that reflects his inner state and resists the attempts of Elizabeth, played by Bette Davis, to “fashion” him through clothing. The word “fashion,” Jones and Stallybrass point out, “did not have changing styles or clothing as its naturalized referent; rather, it commonly referred to the act of making, or to the make or shape of a thing, or to form as opposed to matter, or to the enduring manners and customs of a society” (1). In this film, Elizabeth represents all that is old and depleted, especially in contrast to the virile Raleigh and fertile Beth Throckmorton, played by a twenty-two year-old Joan Collins. While we see Raleigh actively fashioning his identity by choosing, adding, and removing clothes, Elizabeth almost always appears passively encased by her clothing. Her identity has long been chosen and belongs firmly to the past; she is only an active fashioner of identity when she tries unsuccessfully to refashion Raleigh.

Elizabeth’s enclosed, barren body becomes a metaphor for the Old World from which Raleigh escapes just in time to become the honorary founder of America: “Elizabeth’s ageing body becomes both the source and the residue of the founding of America; … Raleigh can represent the acceptable American face of Elizabeth, that which supersedes the obsolete Old World and exports all that is most important, enduring, and potent of Elizabethanism to become Americanness” (Dobson and Watson 283). If we locate *The Virgin Queen* in its post-war Hollywood context, then, suddenly Elizabeth’s subordination to Raleigh as the film’s protagonist makes a lot of sense. Elizabeth is important in this film insofar as she is “the servant of historical progress” who recognizes that her time is passing and her legacy lies in letting Raleigh pass along “the Elizabethan adventuring spirit to America” (Dobson and Watson 283). In light of this interpretation, I will illustrate how costumes convey the power struggle between Elizabeth and Raleigh and her ultimate subordination to him.

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4 Incidentally, Elizabeth’s costumes are influenced by the portrait gowns, but they do not appear to be replicas of them. This may be because Davis had already worn replicas in her previous turn as the queen in 1939’s *The Private Lives of Elizabeth and Essex* (Hodgdon 135).
Finally, it is not my goal to list the historical inaccuracies in each film, for it would belittle my point that these films have merit either because of or in spite of their engagements with history. Therefore, I will keep my discussions of the “real” historical figures to a minimum except when my argument requires it.
CHAPTER 2

ILLUSIONS AND ALLUSIONS: PORTRAIT GOWNS AND ELIZABETH’S FINAL SCENE

In their examinations of Shekhar Kapur’s 1998 biopic Elizabeth, critics note that several of lead actress Cate Blanchett’s costumes are near-replicas of the gowns Queen Elizabeth I wears in famous portraits. While it is true that these costumes help to satisfy the audience's "visual expectations" of historical film, in Elizabeth's case the costumes also help to show how the film is a response to the heritage film debate rather than an evolution of the “heritage film.” For critics such as Kara McKechnie and Julia M. Walker, two of the most recent scholars to discuss Elizabeth’s visual innovations, Elizabeth’s costume in the final scene emphasizes the deliberate construction of her iconographic identity. This, of course, is true. Both critics, however, incorrectly identify the Ditchely portrait as the iconic image that Kapur appropriates. Walker calls the gown “a version of the Ditchley portrait dress” that recalls “the stock image appearing in our minds’ eyes when we heard there was to be a new film on Queen Elizabeth” (191). In McKechnie’s description of the portraits as a framing device, she refers to them as “meticulously re-created” and concludes that Kapur “embrace[s] the heritage principle of authentic pictorial detail, while rejecting or subverting other heritage conventions in order to gain freedom for Elizabeth’s narrative inventions” (233). When we realize that the gown is not a replica of the one in the Ditchley portrait, however, but an illusion, it becomes apparent that the costumes themselves subvert the conventions associated with heritage film, rather than merely enabling their subversion.
In interviews, the makers of *Elizabeth* show their desire to separate themselves from the heritage “frock flicks” that had been the subject of negative media attention since the 1980s. Costume designer Alexandra Byrne\(^5\) explains, "*Elizabeth* was a chance to re-examine the period, interpret it, and not get caught up in a set way of doing it…” ("Elizabeth: PN"). The heritage film’s “set way of doing it,” of course, involved great attention to creating an "authentic" *mise-en-scene*; that attention, however, was

aesthetically conservative; uncinematic in that [it] favored a static pictorialism rather than making fullest use of the *moving* (emphasis hers) image; […] the films were identified with a particular aesthetic approach to the visualization of the past: “a museum look; apparently meticulous period accuracy, but clean, beautifully lit, and clearly on display. (qtd. in Monk 178)

Since this “static pictorialism” seemed based on the desire to showcase some notion of historical accuracy, *Elizabeth’s* team rejected the idea of trying to represent history with the kind of authenticity for which their predecessors strove. Byrne notes: "Every time I was reading a reference book…Shekhar would tell me to close it and throw it away, because he didn't want us to be tied to the fact and reality of it. I felt that I needed to initially make the audience feel safe in a world they would be expecting from a period film” ("Elizabeth: PN"). And while this strategy of satisfying the audience’s visual expectations does create a “safe” environment in which to suspend disbelief, at the same time the film parodies those expectations through its hyper-attention to and subsequent manipulation of visual authenticity.

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\(^5\) Byrne got her start in costume design with the Royal Shakespeare company ("Elizabeth: PN"). According to the Internet Movie Database, she was nominated for a Tony award in 1990 for “Some Americans Abroad,” and she won a BAFTA award for *Persuasion* (1995). She has received Academy Award and BAFTA nominations for costume design for her work in Kenneth Brannagh’s *Hamlet* (1996), *Elizabeth* (1998), and *Finding Neverland* (2004).
In Elizabeth’s coronation scene, Kapur establishes that he can do “historical accuracy” better than anyone. Before the coronation, Blanchett’s costumes are designed in the style of the period, but they do not duplicate Elizabeth's dress in any of the portraits. At the moment she becomes queen, however, it is as almost as though the viewer looks into her Coronation portrait’s frame through the camera’s frame. As Byrne explains, this image serves as a “landmark” in Elizabeth’s journey: “We would try and plot various key stages, plus we knew there were moments of portraiture that we were going to achieve, like the Coronation and the icon, so those were landmarks” (“Elizabeth: PN”). The crown and ermine-lined mantle appear almost identical to those in the portrait, and the gown appears accurate down to the brocade patterns and the shape of its bodice and kirtle, or skirt. In both images, the farthingale exemplifies the bell shape popular in the 1560s (Ashelford 151, 12). The ruff at Elizabeth’s neck marks a sort of middle stage in its history as an accessory; it is slightly larger than the delicate edging of collars present in noble portraits during the 1550s, but considerably smaller than the huge accessories of the late 1570s and early 1580s (Ashelford 14, 153). Blanchett's hair also has the slight waves of the portrait and is worn long and loose “in the style of an English maiden” (Frye 101). Elizabeth’s face is pale in both the film and the portraits, the expressions neutral with a touch of gravity; in the film, this image is juxtaposed with her laughter during the scene of celebratory feasting and dancing that follows the coronation. If Kapur and his colleagues want to show that they can reproduce history, surely this scene takes the notion of “getting it right with the costumes” to a new level.

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6 I will provide more information about the Coronation portrait toward the end of the paper.
7 The bodice is the “heavily boned bodice which compressed the bust and finished in a point at the waist” (Ashelford 12), which, incidentally, points toward her vagina.
8 Ashelford describes the farthingale as the “understructure consisting of a series of connected hoops that increased in circumference from the waist to the feet” (151).
The other image, however, the one to which Byrne first refers as “the icon” and then “the recognized portrait of Elizabeth” (“Elizabeth: PN”) destroys critical characterization of a tidy, visually “authentic” frame for Elizabeth’s reign. The costume does, in fact, have the same white and silver color scheme as the Ditchley portrait, a work most likely painted around 1592 by Marcus Gheeraerts the Younger to commemorate Sir Henry Lee’s entertainment of the Queen at his estate (Strong Gloriana 135). In this portrait, Elizabeth’s gown features a geometric pattern with clusters of colored jewels intersecting on the vertices and pearls dotting the free spaces on the fabric. The bodice, out of which peeps a hint of laced smock, has a low neckline. Instead of a closed ruff that encircles her neck, the material stands up in what appears to be an open ruff that reveals much of her bosom. The dress Byrne designed for the final scene in Elizabeth has a high neckline and a closed ruff, and the kirtle opens in a V-shape to reveal an elaborate forepart. When one notices the bows cascading down the bodice, sleeves, and opening of the kirtle, both the allusion and the illusion become clear. Byrne’s creation has the white and silver color scheme of the Ditchley portrait, but the shape and design of the gown Elizabeth wears in the Armada portrait. In the version of the Armada portrait painted by George Gower c.1588, Elizabeth’s dress is made of black and white, her personal colors, with accents of color, particularly plush pink bows and various jewels.

Elizabeth's costume in the final scene is an illusion that plays upon the viewer's expectations of seeing a particular Elizabeth icon. We have recognized costumes like the Coronation gown as "authentic," so when we see a big white dress, we assume that the costume

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9 In portraiture of the period, difficulty lies in determining whether this accessory is an open ruff or a rebato, a “shaped collar pinned to the bodice and wired so that it stood up round the back of the head” (Ashelford 153), for the ruff’s sharp pleats often resemble the wires of the rebato. Perhaps the large, wing-like extensions behind Elizabeth’s head are a type of rebato.

10 A forepart is the “triangular piece of material that filled in the central parted section of the skirt” (Ashelford 151)
is, or at least represents, the famous white Ditchley gown. If the goal of the final scene is simply to emphasize the role of virginity in Elizabeth’s transformation into the deliberately-constructed icon, then putting her in a replica of the Ditchley gown would certainly serve that purpose; the makers, however, appropriate the Armada gown, altering it only by making it white. Both portraits convey Elizabeth’s power; it seems logical, then, to assume that Kapur and his colleagues found something about the Armada portrait distinctive and compelling enough to make it part of their illusion. First, I propose that the Armada portrait’s appropriation reveals the film’s rejection of visual authenticity for its own sake. The iconic gown we expect, and even think we see, does not completely enclose Elizabeth’s body the way the film’s substitution does; the altered Armada gown gives us a costume that both engages history and translates to a late twentieth-century audience as a signifier of virginity.

Typically, audiences associate chastity with a covered body. In the early modern period, however, virgins of all ages traditionally wore low necklines, a fashion shown in the Ditchley portrait and which Elizabeth exploited until her death at age seventy. In addition to German visitor Paul Hentzner’s observation in 1598 that “Her bosom was uncovered, as all the English ladies have it till they marry,” French ambassador Andre Hurrualt, Sieur de Maisse comments around the same time that the queen received him in a gown “exposing ‘the whole of her bosom’, which was ‘somewhat wrinkled’” (Weir 431-34). Byrne mentions how, to emphasize the film’s interpretation of Elizabeth’s transition from innocent girl to hardened ruler, “the neckline starts low and gradually closes up and up, working towards that final icon look” (“Elizabeth: PN”). Just as the portraits used allegorical symbols that were easily recognizable to the people of the early modern period, viewers of the film must encounter images consistent with their notions of how a virgin should dress. The costume, however, does more than make her look like a modest
virgin to a modern film audience; here, as she “marries England,” its higher neckline reflects the change in dress an early modern woman made after she married. Thus, in associating images of a very covered Elizabeth icon with her professions first that she has “become a virgin” and then that she is “married to England,” Kapur captures the essence of the seemingly-paradoxical iconography in which Elizabeth was not only a virgin, but also both a wife and mother to her country.

In addition, the film may reject the Ditchley portrait in favor of the Armada portrait because of differences in the portraits’ themes. Again, both portraits portray her power, but the Ditchley portrait represents “forgiveness” (NPG website) whereas the Armada portrait commemorates a moment of “imperial triumph,” England’s victory over the Spanish Armada in 1588 (Strong, *Gloriana* 132). The National Portrait Gallery’s website explains that the Queen’s visit to Ditchley signified her forgiveness of its owner Sir Henry Lee, who until his retirement in 1590 was the major planner of Elizabeth’s Accession Day tilts and her champion during the event. Lee had offended Elizabeth by living at Ditchley with his mistress Anne Vavasour. The words on the portrait are difficult to read\(^\text{11}\), but the National Portrait Gallery’s website suggests that they “can be interpreted as: (left) 'She gives and does not expect'; (right) 'She can but does not take revenge', and (bottom right) 'In giving back she increases (?)'.” Blanchett’s Elizabeth does not forgive Robert; although she does not have him killed or charged with treason for his association with the conspiracy against her, surely excising him from her personal life and then requiring him to remain at court constitutes some form of “revenge.” As we can see from the

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\(^{11}\) Elizabeth Pomeroy, however, states that the Latin words on the painting are “now so fragmentary as to be out of reach” (64), which reiterates how our construction of Elizabeth continues.
way Elizabeth handles Robert and the conspirators, the Armada gown’s appropriation makes Elizabeth’s transformation seem like an act of war necessary to preserve both the state and her life.

Early in the film, Elizabeth handles military matters poorly. When the French ambassador approaches her at her coronation feast with a marriage proposal from the Duke of Anjou, the sentiment behind her reply is bold, but her phrasing and skittish tone undercut the force of her objection: “It is unfortunate, however, that at this time the Duke’s aunt, Mary of Guise, chooses to garrison Scotland with French troops.” After the Duke of Norfolk, played by Christopher Eccleston, rudely rouses her from bed to attend an emergency council meeting about the new French reinforcements arriving in Scotland, Elizabeth fidgets and squirms in her chair. Despite her reluctance to send troops to Scotland, she does so upon the council’s advice. The result is a disaster; in a shot that begins with a river running red with blood, we see that the English troops, many of whom are just boys, have been slaughtered by Mary of Guise's forces. When she discovers the battle’s outcome, Elizabeth storms away from her attendants and ends up kneeling before the only portrait actually shown in the film, a portrait of Henry VIII in the style of Holbein, sobbing that her “father would never have made such a mistake.” By the end of the film, however, Elizabeth makes the decisions that she knows will result in violence with confidence, even calculation. When Sir Francis Walsingham, played by Geoffrey Rush, alerts Elizabeth to the plot against her life, he reminds her that if Norfolk signs particular documents the duke will have committed treason. Gravely and steadily, she looks up at him and replies, “Then let him sign it. And let it all be done.” In the end, Norfolk and everyone else associated with the conspiracy are murdered by Walsingham’s men or executed for treason, with the

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12 It seems only natural to refer to the queen’s lover by his first name. First, it hardly seems appropriate to privilege him by calling him “Dudley” or “Leicester” when I refer to God’s Anointed Sovereign by her first name. Second, it is not exactly clear in the film when and if he becomes an earl.
exception of Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester. As Elizabeth’s lover, even Robert’s loose association with the conspiracy forces her to recognize the dangers inherent in choosing the desires of her private body over the duties of her public body. Thus, appropriating the Armada gown reiterates that her transformation was a defensive strategy designed to protect her body politic.

While criticizing the license with which Kapur interprets the relationship between Elizabeth and Robert in her review of the film for the American Historical Association’s online journal Perspectives, Carole Levin illustrates that Elizabeth’s private desire for Robert is a problem in the film precisely because she cannot keep it private:

The film’s prime plot device—the romance between Robert Dudley (well played by Joseph Fiennes) and Elizabeth just reinforces the idea of her as a very weak and flighty character who often showed terrible judgment. She sleeps with Dudley where all her ladies-in-waiting could see her; later they have a lover’s spat in front of her court and the French ambassador. (emphasis added)

The problem, then, is not that the queen has private desires and emotions, but that showing them harms her reputation and potentially threatens the stability of her throne. William Cecil, played by Richard Attenborough, puts it best: “Secrets, madam? You have no secrets. The world knows that Lord Robert visits your chambers at night and that you...fornicate with him. It is even said that you already carry his child.” Here Cecil, who has pressured Elizabeth to marry either Philip I or the Duke of Anjou and provide the nation with an heir, voices the anxiety that privileging the queen’s private body over her public one will together result in an undesirable

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13 It is important to note that Robert’s involvement in the plot, though unclearly defined, is in any case very historically unlikely. In the Perspectives review, Carole Levin writes, “Whatever Dudley’s shortcomings, he would never have been involved in a plot of treason against her.”

14 Levin also cites part of this passage, though for a different reason.
heir and unstable succession. He has already asked Elizabeth's maids to show him her sheets each morning so that he can keep track of her “proper functions”: “Her Majesty’s body and person are no longer her own property—they belong to the state.” As we can see from her love scene with Robert on the night of her coronation, however, Elizabeth refuses to reject her private body simply because she now houses the public body of the monarch. Before she becomes queen, she and Robert chuckle over the Spanish ambassador’s divulgence that if she accepts the “enraptured” Philip’s marriage proposal, the king “would not expect to share [her] bed more than two or three times a year.” This Elizabeth finds such an arrangement laughable and cannot imagine that her private and public selves will be in conflict once she becomes queen. Despite Robert’s musing that he may be “nothing” to her when she takes the throne, Elizabeth clearly sees their relationship continuing: “How could you ever be nothing to me? Robert, you know you’re everything to me.” Her statement foreshadows the end of the film when Robert, the source of the conflict between the queen's two bodies, becomes the impetus for that conflict's resolution.

In Kapur's film, Robert's betrayal of Elizabeth as monarch is inextricably linked to his betrayal of her private body. First, he keeps his marriage a secret; since the film makes it clear that they are lovers and he has also asked her to marry him, such a secret becomes an intimate and significant betrayal. Since she refuses to see Robert in private after finding out about his marriage, his only chance to speak to her about it is when they are dancing at court. He warns her that his enemies are trying to undermine his influence because they know he is “everything” to her, tells her that he “was afraid of losing her because [he] was not free,” and urges her to remember their private relationship: “For God's sake, you are still my Elizabeth.” She becomes angry and declares, “I am not your Elizabeth! I am no man’s Elizabeth, and if you think to rule,
you are mistaken.” She then turns to the crowd and bellows, “I will have one mistress here … and no master.” Later, because Elizabeth is rejecting him, he has role-playing sex with one of her ladies, who has stolen one of the queen's gowns for the occasion. "Say it," he whispers. “Say you're my Elizabeth.” Their encounter ends abruptly when the woman begins screaming; when she "becomes" the queen in order to fulfill Robert's fantasy as well as own her desires, she assumes the monarch's risk to her private body and ultimately dies because the dress, a gift from Mary of Guise, is poisoned.

Robert compounds his infidelity to Elizabeth by supporting Philip II’s marriage proposal. Bishop Alvaro de la Quadra, the Spanish ambassador played by James Frain, tells Dudley that only Philip can protect Elizabeth from the Pope’s plot against her and urges him to convince Elizabeth that marrying Philip is her only option for survival: “She will be dead soon enough, perhaps even at Norfolk’s hand, if you do not help her.” The pope has sent letters to secret Catholics in England urging them to kill Elizabeth and afterwards support the Duke of Norfolk and Mary of Scotland, whom he urges to marry and return England to the Catholic Church. Therefore, Robert asks Elizabeth to consider the very proposal of marriage from Philip that they had laughed over at the beginning of the film. Because Robert in effect proposes that he share Elizabeth with the King of Spain, Elizabeth ignores his warning of impending danger: “You love me so much you would have me be your whore?” When he begs her, “Save some part of us,” she replies, “You may make whores out of my ladies, but you shall not make one of me.” At the film’s end, Robert waits for Walsingham's men to arrest or kill him, which seems a bit confusing given that no clear evidence implicates Robert in the conspiracy and he has tried to warn Elizabeth of the plot against her. Elizabeth looks through letters found in the possession of the Pope’s assassin, but we cannot be certain that any of those letters are for Robert.
Walsingham mentions Robert’s name along with others he has presumably learned from the assassin, but as Elizabeth points out, “A man would confess to anything under torture.” Robert’s ambiguous moral status, which seems like a major flaw in the film, therefore becomes one of the film’s strengths by equating Robert's betrayal of Elizabeth's private body with treason against the body politic. Ultimately Elizabeth resolves the conflict between her two bodies by rejecting her sexual, private self and constructing a new public identity as the Virgin Queen. By specifically giving us the Armada icon, Kapur gives us an Elizabeth that he juxtaposes with the film’s other warrior queen, Mary of Guise.

The Armada portrait evokes Elizabeth the warrior queen via the speech she may have given at Tilbury at the end of the Armada crisis. According to versions of the speech that filtered into cultural memory, after declaring her intent to ride into battle with her soldiers, Elizabeth said, “I know I have the body of a weak and feeble woman, but I have the heart and stomach of a king” (Teague 67). Even though such a memory of Elizabeth as an Amazon on horseback “is false” as Frances Teague points out, it is nevertheless embedded within the layers of the Armada icon; in the film, however, it is first embodied through Mary of Guise. We first see Mary of Guise wearing an armored breastplate and dismounting from her horse to survey her troops’ victory over the English. Even in this short scene, she comes across as both fierce and compassionate when she stops one of her soldiers from killing a wounded English boy. Mary gently wipes the boy’s wounds with a piece of blue cloth and gives it to the boy: “Go back to England and take this to your queen.” She turns to her troops with orders to “make sure he remains alive,” and orders them to “Tell that bastard Queen not to send children to fight Mary of Guise!” Mary leaves the boy alive to remind Elizabeth of her mistake, a strategy Elizabeth

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15 In “Queen Elizabeth in Her Speeches,” Frances Teague discusses the difficulty in determining if Elizabeth even gave this speech, and if so, what she actually said (67).
echoes at the film’s end. When Walsingham insists that Robert “must be made example of” because of his treachery, Elizabeth says that his fate will be to serve as an example not to the public, but to her: “He shall be kept alive to always remind me of how close I came to danger.” In an interesting twist, it was just after the Armada’s defeat that the real Elizabeth actually lost Robert; he died in September 1588 (Williams 210). Ultimately, Elizabeth supplants Mary as the film’s warrior queen because she, unlike Mary, rejects her sexuality. Mary unwisely allows her private desires to compromise her judgment by sleeping with Walsingham, who murders her and leaves her to be found naked in bed.

Of course, the Armada gown helps to illustrate the film’s manipulation of time, particularly because the portrait marks a moment in the production of Elizabeth’s iconography when her power is literally brought to the forefront. As Roy Strong explains, “In the ‘Sieve’ portraits England is depicted glowing mysteriously on a globe in the background behind the Queen; in the ‘Armada’ portrait that globe is brought forward and she holds it; in the ‘Ditchley’ portrait Queen, crown and Island become one. Elizabeth is England, woman and kingdom are interchangeable” (Strong, Gloriana 136). Thus, the last scene’s illusion projects the progression from Elizabeth as Queen and defender of England to Elizabeth as England. Kapur has manipulated time throughout the film to great effect; Walker calls the statue scene, which comes just before Elizabeth’s transformation, “the film’s most unlikely moment and its most logical”:

Something must be offered to the audience to make Elizabeth’s transformation, still a work in progress even in the early 1590s, seem believable in 1563. For all its political and theological absurdity, the scene has tremendous power and conveys in mere seconds the assessment, decision, struggle, and commitment that it took Elizabeth Tudor a life-time to achieve. (Walker 190-1)
The statue scene prepares us for her transformation, which begins with a close-up of Elizabeth’s blank and pale face as her ladies cut off all her hair and begin applying thick, white makeup to her hands. This sequence is perhaps the film’s best example of Kapur’s intention “to bring the past back to life somehow, to render it immediate and contemporary in a visceral, emotional way” in order to convey some sort of truth about Elizabeth (“Like a Virgin”). Through a quick montage of flashbacks, scenes of anxiety and danger are juxtaposed with scenes of safety and joy with Robert. We see sharp cuts of her precarious journey to the throne and uncertain early reign, all shot in dark lighting; then, we see slightly longer, tender images of Elizabeth and Robert dancing, while bathed in golden light. Her hands, so celebrated in her portraits, grasp her hair as it falls. Throughout this process, she appears sad but in control of her emotions.

Finally, Elizabeth enters a room filled with courtiers and she declares to Cecil, now Lord Burleigh, that she is “married—to England.” At the beginning of the film, Mary begs Elizabeth not to "take away from the people the consolations of the Blessed Virgin, their Holy Mother" and ironically, that is exactly what she does. As Walker writes, “Cate and Kapur have spent 120 minutes pushing that image to the side, so that we now may see it finally, as newly, painfully, and deliberately minted identity, the image that will become the icon of Elizabeth I” (191). Renee Pigeon, on the other hand, bemoans the “diminished image of the queen [the film] ultimately offers” (15):

Her choice is not an astute political strategy but a sacrifice that arises from her own emotional pain, and one that can hardly even be characterized as a choice, given her limited alternatives as the film presents them. While the final scene shows Elizabeth’s court—Walsingham last of all—kneeling in awe at her
metamorphosis, the film gives us an Elizabeth who is diminished by her entrapment inside an inescapable role. (Pigeon 18)

For Pigeon, Kapur ruins his biopic of Elizabeth with the “conventionality” of a love plot that engages the memory of an Elizabeth that “achieved […] ultimate power by giving up her ‘natural’ destiny as a woman.” She writes: “Her dependence on Lord Robert Dudley is emphasized not only through the dialogue …but also through an insistent, even heavy-handed use of shot/reverse-shots that show Elizabeth looking to him for approval, and make her the object of his gaze” (15). Granted, Kapur uses this technique at the beginning of the film; that makes it all the more significant when he reverses its meaning in the final scene. As Elizabeth walks by Robert, the camera looks down upon him. He looks up at her with utter sorrow on his face, but far from “looking to him for approval,” she does not acknowledge him. She seats herself on the throne, which does not display her motto “Semper Eadem,” or “Always the Same,” but the phrase “Video et Taceo”—“I see all and say nothing.” Thus, she embraces both her role as the looker and the object of everyone’s gaze.

Considering that Kapur’s appropriation of the Armada gown shows how he can break the heritage film’s rules, perhaps we should revisit the significance of the Coronation portrait. Even in the example of how accurately he can capture a piece of history, he presents an image with layers of fictions. There are at least two surviving images of Elizabeth in her Coronation robes, both painted c. 1600. The image most people associate with the Coronation is an unattributed

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16 While she criticizes the film in her essay “‘No Man’s Elizabeth’: The Virgin Queen in Recent Films” in 2001’s Retroversions as “remarkably conventional” and a “hodgepodge of film genres” including the woman’s film, conspiracy thriller, and horror film (20-21), she nevertheless acknowledges that Kapur and his colleagues are trying to differentiate their film from its recent predecessors: “Clearly, they saw their film as a challenge to the romanticizing of the past commonly attributed to heritage cinema, particularly the maligned Merchant-Ivory films” (15).

17 McKechnie mentions this, but stops her translation at “I see” (232).
painting on a wood panel, which art historian Janet Arnold asserts is a copy of a lost original painted in 1559. Since this and one other \(^{18}\) commemoration of her coronation date so close to her death in 1603, Strong also notes the possibility that the image “could have played a part in the Queen’s funeral ceremonies, celebrating as it were her second coronation in heaven” (163). The film, therefore, reproduces a source with a lost source, which serves as an example of how little access we have to any sort of “truth” about Elizabeth. Furthermore, the portrait, like the “heritage film,” borrows the visual style of another era to imply its subject’s authenticity and authority: “The queen’s “remote and expressionless mask with its calm and never-ending vision hearkens back to the artistic tradition of the High Middle Ages, in which royal portraiture \(^{19}\) invoked the style of holy images, thus conveying the Divine Right of the monarch” (Strong, \textit{Gloriana} 37-8). Ironically, the authentic source is one concerned with portraying its subject’s authenticity.

The gown in the final scene is not only an illusion, but a fiction that creates its meaning by evoking and then rejecting the Ditchley portrait gown in favor of the one from the Armada portrait. The Ditchley dress probably was not real, as Walker notes: “Sir Roy Strong and a team at the Victoria and Albert tried to reproduce the dress of the Ditchley portrait and found it impossible to make real fabric sustain the weight of all those jewels” (Walker 188, note 14 on 224). Perhaps the Elizabeth icon, like the Ditchley gown, cannot withstand the weight added to it over time; Kapur’s innovative film helps “disengage us from a public sphere of memory so layered with Elisabeths that the icon has all but lost its power” (Walker 190). Like the portraits

\(^{18}\) Besides the anonymous wood panel, a Hilliard miniature is still extant. Because of its similarity to images of Elizabeth created for official use, particularly an “illuminated initial from the indenture for the establishment of the Poor Knights of Windsor” (\textit{Gloriana} 56), Strong suggests Hilliard’s miniature may be a copy of a yet another lost portrait created in 1559 by Levina Teerlinc, one of the queen’s early limners (\textit{Gloriana} 163).

\(^{19}\) The image of Richard II in Westminster Abbey, although a problematic allusion for Elizabeth’s government, looks like a probable influence on her coronation portrait.
from which it draws, the film sacrifices “authenticity” to convey a carefully-managed interpretation of the queen. In the screens of epilogue, viewers are told that Elizabeth “never saw Dudley in private again” and that “some say she died with his name upon her lips.” That claim is followed immediately with a statement about her success as a ruler: “at the time of her death, England was one of the richest and most prosperous countries in the world” and that “her reign was called The Golden Age.” This Elizabeth’s success comes as a direct result of giving up romantic love in order to assume her iconographic identity and become an astute politician.

While my goal is not to enumerate the film’s historical inaccuracies, I would be remiss in pointing out that this claim is untrue. The Queen and Robert Dudley enjoyed a close relationship until his death in 1588; Robert’s stepson the Earl of Essex, however, was eventually executed for treason (Weir 396, 467). The claim that Walsingham became her closest advisor also stretches widely accepted versions of history. Most historians would concur that Walsingham was an important advisor to the queen, but Dudley, Cecil, and others were just as important. The point, however, is that Kapur seems to delight in anachronism, conflation, and even untruth because they code his film as “different”:

What Kapur does is to sacrifice historical veracity for cultural and political verity. The people of Elizabeth’s England were as unprepared for an unmarried female monarch as contemporary audiences are for a screen Elizabeth who looks nothing like Bette Davis or Dame Judi Dench in *Shakespeare in Love.* The necessary sense of otherness comes forcefully across because our expectations are violated rather than met. (Walker 190)

Kapur leaves us with the Elizabeth we think we know, but his methods of doing so reiterate her ultimate unknowability within the layers of the iconography she left behind. By using costumes
to set up a frame that seems “accurate” but is ultimately an illusion, Kapur rejects the visual conventions associated with “heritage cinema” that equate aesthetics with authenticity.
CHAPTER 3

CLOAKS, PEARLS, AND CONSTRUCTED IDENTITIES: RALIEGH AND ELIZABETH IN

THE VIRGIN QUEEN

After examining Elizabeth and its innovative response to the heritage film debate, what can we gain by studying the way in which an older film like Henry Koster’s The Virgin Queen uses costumes? As a Hollywood technicolor film that was not released in Britain, how does it fit into this discussion? Since the heritage debate has forced most critics to acknowledge the demands that narrative places on both written and visual history, we may shift our focus from judging a film’s quality based on its historical accuracy to examining the methods it uses to interpret history. Freeing The Virgin Queen from the infallibility of written history and the derision associated with costume drama gives us a chance to explore its creative use of folklore and Elizabethan iconography to underscore the theme of “refashioning”20 in the film. In The Virgin Queen, clothing and jewelry are more than just tools to evoke an “authentic” Renaissance aesthetic; instead, the ways in which they reflect and distort history link Walter Raleigh, played by Richard Todd, and Queen Elizabeth I, played by Bette Davis, and drive the film’s interpretation of their relationship as a power struggle that Elizabeth ultimately loses.

Raleigh’s clothing functions as a symbol of his ambition. In the film’s opening scene, he appears in a plain white shirt and simple dark blue breeches, attire suitable for a man from “an ancient but only moderately prosperous Devonshire family” (May 1). When he sees an

20 I have based my understanding of “refashioning” on the work of Ann Rosalind Jones and Peter Stallybrass in Renaissance Clothing and the Materials of Memory.
opportunity to impress an important political figure, however, he does not hesitate to soil his modest clothing. While on urgent business for the queen, the Earl of Leicester’s carriage gets stuck in a muddy, rutted road on a stormy night. When Leicester reaches a nearby inn to ask for help, the men inside will not assist him until Raleigh, who recognizes the earl, wins a swordfight with their leader. As Raleigh stands rain-soaked and muddy beside the newly-liberated coach, Leicester tries to pay him for his help, but Raleigh refuses: “To serve my queen is reward enough.” Doubly impressed upon finding out that the young man is the son of an old friend, Leicester asks if Raleigh knows him. When Raleigh says he does not, Leicester reveals his identity as one of England’s most powerful men and invites Raleigh to visit him in three days at Whitehall Palace. Raleigh’s Irish sidekick, Lord Derry, chastises him for turning down the gold, but Raleigh explains, “One small purse of gold? My hopes soar higher than that.” In the film’s first few minutes, then, Raleigh’s willingness to get himself dirty for his ambition seems not only politically savvy, but charming.

In the next scene, Leicester discovers Raleigh’s deception, but still consents to help him. During their meeting, Raleigh refuses Leicester’s offers to help advance his career, asking instead for a chance to meet the queen. As Raleigh talks about the new kinds of ships and treasure-seeking ventures he plans to propose to Elizabeth, Leicester asks Raleigh if he recognized him that night at the inn. Raleigh confesses his lie, but uses the language of an adventurer to explain it as simply taking advantage of providence: “Sometimes a man must catch the nearest wave.” Signaling that he will arrange the introduction, Leicester asks Raleigh if the clothes he wears are the best he has and offers to get him something more suitable. Raleigh refuses this kindness, answering, “I’ll accept only what I’ve asked.” He insists his refusal comes from “pride,” not the “stubbornness” Leicester attributes to Devon men. Here
Raleigh’s pride seems noble and honorable, his deception of Leicester excusable. He desires the chance to win for himself prestige and wealth, and asks only for the opportunity to prove his worth. Thus we see that while Raleigh is willing to manipulate events in his favor, he draws the line at accepting material goods from Leicester because the clothes would serve as a tangible reminder that he deceived the earl.

When Raleigh cites pride as his excuse for turning down Leicester’s offer of clothes, he establishes clothing as the barometer of his honor. At the end of their meeting, Leicester warns him, “God help your pride if you find favor with the queen.” Through Raleigh’s relationship with clothing as his career at court progresses, the makers of The Virgin Queen not only sketch Raleigh’s character, but also portray Elizabeth as the one responsible for forcing him to “refashion” himself. At this early stage in the film, however, rather than allow anyone to help fashion his image, he uses his quick wit to procure the clothes he needs. In the scene after the Leicester meeting, we see Raleigh acquiring his legendary cloak, the film’s primary symbol of his ambition. Even though it has been made specifically for the French ambassador, Raleigh intimidates a tailor into hiring it out. After Raleigh’s diatribe about the French ambassador’s plot “to discredit the entire tailoring trade of London” by having a French tailor secretly damage the beautiful cloak, the tailor has no choice but to let Raleigh rent it in spite of his fear that “something might happen to it.” By the scene’s end, Raleigh has used his quick wit and rhetorical skills to secure an official identity on his own terms.

When Raleigh comes to court, the regular courtiers grouped around the French ambassador notice him and his cloak at once, remarking that the cloak is “too fine for the rest of him.” Here, we should notice that Raleigh retains the other garments he wears during his meeting with Leicester, adding only an outer layer of clothing to gain admission to court. In
effect, he shows that he has only changed on the surface and he remains the same “Devon man” beneath his court attire. A follower of Sir Christopher Hatton approaches him, starts touching the cloak, and asks him where he got it; Raleigh says, “I took it from the corpse of a fellow I stabbed to death for pawing at me.” Removing his hands, the man replies that Raleigh “certainly washed it well,” to which Raleigh answers that, on the contrary, “the fellow was bloodless—like you.” Raleigh again shows himself to be brash, quick-witted, and unwilling to tolerate insults. He wears the cloak of a powerful man, which both helps shield his modest birth from notice and draws the attention of future rivals. His encounter with Hatton’s friend, however, attracts Beth Throckmorton’s notice, who goes rushing after him after he strides away from the confrontation.

As Beth, played by Joan Collins, and Raleigh begin to flirt, the film’s second symbol makes its first appearance. Cautioning him to be careful what he says and to whom he speaks, Beth uses her pearl necklace to teach Raleigh the “rules” of court etiquette. As she describes each of her tips for surviving in Elizabeth’s court, she fingers a different pearl in her long necklace, almost as though she were counting off beads in a rosary. Pearls, of course, are a valuable gem and a symbol of virginity, and they have become linked with images of Elizabeth as the icon of the Virgin Queen. Their beauty, however, is created when an irritant penetrates the shell of certain mollusks. Thus, pearls are created by a creature trying to protect itself; in this sense, they are not unlike the Virgin Queen who wears them. Suddenly startled by a loud thumping noise, Beth breaks the chain of pearls, and the camera follows them as they scatter to the floor. Raleigh bends down to pick up Elizabeth Throckmorton’s pearls, but seconds later finds himself looking up into the face of Elizabeth the Queen. He immediately shifts his attention from one Elizabeth to the other, establishing the conflict between his political devotion to the queen and his private desire for a vivacious young woman.
In his first encounter with Elizabeth, Raleigh uses the material object of his court entrance as a “stepping stone” toward furthering his ambition. In the famous but probably apocryphal incident that first appears in Thomas Fuller’s writing (Greenblatt 58), Elizabeth pauses for a moment as she encounters a puddle. Raleigh quickly whips off his fine cloak and spreads it onto the puddle before her. The queen’s face shows her amusement and approval as he takes her arm and she jauntily steps on the cloak. Just before she gets into her coach, she complains of the cold, and Sir Christopher Hatton rushes to fasten his own cloak around her shoulders. She smiles as she touches it: “Sable, the finest sable. Much too fine to waste on a mere queen.” Throwing the sable to the ground, she climbs into her carriage. Thus, while Raleigh’s straightforward manner and plain speech impress the queen, his willingness to sacrifice for her, shown when he does not hesitate to ruin such an elegant piece of clothing, becomes the stuff of legend. Completing its circulation in the love triangle, the cloak passes back into Beth’s hands. When she returns it to him after his dinner with Elizabeth, he comments gruffly that it is “very muddy.” “Oh,” she replies, “but it is very famous.” Using the cloak as the symbol of Raleigh’s ambition not only underscores his desire for fame, but also portrays Elizabeth as one who prizes displays of submission in the men who impress her. Furthermore, since we generally do not wear cloaks anymore, Raleigh’s cloak has an archaic connotation; no matter how fine it is, he must cast it off if he truly wants to leave the Old World for the New World.

Raleigh’s dinner with the queen does not seem quite as successful as their first meeting, but it is important because it establishes the dynamic between them. Again, his speech is fairly straightforward, and he flatters her only when her words demand it. He tells her outright that she is the next “citadel” he wishes to assault and reveals his aspirations of building ships to sail to the
New World in search of treasure. Angered by his bluntness, she violently throws the contents of her goblet onto his plain doublet. His chest dripping, Raleigh commits a serious breach of court etiquette by turning his back on the queen and starting to leave the room. She reprimands him, and to test her control over him, orders him to refill her cup. She smiles as he complies, pleased at how her power makes the confident man submit. Again, Raleigh’s clothing bears the mark of his submission to the queen, but this time the stain is inflicted upon him, not by him. In this encounter, Elizabeth shows that she can sully him if she wants, for to get what he wants, he must endure her temper.

Elizabeth marks Raleigh as her own by appointing him Captain of her personal guard. His uniform, colored bright scarlet and black, provides the first occasion for Beth to show her contempt for Raleigh’s new relationship with Elizabeth. Here red and black represent passion and death, foreshadowing the deadly situation that Raleigh’s passions will get him into. When Beth sees him wearing it after the news of his preferment has begun to circulate, she publicly mocks him during his inspection of his new guards. His preoccupation with the small faults in their uniforms seems almost silly: he orders that a guard with a small rip in his sleeve have it mended by nightfall and then stops to straighten the feather in another guard’s cap. As he adjusts the feather, Beth calls attention to his new status and fine new garments: “Even birds of fine plumage have trouble with their feathers, Captain.” She proclaims her difference from the queen, making a comment about how it is a shame he wears no fine cloak to help her as she jumps over a puddle. As Beth shows us, wearing a form of Elizabeth’s livery is a dangerous step toward becoming one of the queen’s emasculated “lap-dogs.” Through Captain Raleigh’s attention to relatively inconsequential matters of dress, we see him becoming part of a court culture over-concerned with appearances.
Raleigh, however, soon tries to defy such categorization by refusing to submit quietly to the queen’s commands. Hatton tells Elizabeth during a meeting of advisors that an Irishman and friend of Raleigh’s, Lord Derry, is serving on her personal guard. Since England is at war with Ireland, Elizabeth furiously orders Raleigh to imprison Derry in the Tower. A tremendous argument ensues, and Raleigh walks out on the meeting without Elizabeth’s permission. In this scene, his clothing appears a bit finer, but hardly as extravagant as the description Stephen Greenblatt gives of Raleigh’s clothing during his period as a favorite:

There was wild talk about the extravagance of his dress—jewels in his shoes worth 6,600 gold pieces, a suit adorned with 60,000 pounds of precious gems. And indeed the magnificence of his clothing is borne out by the portraits of this period such as the lovely miniature by Nicholas Hilliard, depicting Ralegh in a jewel-studded cap and a collar edged with beautiful lace. (75)

The makers of *The Virgin Queen* could choose to emphasize Raleigh’s increased status by putting him in more luxurious costumes, like the pink, pearl-studded garment Hatton wears in the cloak scene. Instead, they keep him in the dark black or blue tones he wears at the film’s beginning and simply increase the quality of the fabric and construction of the costume. Blue represents his loyalty, both to Elizabeth and his friend Derry. Again, black stands for the serious implications of refusing to compromise that loyalty as he negotiates dangerous court politics. Therefore, when Elizabeth storms after Raleigh and they continue yelling at each other in the hall, the viewer sees Raleigh as a principled man who values his beliefs more than the court’s superficial politics. Elizabeth rages at him to leave her house, and obviously disturbed by his unrepentant departure, she remains in the hall with the advisors who have followed her. Wearing a gown that looks a great deal like that of her Armada portrait, she grabs her waist-length ropes
of pearls and fidgets with them as she reminds them of her power: “Little men, little men, you know what you were before I made you what you are. Do not gape so! By the rood, I’ll turn you all out of doors!” Drawing attention to her jewelry at this moment works on several levels. Since the abundance of pearls not only displays her great wealth and status, but also symbolizes her virginity, this agitated, self-conscious gesture during such a reprimand underscores the connection between her decision to remain unmarried and the preservation of her royal sovereignty. Earlier, Beth’s string of pearls had broken, foreshadowing the loss of her virginity in her secret marriage to Raleigh. Elizabeth may tug at her pearls, but the string holds. Her anxiety, however, reveals that even supreme power cannot give her complete personal security, especially emotional security.

Elizabeth also uses pearls as a metaphor for Raleigh when revealing her plan to prevent his New World voyage. At this point in the film, Raleigh has already returned to Elizabeth’s favor but seems to have lost Beth, whom he married in secret when he thought he was in disgrace with the queen. When Beth finds out her new husband has been bribed back into favor by the promise of only one ship and also has chosen not to tell the queen of their marriage, she declares that she is not his wife, and they part. After their separation, we should note that Beth next appears in a dress of black and white---the queen’s personal colors (Strong 21). Yet, I would argue that Beth wears black and white not to show her allegiance to her sovereign, but to reflect a mixture of wedding and mourning. It also serves to remind to Beth and Raleigh that they each belong to the queen. When Elizabeth, who is reclining on a couch as Beth and the other ladies remove her jewelry, mentions that she has decided against allowing Raleigh to sail, Beth is so shocked that she drops the pearl necklace she has just unfastened from around Elizabeth’s neck. With a pointed glance, the queen reprimands Beth for her clumsiness: “Take
care how you treat your queen’s possessions.” Here we see that Elizabeth retains control over her subjects. She has already caused Beth to lose her hold on Raleigh once. And again, the queen’s pearls do not scatter as Beth’s did at the beginning of the film. As Beth drops these pearls, we are reminded that her virginity is gone, especially when Elizabeth comments on Beth’s pallor and fainting fit in chapel. The scene closes with Elizabeth announcing that the ladies will be sent to the French court for two years; the camera pauses on Beth, the only one of the ladies not chattering excitedly, and the only one of the ladies wearing a black and white gown.

While Raleigh’s costuming portrays Elizabeth’s desire to control and refashion her court’s bright young men, the contrast of her clothing with Beth Throckmorton’s underscores the film’s interpretation of Elizabeth’s sexuality. Unlike Kapur’s Queen, *The Virgin Queen’s* Elizabeth is an actual virgin. She may demand flattery from men, but words are all she wants; in fact, she shrinks from physical intimacy. For example, when she and Raleigh reconcile, she says, “Kiss me, Walter,” but when he leans in to kiss her lips, she quickly offers him her hand instead. The film does not appropriate accounts of Elizabeth’s behavior that make her seem sexually ridiculous, such as one ambassador’s account in which she flashed her breasts at him in a suggestive gown (Weir 431). Instead, this Elizabeth’s clothing helps to confine her woman’s body. *The Virgin Queen* juxtaposes the aging queen and beautiful ingénue by costuming Collins’s Beth in gowns influenced by 1950s fashion and modifying the dresses of Davis’s Elizabeth to conform to flawed twentieth-century notions of modesty in Renaissance clothing. Most of Davis’s costumes are not exact copies of gowns from the real queen’s surviving later portraits, but as we see in costume historian Edward Maeder’s description, they are very similar: “Davis was dressed in elaborately wired and starched lace collars, a long-waisted, rigid bodice,
and a plate-shaped farthingale” (Maeder 40). Maeder also points out that Collins’s clothes are “basically contemporary” and “lack the stiffness that is present in Davis’s costume” (40). Collins’s most famous gown in the film is “of gray wool, a fabric of great popularity in the 1950s. The sleeves and the skirt are accurate, but the shaping over the chest is strictly 1954—the lifted and separated look, the result of the most recently developed bras” (40). Davis and Collins’s costumes, then, both feature unnatural, constructed bustlines that represent their characters’ personalities. Collins’s bustline, although molded into unrealistic perkiness, either prominently displays her cleavage or covers her breasts with soft-looking fabrics, highlighting her sensuality. By using costumes that blend Renaissance style and 1950s fashion, Collins’s Beth embodies both the nostalgia for the past and mid-twentieth century ideals of beauty. With Davis, on the other hand, the costume designers adjust a feature of Elizabethan fashion in order to make her seem old and prudish. While the basic construction of Davis’s gowns appears more or less authentic, the tops of the bodices are usually raised to prevent her cleavage from showing, even though the real queen wore a virgin’s low-cut gowns until her death at age seventy (Weir 431). The more modest bodices, however, make this Elizabeth appear covered, rigid, and untouchable; Davis’s breasts and heart seem enclosed in a flat, armored breastplate. Noticeable cleavage, no matter how authentic, would seem incongruous with Elizabeth’s position as an almost asexual object; a covered bosom helps a film audience to interpret Elizabeth as a bitter spinster who must guard her emotions.

The film’s use of wigs also helps contrast Beth’s youthful sexuality with Elizabeth’s aging body. According to Katherine Annas, costumers again incorporated twentieth-century trends into Beth’s wigs while stripping Elizabeth of femininity by taking away her hair. Davis had already shocked Hollywood in 1939’s The Private Lives of Elizabeth and Essex, a
technicolor film helmed by the future *Casablanca* director Michael Curtiz, when she “became the first major female star to allow her glamour image to be sacrificed totally for the sake of a character” (Annas 67). At thirty years old, she “suggested that makeup artist Perc Westmore shave off her eyebrows and shave back her hairline several inches in order to make her look more exactly like the aged, bald queen, who was in her mid-sixties and wore red wigs and heavy white lead makeup at the time of the events depicted” (Annas 67). Davis requested Westmore when making *The Virgin Queen* fifteen years later, and in addition to shaving back her hairline, she “went a step further and insisted on revealing her baldness on screen as a contrast to Joan Collins’s beautiful, young Beth Throckmorton” (67). For the scene in which this confrontation occurs, “Westmore, taking advantage of numerous advances in makeup and wig technologies, devised a thin rubber “bald cap” with white hairs only at the back of the crown” for Elizabeth (67). Once again, Collins’s hairstyle modifies Renaissance style to satisfy a 1950s audience’s perception of beauty: “Collins as Elizabeth’s rival wore 1950s formula glamour makeup and a wig with pseudo-Elizabethan temple rolls combined with 1950s wispy hairline curls and spit-curl bangs, all anchored with copious amounts of hairspray” (67). The contrast between Elizabeth’s baldness and Beth’s abundance of hair reinforces this Elizabeth’s pride in her “spirit,” not her beauty. After removing her nightcap, she says, “Twenty years since, a fever took my hair. Do you think I have ever put myself on the lists against pretty faces and empty heads? I am Elizabeth Tudor. Men have loved me. Not with the dandling love you toss up, white kitten, but men have loved me because I struck sparks from their minds. I matched spirit with spirit.” Thus, even though she displays her vulnerability by exposing her physical flaws, she also refashions those flaws into assets that have helped her rule successfully. Moreover, this incident
in which she reveals the evidence of her age and grotesqueness is the only time we see her actually fashioning herself.

Elizabeth’s physical juxtaposition with Beth in the bald scene also reinforces the film’s interpretation of an important issue during Elizabeth’s reign: her ability to produce an heir. This scene occurs after Raleigh discovers Beth’s pregnancy and they reconcile. The couple compounds their crimes by planning to smuggle Beth aboard Raleigh’s ship, ignore Elizabeth’s orders to bring the ship to London, and sail straight to the New World. Elizabeth, of course, finds out about the marriage and orders that Raleigh and Beth both be imprisoned and executed. In this scene, Beth has skirted her captors and slipped into the sleeping queen’s bedchamber to plead for Raleigh’s life, admitting her pregnancy only when Elizabeth affirms that they both will be executed. Beth engages in her own power struggle with the queen: “Even the Queen of England cannot send me to that death on Wednesday next. You will have to wait some months, Your Majesty. Such is the law . . . . Two are past, seven are yet to go. It is a law older than the Tudors.” Beth means, of course, the law prohibiting the execution of pregnant women. After Elizabeth’s speech about the noble, non-physical love men have for her, Beth implies that Raleigh’s love for her is greater: “But it is I who carry his child.” Using pregnancy as the measure of love only angers Elizabeth: “Be very proud. When I was eighteen, my physicians told me I could never bear a child. I am glad. England was child enough for me. Take this strumpet away! Take her away! Take her away!” The tone in the queen’s voice suggests that while she embraces her role as mother of her country, her feelings about her role as the Virgin Queen are complicated. This Elizabeth also attributes her single state to a fertility problem and then admits she knew about it before taking the throne. Therefore, in The Virgin Queen,
Elizabeth became queen knowing that she could not provide the country with an heir. Like Raleigh, this Elizabeth will deceive for the sake of her ambition.

In the film’s penultimate scene, Elizabeth visits Raleigh in the Tower. He wears a simple dark shirt with no doublet, which signifies his humbled status and impending death, and the queen’s bright red gown represents the blood she has ordered to be spilled. As soon as she enters, she berates him about Beth and his plan to steal the ship. He tries to convince her to let the ship’s navigator make the voyage in his place: “He’ll bring back the riches I would have brought for you. He’ll claim that share of the world this little island needs!” With a smirk, Elizabeth replies, “I thought to find you thinking only of Beth Throckmorton.” Raleigh insists that the only chance his wife, who by law cannot be executed until her child is born, has of surviving is for a ship to return with enough gold to make Elizabeth forget “a dead man whose eye wandered.” When Raleigh realizes that she will not listen to his pleas for the ship or for Beth, he orders her out of the cell. She takes a few angry steps, but turns around, her voice softening: “Walter, Walter, I needed you, and you betrayed me.” His voice strong and clear, he replies, “I loved you, madam. I loved you as a man loves a great queen, and it’s that love you betrayed!” Her voice still soft and hurt, she answers, “But I’m also a woman, a woman not too young.” He drops to one knee and kisses her hand, and she turns to leave the cell. She stops in the hallway, though, and returns, ordering him to make the voyage: “I will not be served by underlings. This does not mean I forgive you or the slut you married. But I want the world you promised me. And I don’t want to dream of a brat crying as I did last night. I was once a brat crying because of the headsman’s axe. Those cargoes you bring back had best be rich and rich and rich!” This Elizabeth, then, has been affected by Raleigh’s rhetoric, even if she must excuse her decision by emphasizing the potential financial advantages of the voyage. Thus, while the
hero is saved, his salvation comes from his own merit rather than Elizabeth’s beneficence. Her
decision seems to be the inevitable result of effective rhetoric by a persuasive man who presents
himself as both principled and ambitious.

In most of the film, Raleigh’s clothes say as much about Elizabeth as her own. The
film’s final scene, however, in which Elizabeth again wears the Aramada portrait-inspired gown,
emphasizes her loneliness and duty to the state. We see Leicester entering a room in which the
Queen sits alone, working at a desk. He insists that she look out the window because Raleigh’s
ship is sailing beneath it. She peers through a spyglass and sees Raleigh standing on the deck
with his arms around Beth as they happily gaze out onto the Thames. “Do you think I would
take pleasure in such a sight?” she asks Leicester. He instructs her to raise the glass higher, and
she sees her scarf flying from the mast. She had sent to it to Raleigh with a letter before his
arrest: “Fly it as a symbol of the one you serve.” A strained look crosses her face, and she turns
back toward her desk. “Two months are gone, and seven left. A puking wench and some
waves,” she says, pausing. “I must attend to the business of state.” Leicester bows and retreats
as Elizabeth sits back down at her desk. She writes until the door closes, then sighs dramatically
and props her head on her hand. The camera then shifts to a frontal shot and pans backward,
distorting the image of her bowed head. Placing Elizabeth in the Armada gown as Raleigh sets
sail underscores not only England’s naval glory, but Elizabeth’s single state. Painted to
commemorate England’s victory over the Spanish Armada in 1588, the portrait also evokes a
period in which many realized that the fifty-five year-old queen would never marry and produce
an heir. Therefore, in the film’s final moments, the queen’s clothing juxtaposes her with both
Raleigh and Beth: the aging, single queen is set against the young, pregnant lady, and the female
ruler confined by her state duties is contrasted with the male adventurer setting off on an exciting
new voyage. While Raleigh and Beth sail off in their simple garb, Elizabeth remains alone, clothed in the fussy ruff and long strings of pearls that have become inextricably linked with her image.

Stephen Greenblatt writes that “like the queen, Raleigh was an actor who was thoroughly committed to the role he had fashioned for himself” (58). The Virgin Queen exploits both his skills as an actor and his interest in extravagant clothing to underscore the theme of “refashioning” in the film. By focusing Raleigh’s interest in fine clothing into one incident, however, they use his dress in other scenes to interpret his relationship with Elizabeth and their respective identities. This film portrays Raleigh’s self-fashioning as the inevitable, even heroic, product of the Elizabethan court system. It emphasizes Raleigh’s quick wit and political expediency, characteristics that historians often attribute to Elizabeth when describing her successful reign. Even if it takes deceit and manipulation, he overcomes all the obstacles Elizabeth produces, and his position on the ship foreshadows his exciting role in shaping the New World. True, he flatters the queen often during the film; however, it is usually because she solicits it, and thus his words seem like a chivalrous gift to a lonely older woman. Elizabeth “veers between two of her usual positions, as would-be sentimental heroine and as blocking figure” (Dobson and Watson 281). At the film’s end, she becomes a diminished sort of heroine precisely because she gives up the role of blocking figure. Or rather, she ceases to block Raleigh’s career and love ambitions because his charisma compels her to do so, and she gains our sympathy because she nobly gives up her claim to such a heroic, principled man. In the end, Raleigh gets both his ships and his love. Not only has he has resisted her attempts to refashion him, he is free to pursue his dreams while she must remain behind, trapped by the identity she has constructed for herself. The Virgin Queen’s final image of Elizabeth depicts her as the
portrait icon tending to the business of her country, chastened by Raleigh’s differentiation between love and love for a great queen, and resigned to her lonely destiny.
CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSION

Alas, the natural third chapter to this study cannot yet be written. Shekhar Kapur announced his intention to direct another Elizabeth biopic that, given Elizabeth’s final screen of epilogue, he has appropriately entitled “Elizabeth: The Golden Age.” While details about the picture are still sketchy and it is classified as in currently in “pre-production,” the Internet Movie Database reports that the film will explore the relationship between Elizabeth and Raleigh. Gladiator screenplay writer William Nicholson will join Elizabeth writer Michael Hirst in creating the script; producers Tim Bevan and Eric Fellner have also signed on to the project, with Jonathan Cavendish of Bridget Jones fame replacing Allison Owen. Unfortunately, there is no word yet on who will be the costume designer. The film is tentatively scheduled for release some time in 2006.

The casting, while unconfirmed, is terribly exciting: Jeremy Irons plays Leicester, Clive Owen plays Raleigh, Hugh Dancy plays Essex, and Geoffrey Rush is reportedly back as Walsingham. Although it was originally reported that Blanchett would play Elizabeth again, she refused to confirm the report in an interview at the beginning of September, and so far, she has not publicly stated that she will take the role. Blanchett says, "I'm really good friends with Shekhar Kapur and he's forever saying he's going to do this movie or that movie and I think there was talk about it. There's so much there if it were to happen, but my initial instinct is, why (make
it)?" Since Kapur has already turned Elizabeth into an icon, we must wonder along with Blanchett how he will complicate that depiction of her in the sequel.

If Elizabeth’s aesthetics and inaccuracies responded to a specific cultural moment, I am curious about how they will function now that the moment has changed. It has been eight years since “the landslide election of Tony Blair’s New Labour government in 1997 and the accordant shift in policies and ideologies surrounding cultural production and the projection of the nation” (Monk 181). The government, then, has changed, but there are always things to criticize. “In ‘New Britain,’” Claire Monk explains, “criticising commercial success has become bad form, and the dominant mood is one in which British film successes with period and contemporary settings alike are celebrate uncritically by almost everyone—regardless of whether or not critical skepticism or political criticism, might in fact, be richly deserved” (181). Will Kapur’s new film engage the new problems in historical film? Since the sequel will focus on Elizabeth’s relationship with Raleigh, the possibility that it will use the “commercial success” of Raleigh’s enterprises at sea as a means of commenting on modern-day British film exports is certainly provocative. Furthermore, I am interested in what role Koster’s The Virgin Queen will play in Kapur’s new project. As the only other Elizabeth biopic that focuses on her relationship with Walter Raleigh, it is bound to influence The Golden Age in one way or another. Since it is an American “refashioning” of British national identity, The Virgin Queen could be a powerful appropriation if Kapur wishes to address the United States’ domination of the film industry.
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