

Speaking Stitches, Laughing Flowers:



An Emblematic Reinterpretation of the
'Rainbow' Portrait of Elizabeth I

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MA by Research awarded by the University of Hertfordshire

November 2019

Abstract

The imagery of the ‘Rainbow’ Portrait of Elizabeth I which hangs at Hatfield House in Hertfordshire has been the subject of numerous academic investigations. However, few have addressed in satisfactory depth the many emblematic references that appear in the painting. Additionally, little research has been done to interpret the painting through an understanding of the material properties of the objects and clothing which it depicts. Through an interdisciplinary investigation this dissertation draws on evidence from Cesare Ripa’s emblem collection, the *Iconologia* (first published in 1593), combined with an examination of the Bacton Altar Cloth embroidery, c. 1590 -1600, currently being conserved by Historic Royal Palaces, supported by analysis of contextual source materials including John Gerard’s *The Herball, or Generall Historie of Plantes* and other ‘herbal’ texts, a selection of contemporary portraits, and poetry and theatrical dialogues from John Davies and William Shakespeare, to reveal a number of previously undiscussed visual references in the ‘Rainbow’ Portrait. These findings serve to aid our understanding of this enigmatic painting, and the intentions of its probable commissioner: Robert Cecil, 1st Earl of Salisbury

Contents

Abstract.....	2
Introduction.....	6
A Review of Previous Literature on the ‘Rainbow’ Portrait	12
The ‘Springtime Theme’	12
Religious Symbolism, and the ‘Cult of Elizabeth’	22
Political Symbolism	24
Image and Object: the Place of Dress History, the Place of Textile History, in the Study of Portraiture.	26
Research Methodology.....	27
Dissertation Outline	34
Chapter One: Laughing Flowers: an Emblematic Reading of the Floral Motifs in the ‘Rainbow’ Portrait.....	36
Introduction.....	36
The Medicinal Virtues of the Embroidered Plants in the ‘Rainbow’ Portrait	36
Shakespeare’s Imagery: ‘Blooming’ Brides and ‘Withering’ Womanhood.....	41
The ‘Mask of Youth’ and the ‘Subtle Smile’	45
Cesare Ripa and the Flowers of Mirth	46
Conclusion	52
Chapter Two: Speaking Stitches: The ‘Weight’ of Embroidery for a Contemporary Audience.....	54
Introduction.....	54
Modern Perceptions of Floral Decoration.....	55
The Gift Worth More than Money	60
Woven with Silver, Embroidered with Gold	64
Conclusion	75
Chapter Three: The Presence of the Patron: Deciphering Visual References to Robert Cecil in the ‘Rainbow’ Portrait	76
Introduction.....	76
The Mantle Covered with Eyes and Ears: a Compliment or a Boast?.....	78
An Embroidered Garden, a Celebrated Gardener	87
A ‘C’-shaped moon.....	96
Conclusion	100
Chapter Four: Dismantling the ‘Rich Mantle’ of Eyes and Ears: an Impossible Gift in the Midst of a Very Real ‘Gifting Dynamic’.	101
Introduction.....	101
The Power of Royal Gift Giving.....	102

The ‘Rainbow’ and the ‘Hardwick’ Portraits.....	107
The Real Versus the Fantastic in our Imagining of the Mantle	110
Conclusion	115
Chapter Five: Death: the ‘Rainbow’ Portrait as a Posthumous Image of Elizabeth I..	116
Introduction.....	116
The Significance of a Significant Event	118
The Disappearing Farthingale.....	125
The Mystery of the ‘Masque’ Costume	130
Morte’ and the Mask of Death	136
Conclusion	138
Final Conclusion.....	140
Reinterpretations	140
Material Insights	141
Future Study.....	142
Bibliography.....	145
Primary Sources	145
Secondary Sources	146

Title page image: An illustration of a ‘heartsease’ or wild daisy, from John Gerard, *The Herball, or, Generall Historie of Plantes* (London: Adam Islip, Joice Norton and Richard Whitakers, 1636), p. 854.



Above: Figure [1] Attributed to Isaac Oliver, *The 'Rainbow' Portrait of Elizabeth I*, c. 1600, oil on canvas, Hatfield House, Hertfordshire.

Introduction

The ‘Rainbow’ Portrait of Elizabeth I, which hangs at Hatfield House in Hertfordshire, is an enigma. Undated and unsigned, all that can be known for certain of this painting’s background is the extent of its long residence in its present home; and in the possession of its current owners, the Salisbury family.¹ It has proved a difficult image to put a convincing credit to, having been previously attributed at various times to Federico Zuccaro, John De Critz, and Marcus Gheeraerts II.² Current consensus, however, assigns the authorship to a student of Nicholas Hilliard, Isaac Oliver (or Olivier), with the queen’s face taken from a face pattern made by Hilliard in the 1590s.³ Like many portraits of the queen taken during her lifetime as well as after her death, it is unlikely that Elizabeth ever sat for this painting. Evidence suggests that she rarely sat for any artist, and instead face patterns, taken infrequently by her most trusted court artists, were passed around among painters and used as bases for a large number of her portraits.⁴ Her apparel, as Janet Arnold has shown conclusively in her work on the royal wardrobe records of 1600, was sometimes replicated with precision from real life.⁵ In these instances garments and jewellery may have been borrowed from Elizabeth’s wardrobe and arranged with care in the artist’s studio to be copied.⁶ In the case of the ‘Rainbow’ Portrait it appears that this indeed must have been so at least for part of the wardrobe, as the large serpent decoration on the queen’s sleeve can be seen in another, later portrait, suggesting that it was once a real ornament.⁷ Arnold also

¹ Erna Auerbach and Charles Kingsley Adams, *Paintings and Sculpture at Hatfield House* (London: Constable & Company Limited, 1971), p. 61.

² Ibid. p. 60.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Janet Arnold, *Queen Elizabeth’s Wardrobe Unlock’d: The Inventories of the Wardrobe of Robes Prepared in July 1600* (Leeds: W.S. Maney & Son Ltd., 1988), p. 14.

⁵ Ibid. passim, and Chapters II and IV in particular.

⁶ Ibid., p. 14 – 15.

⁷ Ibid., p. 82.

connected this item with a record in the wardrobe accounts, of a ‘Jewell of golde like a Snake wound together garnished with small Opalls and Rubies’.⁸

The painting’s most recent attribution was made, initially by Erna Auerbach, because in examples of his other known works Oliver seems to provide the closest match for the ‘Rainbow’ Portrait in terms of style.⁹ His distinctive, delicate technique was a product of his background in miniature painting, and his ‘diverse and experimental’ attitude in this field would also seem to make him a likely candidate, given the bold and enigmatic nature of this portrait of the queen.¹⁰ As to the date of its creation, the painting itself is thought to have been produced at some point around the turn of the seventeenth century, and is sometimes connected with one of two lavish parties which the queen attended during 1602.¹¹ This has given the painting a generally accepted date of *c.* 1600, or sometimes *c.* 1602. The identity of the person who commissioned the portrait, and for what purpose, is also unknown, although its home and the time of its creation suggest a strong candidate. Sir Robert Cecil, 1st Earl of Salisbury, was Privy Councillor to the queen from 1591 until her death in 1603,¹² and Hatfield House was acquired by him from James I in 1607.¹³ After an extensive rebuilding project which was completed shortly after his death in 1612,¹⁴ the new Hatfield House became the ancestral home of his descendants, and houses the ‘Rainbow’ Portrait to this day. The portrait may have been one of three paintings of the queen listed in the early inventories taken of the house in 1612, or it may have come to Hatfield from Cecil’s other home,

⁸ Ibid., p. 81.

⁹ Auerbach, p. 60.

¹⁰ Rab MacGibbon, *Elizabethan Treasures: Miniatures by Hilliard and Oliver*, ed. by Catharine Macleod and others, (London: National Portrait Gallery, 2019), p. 38.

¹¹ For example, Roy Strong, *The Cult of Elizabeth: Elizabethan Portraiture and Pageantry* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1977), p. 52, and Janet Arnold, *Queen Elizabeth’s Wardrobe Unlock’d: The Inventories of the Wardrobe of Robes Prepared in July 1600* (Leeds: W.S. Maney & Son Ltd., 1988), pp. 83 – 4.

¹² Susan Doran, *Elizabeth I and Her Circle* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 279.

¹³ Hatfield House, *Hatfield House Booklet* (Hatfield, UK: Jarrold Publishing, 2014), p. 6.

¹⁴ Ibid.

Salisbury House, when the contents of that residence were transferred to Hatfield House in the 1690s.¹⁵

If Robert Cecil was the commissioner of the ‘Rainbow’ Portrait, his reasons for doing so remain a mystery; although arguments in favour of the second of the two 1602 celebrations, which was held at Cecil’s house in the Strand on 6 December, suggest a possible connection there.¹⁶ Despite all these conjectures however, nothing much more concrete than this can be said of this painting, and, undoubtedly, all such uncertainties help to make the portrait’s provenance a matter of some intrigue. However, the vast majority of scholarship around the ‘Rainbow’ Portrait has concerned itself not with these issues at all, but with the real enigma of this painting. This is the far greater mystery posed by the strange and heavily symbolic content of the painting itself.

The portrait, half-length, shows the queen standing. She is depicted as young, and beautiful, despite the fact that Elizabeth would have been in her late sixties at the time the portrait is thought to have been painted. Her face is turned towards the viewer. She wears a small smile, almost as subtle and secretive as that given by Da Vinci to his Mona Lisa, nearly a century earlier. Just evident in the near blackness of the portrait’s background is the dim tracery of some archaic scene. Classical columns support a Roman arch which disappears above the queen’s head; she seems to be standing before an entryway to some magnificent and probably imagined edifice. At her back, utter darkness lies beyond this portal. The majority of the rest of the image is filled by her expansive apparel and adornments, which spread around her in a gaudy cloud of finery. This is fairly typical of portraits of the queen, many of which understandably displayed opulence and wealth as a desirable standard. In this

¹⁵ Auerbach, pp. 57 – 8.

¹⁶ For example see Strong, p. 52 and Mary C. Erler, ‘Sir John Davies and the Rainbow Portrait of Queen Elizabeth’, *Modern Philology*, 84, 4 (1987), 359 – 371 (pp. 365 – 370).

instance, however, she is not only fine, but also modelling an array of emblematic costume elements, which range in style from the magnificent to the absurd.

An ivory coloured bodice, thickly embroidered with floral motifs, is cut low upon her breast, to reveal the white and naked décolletage of an unmarried maiden. Tendrils of loosed red hair tumble across this milky expanse and confirm her virginal status - fashion of the period demanded that only a maid wear her hair this way: married women tied theirs up. A rope of pearls forms a fat knot across her heart, then dangles in a long loop down the length of her torso. From her shoulders spring cascades of gossamer-fine white frills: a standing ruff, edged with lace and a ballooning, diaphanous jewelled veil, which parts and sprays out behind her like the wings of an insect. On her left arm a delicate sleeve, also covered in floral motifs, somehow supports the weight of an enormous, jewelled brooch or piece of applique, in the shape of a writhing serpent, which is picked out in opals, sapphires and rubies. This animal, a popular symbol of intelligence,¹⁷ also appears to have coiled its body in such a vigorous ecstasy of slithering that it has actually tied itself into a knot. Dangling from its jaws is a giant, heart-shaped ruby, signifying ‘passion’,¹⁸ or ‘counsel’.¹⁹ Hanging just above its head, and bobbing oddly against its brow, is a tiny, diamond encrusted armillary sphere, which speaks of all the unknowable questions of the universe.²⁰ Above this, draped across one shoulder and folded loosely over Elizabeth’s skirt, is a large silk cloak, or mantle. The surface of this is brilliant orange, highlighted on the surface of the painting with touches of real gold leaf. It is decorated with a bizarre pattern of detached and floating eyes, ears, and possibly mouths, which appear to be observing and listening to the viewer. In her hand, in the manner of Diana the Huntress grasping her lethal bow, the queen ironically grasps not a

¹⁷ Frances A. Yates, ‘Allegorical Portraits of Queen Elizabeth I at Hatfield House’, *Hatfield House Booklet*, 1 (1952), in *Astraea: The Imperial Theme in the Sixteenth Century* (London: Routledge and Boston: Kegan Paul, 1975), p. 217.

¹⁸ Strong, p. 50 – 2.

¹⁹ Susan Doran, ‘Virginity Divinity and Power’, in *The Myth of Elizabeth*, ed. by Susan Doran and Thomas S. Freeman (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), p. 191.

²⁰ Yates, *Astraea* p. 217.

weapon but a small, transparent rainbow: a symbol of peace and tranquillity.²¹ Floating just above this are four gold embossed words: 'NON SINE SOLE IRIS'. This cryptic Latin caption is usually translated 'No rainbow without the sun'.²² Completing the connection with Diana the Huntress, whose head is almost always crowned with a shining, ethereal crescent moon, Elizabeth wears a jewelled crescent of her own; atop a more tangible, pearl covered crown, wedged inside her headdress. This strange, helm-like creation itself sits so precariously at the back of the queen's coiffure that one almost feels compelled to reach into the picture and catch it before it slips off her head. It is also decorated with a peculiar, fine spray of golden feathers, which sprout from its centre and extend upwards so far that they disappear into the frame.

It is generally agreed that all of these symbolic elements, though sometimes perplexing to our modern understanding, could have been 'read' and understood by a contemporary viewer in the know, even to the extent of communicating quite complex thoughts and ideas.²³ The job of the modern scholar, then, in studying this portrait, has at least in part been to translate this visual language; so that the 'Rainbow' Portrait can be properly understood and consumed by a modern audience. This has also been the goal of much scholarship concerning portraiture of Elizabeth I in general, which nearly always contains at least some imagery or symbolism that requires decoding. However, the code of the 'Rainbow' Portrait is so particularly confounding, that even after decades of discussion and research, academics are yet to reach a satisfactory consensus on its likely meaning and purpose, even in quite general terms.

It is this code, woven into the imagery and composition of the 'Rainbow' Portrait, and described variously as 'symbolic', 'iconographic', or 'emblematic', which this dissertation

²¹ Doran, *Virginity, Divinity*, p. 191.

²² For example see: Arnold, *Wardrobe Unlock'd*, p. 83.

²³ Yates, *Astraea*, p. 217.

will primarily address; and the contribution of an original ‘translation’ of this content, drawn from new evidence, is the purpose and outcome of this research.

A Review of Previous Literature on the 'Rainbow' Portrait

The 'Springtime Theme'

**'Reserve (sweet Spring) this Nymph of ours,
Eternall garlands of thy flowers,**

**Greene garlands never wasting;
In her shall last our *State's* faire Spring,
Now and for ever flourishing,
As long as Heaven is lasting.'**

These lines from John Davies' ode, 'To Spring', from *Hymns to Astraea*, first published in 1599, led Dame Frances Yates to conclude, in her examination of the 'Rainbow' Portrait in the 1950s, that the embroidered flowers on the queen's bodice and sleeves 'may relate to one of her most frequently used symbolic presentations – that of Astraea, the Just Virgin of the Golden Age'.¹ This simple statement set in motion an idea which has spread through almost every piece of scholarship concerning this portrait ever since.

Sir Roy Strong reinforced its potency in his influential work *The Cult of Elizabeth*, in which he suggested that the link between the portrait and this collection of poems by Davies is in fact so pervasive that: 'one might reasonably conclude that the programme [for the portrait] was actually drawn up for the artist by Davies.'² Strong went on to analyse several other extracts from the poems, explaining their relationship to the imagery in the painting in detail. He, like Yates, also pointed to the symbolism of the flowers: 'The bodice of her dress is embroidered with flowers...in allusion to this springtime theme', and also used an analogy with the virginal 'Astraea, Queen of Beauty', whose 'return to earth brings the flower-decked

¹ Yates, *Astraea*, p. 217.

² Strong, *Cult*, p 50.

springtime of the golden age', to explain a number of other symbolic elements in the 'Rainbow' Portrait.³ With such a forceful argument from so influential an authority, it is hardly surprising that this suggestion has had a lasting impact on scholarship. However, it is time for a review. This thesis will draw on evidence from historical sources, comparative artworks, literary interpretation, and textile analysis to provide a very different explanation of the portrait while offering an in-depth study of the 'flower-decked' ensemble which first sparked the attractive but ultimately flawed concept of the 'springtime theme'.

Both Strong and Yates' chief reasons for making the connection between youth and springtime in the 'Rainbow' Portrait, are Davies' spring flowers from his *Hymns to Astraea*. In this series of poems, Elizabeth herself appears to be worshipped, not just as Astraea, but also as 'Flora, Goddess of Flowers',⁴ as well as 'Spring' herself: the anthropomorphised spirit of this very season.⁵ However, the apparent spring-time allusions in the 'Rainbow' Portrait are more complex than Yates and Strong originally suggested. In order to examine them effectively, it is first necessary to address some slight but important misconceptions concerning Davies' poems. In his discussion of the floral embroidery, for example, Strong suggests that the 'spring flowers' embroidered on Elizabeth's bodice are not just an allusion to spring, but also to Elizabeth's personification 'as Flora, 'Empress of Flowers''.⁶ However, this is a misinterpretation of the poem from which the quote comes. In this poem, 'To Flora', it is not Elizabeth, or even her alter-ego, Astraea, who is described as the 'Empresse of flowers', but rather the character of 'Flora' – the hapless victim of

³ Ibid.

⁴ John Davies, *The Complete Poems of Sir John Davies*, ed. by Alexander B. Grosart (London: Chatto and Windus, 1876), p. 137.

⁵ Davies, *Complete Poems*, p. 131.

⁶ Strong, *Cult*, p. 50.

Astraea/Elizabeth's powers of attraction, which have drawn away her court of heavenly muses to admire Elizabeth instead.⁷ It is Flora, old springtime goddess of the classical world, who is the 'Empresse of flowers'; and she is held up as an example of a being who is far inferior to Davies' real object: Elizabeth. Even her flowers themselves are snubbed: 'Roses and lillies did them draw, ere they divine Astraea saw'.⁸

Strong was by no means the first or the only one to blur this distinction: Frances Yates also frequently blended the various characters represented in the *Hymns* into one, interpreting Davies' intention to be an over-layering of many goddesses, all of whom really represent Elizabeth. For example, in a more in-depth study of the 'Astraea' theme, she noted that two of the other poems in this collection 'also relate to Elizabeth-Astraea as spring; one is addressed to her as May, where she is called 'May of Maiestie'; and another to her as Flora, 'Empresse of Flowers''.⁹ Here she formed the same misinterpretation of these poems as Strong, and other scholars have made similar assumptions since. It is easy to see why: there is plenty of evidence to suggest that Elizabeth was frequently represented as a collection of various different divine figures in art and literature of the period. However, it is important to note the clear distinctions Davies drew in this particular work, because they clarify the themes with which he was primarily concerned at that time.

The goddess 'Flora', and the flowers themselves, are rejected for an important reason. They are transient, and represent youth, death, and deterioration: and these are ideas which Davies steadfastly attacks and saps of their power throughout this collection of poems. Even in 'To Spring', the source which supplied Yates and Strong with so many links between Astraea, spring, and Elizabeth's floral gown, this theme is clear: Spring is asked to preserve,

⁷ Davies, *Complete Poems*, p. 137.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Frances A. Yates, *Astraea: The Imperial Theme in the Sixteenth Century* (London: Routledge and Boston: Kegan Paul, 1975), p. 67.

for Elizabeth, some ‘Eternall garlands’ of her flowers, to supply her with ‘Greene garlands never wasting’, so that:

**‘In her [Elizabeth/Astraea] shall last our State’s fair Spring,
Now and forever flourishing,
As long as Heaven is lasting.’¹⁰**

The emphasis here is on the effort to defeat the passing of time: Spring herself may be transient, (and therefore inferior), but her finest qualities will be upheld in the eternal spring of the nation, which Elizabeth has created to replace her. This idea is also reflected in the composition of the poem. Like most of the *Hymns*, in the first stanza it presents and extolls the virtues of one concept or character; before confirming Astraea’s superiority in the last: forming a neat juxtaposition of themes and a rhetorical emphasis on Astraea’s (i.e. Elizabeth’s) ultimate supremacy in all things. In this case we are introduced to ‘Tolly [jolly] Spring’ in the first stanza, and then in the last are shown that the ‘State’s faire Spring’ brought by Astraea (Elizabeth) is far superior, because it is ‘for ever flourishing’, and so therefore much better than natural spring, which comes and goes, following ‘angry aged winter’.¹¹

The reason for this preoccupation with permanency and the rejection of transience may be linked to the aging physical state of the queen herself at the time when these poems were written. Roy Strong voiced the idea of the ‘Mask of Youth’, in the early 1960s, to explain the many representations of the queen as a young woman, even into her old age, as an effort to preserve the populace from fear over the end of her reign and the instability which might follow.¹² Davies’ efforts here could be a contribution to this systematic programme of

¹⁰ Davies, *Complete Poems*, p. 131.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Roy Strong, *Portraits of Queen Elizabeth*, (Oxford: Clarendon, 1963), pp. 19, 33-41, 94. Previous allusions to this idea were also made by David Piper: David Piper, *The English Face* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1957), p 70.

denial; if such a programme existed. However, several scholars since that time have re-examined this idea and questioned it. In 2010, for example, Anna Riehl analysed a large and varied range of contextual sources and found the visual ‘rhetoric’ of the queen’s face and the messages it could convey to be far more complex than Strong suggested.¹³ This will be explored further in Chapter One.

Alternatively, Davies’ concerns could simply represent a rather more personal sensitivity to the delicate feelings of an ageing former beauty, as Elizabeth certainly was. Other sources at this time suggest that, whatever the nation was thinking, the queen, in her sixties, would have preferred to hear about lasting beauty, than the freshness of youth and springtime.¹⁴ Whatever the reasoning, one message to us as historians is clear: at this sensitive time, any kind of suggestion of a relationship between the queen and ideas of springtime and youth would have had to be made very carefully. This need for sensitivity could explain why there are no fresh flowers in the ‘Rainbow’ Portrait, as they might have implied fragility or death. The queen was pictured with fresh flowers in a number of other portraits during her lifetime;¹⁵ so their absence in this instance is worth noting, if a theme of floral springtime and renewal is supposed to be represented here.

These are the species which form the floral pattern on the bodice: roses, gillyflowers (carnations), woodbine (honeysuckle), wild pansies (viola tricolore), cowslips, oak leaves and acorns, and what appear to be parts of borage, lilies, and daffodils. Perhaps the first thing which grabs the attention in even a brief consideration of this list is that these are not all spring flowers. Acorns, for example are not flowers at all; and ripen in autumn.¹⁶ It is

¹³ Anna Riehl, *The Face of Queenship: Early Modern Representations of Elizabeth I* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

¹⁴ For an example of this tension, see Anna Whitelock’s examination of the extensive beauty regimens performed by the queen’s ladies in waiting to conceal her aging appearance before the public: *Elizabeth’s Bedfellows: An Intimate History of the Queen’s Court* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), pp. 24, 192.

¹⁵ For some interesting examples see: Maria Hayward, ‘The ‘Empresse of Flowers’: The Significance of Floral Imagery in Two Portraits of Elizabeth I at Jesus College, Oxford’ *Costume*, 44 (2010), 20 – 27 (pp. 24 – 5).

¹⁶ John Gerard, *The Herball, or, Generall Historie of Plantes*, (London: John Norton, 1597), p. 1163.

possible that this motif, which can be seen just above Elizabeth's midriff and to the right of her string of pearls, may actually be a stylised strawberry plant, bearing fruit; but this too, would seem a little incongruous, as a springtime strawberry plant would be showing flowers, not fruit.¹⁷ Indeed, a few of the more obvious flower species also lack a clear connection with that time of year. Roses, for example, flower from May till August, and most are at their best in midsummer.¹⁸ Carnations, like the pink sprig at the top of the bodice, are also summer flowering plants.¹⁹

This obsessive attention to the particular flower cycles of all these species may seem like pointless nit-picking. However, it is important to remember that although flowering seasons and plant life cycles may not mean much to us, as a modern audience, it is likely that a contemporary English audience would have had a much greater interest in all these things, out of practical necessity. The popularity of herbal guide books like John Gerard's *The Herball or General historie of Plantes*,²⁰ and housewifery books which called for a knowledge of ingredients from both the garden and the wild hedgerows show us how necessary nature's larder was to the health and stomachs of many early modern people. According to one such guide, every good housewife and cook 'shall also know the time of the yeere, Moneth and Moone, in which all herbs are to be sowne, and when they are in their best flourishing, that gathering all herbs in their height of goodnesse, she may have the prime use of the same.'²¹ And the majority of these guides also clearly note the seasons and places where all plant species might be found flowering or fruiting; for example, the flowering times for most of the plants featuring on the queen's bodice in the 'Rainbow' Portrait can be found in Gerard's *Herball*, as has been demonstrated in the footnotes for each one mentioned above. This is because that knowledge was vital to any reader wishing to make a practical use of this

¹⁷ John Gerard, *Herball*, p. 845.

¹⁸ John Gerard, *Herball*, p. 1081.

¹⁹ John Gerard, *Herball*, p. 473.

²⁰ John Gerard, *The Herball, or, Generall Historie of Plantes*, (London: John Norton, 1597).

²¹ Gervase Markham, *The English House-wife*, (London, 1637), p. 63.

bounty. And we may safely conjecture, given the importance of such things, that those who did not get this information from books would have received it from friends, family and the handing down of simple traditional knowledge. So, although the description may seem perfectly logical to us now, it is possible that an Elizabethan or Jacobean audience would have had a much more specific idea of the meaning of a term like ‘spring flowers’; one which they simply would not have applied to the collection of plants that can be seen decorating Elizabeth’s bodice in the painting.

There is also another anachronism in the apparent springtime allusion in the ‘Rainbow’ Portrait, which may be harder to explain: if the portrait is a vision of a springtime goddess, then it is strange there are no other emblematic references to springtime in the painting at all. ‘Emblems’, of the kind to be found in popular books like Geoffrey Whitney’s *A Choice of Emblemes*,²² were visual texts comprising a symbolic image, usually a little scene containing various symbolic objects and persons, combined with a riddle or piece of metaphorical poetry. Both the image and the words ostensibly showed one thing, but, using the emblematic language of symbols, they could be interpreted as coded messages or ideas, often indicating something quite different. These intriguing picture messages gained enormous popularity during the latter part of the Elizabethan era and continued doing so long afterwards. Shared in their hundreds and compiled in emblem books, they also formed a decodable visual language comprised of symbols and imagery, which allowed any artist to fill his canvas not just with pictures but with messages too. Using this complex language, concepts, hints, and even whole phrases could be represented in any work of art, using an entirely pictographic vocabulary of symbols, in the main part readable only to the intellectual elite. In her examination of the ‘Rainbow’ Portrait Frances Yates also drew on some of this source material, alongside the classical sources and poetry mentioned above, to decode its

²² Geoffrey Whitney, *A Choice of Emblemes*, (London, 1585/6).

complex meaning. As she wrote, ‘we may wonder how the artist, or designer, of this picture, could have supposed that the beholder of it would understand such complicated allusions,’²³ but, as she also went on to explain, during this period ‘symbolism and allegory were very widely studied’,²⁴ and emblem books²⁵ and emblem textbooks²⁶ could be found ‘in the libraries of most educated people’.²⁷

Such a source base is also an important reference point for anyone hoping to decipher the emblematic messages in the ‘Rainbow’ Portrait, and several scholars have already acknowledged the usefulness of a particular text: the *Iconologia*, or ‘Guide to Emblems’, written by the Italian scholar Cesare Ripa and first published in 1593. Frances Yates examined a number of emblem images from the book in her analysis of the ‘Rainbow’ Portrait,²⁸ and several later scholars have drawn on her initial findings. This is a particularly significant text for this study because of its extraordinary popularity in the years just before the portrait was painted, and because of the apparent use of the text and its woodcut images as source material for the artist of the ‘Rainbow’ Portrait.²⁹ In fact, in terms of the number and clarity of the references in the portrait, the *Iconologia* is a far more likely source for the ‘programme’ of the painting, as Strong described it, than Davies’ poems.

Cesare Ripa’s *Iconologia* also paints a vivid picture of the emblematic figure of ‘Springtime’, (or, if more directly translated: ‘Spring Equinox’), which is filled with little visual pointers, easily recognisable to a contemporary audience, none of which have been

²³ Yates, *Astraea*, p. 217.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ For example, Geoffrey Witney’s *A Choice of Emblems*, which is a collection of cryptic image and text combinations meant to be solved and enjoyed by the reader.

²⁶ For example, Cesare Ripa’s *Iconologia*, which provided explanations of various emblematic motifs and was designed to help the reader to understand emblem books like Witney’s, as well as emblematic paintings and decorative art.

²⁷ Yates, *Astraea*, p. 217.

²⁸ Ibid., pp. 216 – 7.

²⁹ For a history of this text’s publications, translations, and cultural impact, see: Hans-Joachim Zimmerman, *English Translations and Adaptations of Cesare Ripa’s Iconologia: From the 17th to the 19th Century*, (a paper given at Utrecht Conference, August 25th, 1994), and *Der akademische Affe: Die Geschichte einer Allegorie aus Cesare Ripas ‘Iconologia’*, (Wiesbaden: L. Reichert, 1991).

included in the 'Rainbow' Portrait.³⁰ Ripa describes 'Springtime' as a young man, dressed, rather strikingly, with one half of his body swathed in black, the other in white. He also wears a belt or girdle decorated with stars, holds a ram under his arm, and has wings on his feet; again, one black, one white. While there is a brief mention of flowers - 'Springtime' holds a garland of several flowers in his left hand - Elizabeth is *not* doing this in the 'Rainbow' portrait and there are no other elements from this image to be found in the portrait at all.³¹ This point in itself would have less weight, if it were not for the fact that so many other motifs from the *Iconologia* have clearly been used as source material in the composition of the rest of the painting: a point which will be explored in later chapters.

As well as this, an Elizabethan audience would have understood a range of visual references to spring, regardless of the *Iconologia*. The cultural and scientific importance of astrology at this time indicates that any viewer of the portrait would have recognised a ram, for example, as a reference to Aries and a visual code for springtime. Works by figures such as John Dee, astrologer to the queen, and astrological medical practitioners such as Simon Forman and Richard Napier demonstrate the popularity of astrology as a field of study at this time. However, astrological metaphor had been in use in English art and literature since long before this. The ram, for example, features as a reference to springtime in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, written at the end of the fourteenth century. The General Prologue opens with a verse of perhaps the most potent springtime imagery ever written, in which Chaucer describes the universal vernal verve which has invigorated the natural world and tempted forth the Canterbury pilgrims on their journey. We are told of the sweet showers of April, the sweet breezes of Zephyrus, the little birds singing, the tender young crops in the fields, the sap rising in the veins of the plants, and that 'the young Sun has in the Ram his half course

³⁰ Ripa, p. 130.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 130-1.

run.’³² This is an anthropomorphised vision of the movement of the heavens, and indicates the date: i.e., around the end of the first week of April, when half of the thirty-one days of the sun’s transit in the sign of Aries have elapsed. This reference might need explaining for a modern audience; but medieval or early modern readers would have understood it immediately.

Of course, for various reasons, it may not have been practical or desirable for Elizabeth to be pictured with a ram under her arm in the ‘Rainbow’ Portrait. It would surely have been simple enough, however, for the painter to have included a few small stars scattered somewhere in the painting’s composition instead; and Elizabeth was portrayed in striking black and white apparel in several other portraits, as it was one of her favourite colour combinations.³³ However, on recognising the need for a rejection of any kind of imagery connected with death or transience, an explanation for these absences becomes obvious. In both Ripa’s depiction of personified ‘Springtime’, and in the astrological symbolism, the emblematic elements that denote spring are often inextricable from those which denote change, and the passage of time. The black and white of ‘Springtime’s peculiar garb, for example, are a vivid reference to the switch from one extreme to another: dark to light, winter to warmth. The wings on his feet signal speed, and the constant movement of the seasons. The ram, Aries, describes a point on a calendar, as Chaucer has shown above.³⁴ So although Davies is able to talk about an eternal, timeless spring in his poetry, in visual, iconographical terms, this message may have been much more difficult for the painter of the ‘Rainbow’ Portrait to convey. This offers a possible explanation for the absence of symbols of spring in a portrait supposed to represent spring: but a rather unsatisfactory one. A far more straightforward explanation for all these complexities and absences may be that an

³² Geoffrey Chaucer, ‘The General Prologue’, in *Chaucer to Spenser: An Anthology*, ed. by Derek Pearsall, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1999), p. 80.

³³ Strong, *Cult*, p. 71

³⁴ These references are explained by Ripa in his description of ‘Equivinottio della Primavera’ in the text which accompanies this image. Ibid.

allusion to a 'springtime theme', as Strong suggested, was never really an intended part of this painting after all.

Religious Symbolism, and the 'Cult of Elizabeth'

One of the other ways the 'Rainbow' Portrait has been discussed in the past is in terms of its religious symbolism. For example, René Graziani, writing in 1972, suggested that almost all the symbolic elements of the painting converge to form 'a profession of religious faith'.³⁵ In this article Graziani drew on biblical themes to explain the imagery which Yates saw as deriving from the emblematic tradition of the kind found in Ripa's *Iconologia*. Thus the serpent on Elizabeth's sleeve, in Graziani's interpretation, is not linked with the emblematic figure of 'Intelligenza', as Yates suggested.³⁶ It is instead the 'familiar symbol of the Redeemer' and represents a powerful 'profession of faith in Christ' and 'pledge of salvation'.³⁷ The idea of a semi-religious 'Cult' of Elizabeth I has also been a popular one amongst scholars for some time.³⁸ This theory brings together references in both art and literature to paint a picture of the queen as a kind of living goddess to her people; replacing the Catholic Madonna whose presence was no longer welcomed under her reign. This idea, produced by numerous scholars from a large variety of visual and literary sources over the last century, has resulted in a plethora of references to Elizabeth as both an embodiment of the divine and the secular figure head of her own personal cult of adoration.

The 'Rainbow' Portrait is of course no different. Indeed, the divine figure of Astraea, whom Frances Yates and Roy Strong both perceived, is by no means the only one to have been found in this painting.³⁹ Her discovery merely forms part of a communal goddess hunt

³⁵ René Graziani, 'The 'Rainbow Portrait' of Queen Elizabeth I and Its Religious Symbolism', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 35 (1972), 247 – 259 (p. 247 – 8).

³⁶ Yates, *Astraea*, p. 217.

³⁷ René Graziani, 'The 'Rainbow Portrait' of Queen Elizabeth I and Its Religious Symbolism', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 35 (1972), 247 – 259 (p. 254).

³⁸ For example: Strong, *Cult*.

³⁹ Yates, *Astraea*, p. 217.

within the portrait which has been progressing for decades. ‘Although there is a fairly general consensus’, as Susan Doran wrote in 2003, ‘that the portrait elevates Elizabeth as a goddess, historians divide over whether that goddess is Astraea, the “Queen of Love and Beauty”, the sun goddess, or Cynthia’;⁴⁰ and, although these are the main contenders, there are a number of other divinities to be acknowledged as well. Indeed, even the addition of Flora,⁴¹ Spring,⁴² Iris,⁴³ Urania,⁴⁴ the chaste Moon,⁴⁵ Belphoebe,⁴⁶ Artemis,⁴⁷ and Diana the Huntress⁴⁸ still does not complete the list of personifications which have been connected with this portrait, and with Elizabeth’s representation within it. A couple of these connections have been re-evaluated in the previous pages, which might help to clear the field somewhat. However, this dissertation will also add greater complexity to the discussion by presenting yet another deity to add to the group; albeit one rather different from any of the regal virgins just mentioned.

Ripa’s ‘Allegrezza’, the voluptuous and feisty personification of merriment and fun, will be offered up for consideration in Chapter Two. Her presence in the ‘Rainbow’ Portrait, as an emblematic figure, gives support to Yates’ emblematic interpretation as opposed to Graziani’s religious one; however, both are counteracted by her connection to worldly pleasure. Though Yates cited the classical, rather than the Christian tradition, her Astraea, the ‘Just Virgin’, was still a sacred device. In 2014 Helen Hackett discussed the prevalent use in Elizabeth’s portraits of pagan and classical divine imagery, as a safe alternative to Catholic

⁴⁰ Susan Doran, ‘Virginité Divinity and Power’, in *The Myth of Elizabeth*, ed. by Susan Doran and Thomas S. Freeman (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), p. 191.

⁴¹ Strong, *Cult*, p. 50.

⁴² Yates, *Astraea*, p. 218.

⁴³ Arnold, *Wardrobe Unlock’d*, p. 83 – 4.

⁴⁴ Jean Wilson, ‘Queen Elizabeth I as Urania’, *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 69 (2006), 151 – 73.

⁴⁵ Yates, *Astraea*, p. 218.

⁴⁶ Maria de Jesus C. Relvas, ‘Myths (Re)Told in the Iconography of Elizabeth I’, in *The Power of Form: Recycling Myths*, ed. by Ana Raquel Fernandes, Jose Pedro Serra, and Rui Carlos Fonseca (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015), pp. 116 – 23, (p. 121).

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Elizabeth Woodhouse, ‘Spirit of the Elizabethan Garden’, *Garden History*, 1, 27 (1999), 10-31, (p. 25).

iconography.⁴⁹ If Astraea's imagery has been adopted in this image, it is surely as a replacement for the ultimate 'Just Virgin': Mary, mother of Christ. Allowing the laughing, wine-supping figure of 'Allegrezza' a presence in the 'Rainbow' Portrait, however, must bring any theme of holy virginity into question, undermining both Yates' and Graziani's interpretations.

Political Symbolism

In Elizabethan England, the divine and the political could never be separated for long; and politics has not been left out of the discussion of the 'Rainbow' Portrait. Mary E. Hazard proposed in 1990 that in the 'Rainbow' Portrait, the rainbow, as a 'syncretic device',⁵⁰ can 'simultaneously convey a religious and a political message',⁵¹ and for her it was there to 'unite divided parties': the embittered Catholics and Protestants.⁵² For Daniel Fischlin, writing seven years later, the painting was 'primarily a political allegory'⁵³ in which the eyes and ears of the mantle 'echo the watchful gaze of the Queen',⁵⁴ who 'watches and listens vigilantly, seeing from all perspectives, hearing in all directions',⁵⁵ providing a 'political service' to the nation by giving intelligence against enemies.⁵⁶ Susan Doran, building on Stevan Dedijer's work in the 1980s,⁵⁷ explored this connotation in an interesting direction in 2003, linking this 'political service' not just to the queen herself but to her chief spy master, and political advisor, Robert Cecil: the probable patron of the portrait.⁵⁸ In Chapter Three this

⁴⁹ Hackett, Helen, 'A New Image of Elizabeth I: The Three Goddesses Theme in Art and Literature', *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 77:3 (2014), 225 – 256, (pp. 239 – 40).

⁵⁰ Mary E. Hazard, 'The Case for "Case" in Reading Elizabethan Portraits', *Mosaic*, 23, 2 (1990), 61 – 88 (p. 76).

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ Daniel Fischlin, 'Political Allegory, Absolutist Ideology, and the "Rainbow Portrait" of Queen Elizabeth I,' *Renaissance Quarterly*, 50, 1 (1997), 175 – 206 (pp. 183).

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 182.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 183

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ Stevan Dedijer, 'British intelligence: The rainbow enigma', in *Clio Goes Spying: eight essays on the history of intelligence*, ed. by Wilhelm Agrell and Bo Hultdt (Lund: University of Lund, 1983).

⁵⁸ Doran, p. 191.

exploration will be taken further, with the addition of a number of other elements of the painting which also seem to point to the Cecil family.

Frances Yates noted in 1959 that ‘the clue to [the ‘Rainbow’ Portrait] may be that it records Elizabeth’s presence at some masque in which allegories in her honour were presented by various personages but which are now summed up in a composite portrait of herself’.⁵⁹ When describing the entertainment at the house party hosted for the queen by Robert Cecil in December 1602, Roy Strong wrote of a beautiful ‘shrine’ to Astraea, and considered the possibility of the ‘Rainbow’ Portrait’s featuring as a centre piece.⁶⁰ Since these theories were written, the idea of the picture having a connection to an event or party of some kind has remained popular with scholars. Some have developed this further and considered the idea of the portrait, or the clothing pictured in it, forming part of an elaborate presentation of gifts to Elizabeth at such an event. Numerous scholars have examined the rituals and the importance of the giving and receiving of gifts from and to the queen and her subjects during this period, and the exchanges and obligations they framed. Objects like needlework, jewellery and clothing, and the events at which they were presented to the queen, formed part of a cultural narrative that impacted on many lives. Examining and understanding these objects can contribute to our understanding of the cultural and social history of the period. A number of scholars have placed the ‘Rainbow’ Portrait as part of this dynamic, as a record of a royal gift presented at a gifting ceremony. This gift is thought to be either a ‘robe of rainebowes’ given by Thomas Egerton,⁶¹ or the ‘rich mantle’ given by Robert Cecil,⁶² both of which appear in the records of the two royal visits to these men in 1602. In this way historians have attempted to link the painting with one or other of these

⁵⁹ Frances A. Yates, ‘Boissard’s Costume-Book and Two Portraits’, *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 22 (1959), 365 – 6.

⁶⁰ Strong, p. 52.

⁶¹ Arnold, *Wardrobe Unlock’d*, pp. 83 – 4.

⁶² Mary C. Erler, ‘Sir John Davies and the Rainbow Portrait of Queen Elizabeth’, *Modern Philology*, 84, 4 (1987), 359 – 371 (p. 370).

events. However, as Roy Strong himself showed, this is problematic. This dissertation will explore how the portrait could be nothing to do with any gifting event after all.

Image and Object: the Place of Dress History, the Place of Textile History, in the Study of Portraiture.

In 1988 Janet Arnold published her seminal text, *Queen Elizabeth's Wardrobe Unlock'd*. In this work, as part of a remarkable, in-depth analysis of textile artefacts and records of costume from the royal wardrobe records of 1600, she offered minutely observed assessments of the provenance and symbolic meaning of a large number of pieces of clothing and jewellery which feature in portraits of Elizabeth I.⁶³ One of these is the 'Rainbow' Portrait, and Arnold demonstrated in her examination of the emblematic elements of Elizabeth's apparel, just how important a knowledge of both textile and dress history is to an accurate interpretation of this image. Similarly, Eleri Lynn's careful analysis of the Bacton Altar Cloth in 2018 has provided a great deal of new insight which can inform our understanding of the 'Rainbow' Portrait. This embroidered textile, thought to have once formed part of a dress actually owned by Elizabeth I, bears a striking resemblance to the embroidered bodice she wears in the painting. Analysis of its structure and composition, for example, can therefore tell us a great deal about the likely qualities and value of the floral embroidery in the 'Rainbow' Portrait.⁶⁴ This will be discussed further in Chapter Two.

⁶³ Janet Arnold, *Queen Elizabeth's Wardrobe Unlock'd: The Inventories of the Wardrobe of Robes Prepared in July 1600* (Leeds: W.S. Maney & Son Ltd., 1988), pp. 14 – 52.

⁶⁴ Eleri Lynn, 'The Bacton Altar Cloth: Elizabeth I's "long-lost skirt"?', *Costume*, 52, 1 (2018), 3 – 25.

Research Methodology

As has been shown in the preceding pages, a thorough examination of this portrait requires a combination of approaches to be successful. Scholars from various fields have contributed interpretations of the painting, and each have done so in their own way. Yates drew on her extensive background in classical history to interpret the classical motifs she observed in the painting. Roy Strong drew on his broad knowledge of art history and Elizabethan portraiture, and sited the 'Rainbow' Portrait within the 'cult' of the image of the queen that he identified. Janet Arnold saw the painting through the objects and textiles it depicts; which she analysed in terms of their physical and stylistic characteristics, whether as extant examples or as inventoried in the wardrobe records. As part of this analysis, she was able to propose theories about the symbolic meaning of these objects individually, and so contribute to our understanding of the painting as a whole. Susan Doran and Daniel Fischlin both approached the portrait from a vast base of knowledge of the politics and political relationships of the principal figures connected with it: the queen, and William and Robert Cecil. For them, the symbolism of the portrait must be a forum for a portrayal of the dynamic between these key political figures, and so they used this outlook to pounce upon inferences to it within the symbolic language.

These various approaches have all contributed to the evolution of our understanding of this portrait. But they have also proved, by their disparities and their over-layering of interpretations, that a consideration of several different, and even contrasting approaches, is the only way to have a hope of reaching an accurate interpretation of the 'Rainbow' Portrait. Despite all this difference, there is also one element which appears again and again in the vast majority of literature concerning the portrait. That is the significance of viewing this image with at least some reference to what might be described as the 'emblematic code'; the visual language of symbols and imagery which could be found in various popular 'emblem books'

of the period, and in many other visual sources such as paintings, illustrations and even clothing and jewellery. Subtlety and secrecy were a vital part of Elizabethan courtly communication, and symbols like these enabled elite members of Tudor society to woo one another with discretion, or express political leanings and personal affinities, simply by donning certain accessories. They could also choose to be depicted in portraits or miniatures filled with these symbols, and frequently did so.¹ We know from a number of surviving miniatures, for example, that some of Elizabeth's subjects liked to curry favour by offering these images as tokens of adoration, embedding them with intimate emblematic messages. These tiny paintings were 'designed for concealment and revelation', and 'were ideal vehicles for such symbolism'.² Elizabeth also 'received gifts of symbol-laden jewellery that was often used as a device for flirtation',³ a fact which Eleri Lynn recently demonstrated with numerous examples in *Tudor Fashion* (2017). However, this 'complicated language of symbols' was not confined to the queen's personal relationships. By the end of the sixteenth century it had become so popular among the elite classes that, as Lynn went on to add, it 'was to be seen everywhere'.

It would make sense therefore to make an emblematic interpretation the focal point of any exploration of meaning in the 'Rainbow' Portrait, a painting which Lynn described as 'the most eloquent expression of this language of symbols'. However, despite the number who have acknowledged its importance, very few scholars of the 'Rainbow' Portrait have actually drawn from this 'language of symbols' in satisfactory depth. Even fewer have gone beyond the initial research of Yates and Strong, to determine if any additional or new emblematic messages may be discovered alongside the small number of well examined examples they discussed, which can show us little new information, valuable as they are. This

¹ For example, see Roy Strong's interpretation of Hilliard's *Young Man among Roses*, Roy Strong, *The Cult of Elizabeth: Elizabethan Portraiture and Pageantry* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1977), p. 75.

² Catharine Macleod, *Elizabethan Treasures: Miniatures by Hilliard and Oliver*, ed. by Catharine Macleod and others, (London: National Portrait Gallery, 2019), p. 94.

³ Eleri Lynn, *Tudor Fashion* (London: Yale University Press, 2017), p. 90.

dissertation will address this omission by giving the ‘Rainbow’ Portrait a more thorough ‘emblematic’ reading than it has so far received, using as a starting point a book which has been referred to many number of times by a great number of scholars of this portrait, and yet been under-utilised by all.

Cesare Ripa’s *Iconologia* is a book whose value to the modern-day hunter of emblems in art is hard to exaggerate. Written in 1593 by an Italian academic, it was reprinted several times during the author’s lifetime, and many more times after his death. Its impressive popularity throughout the early modern period led to its translation into numerous languages, including English in 1709.⁴ It had significant influence therefore over much of the art and literature produced throughout this period in Europe. However, its usefulness to us comes from the intentions of its author, rather than its role as a source of inspiration. Many texts containing emblems had been published before this, in England as well as the rest of Europe. A good example is Geoffrey Witney’s *A Choice of Emblemes*, published in 1585. This was popular in the English court, and seems to have been influential to the design of some works of art and jewellery produced during the latter part of the century.⁵ Many other similar books had also collected emblematic material together in this way, drawing from ‘a long and strong tradition of symbolic modes’⁶ which can be traced back to antiquity. However, the *Iconologia* was the first of its kind to effectively bring together and catalogue all these motifs in a reader-friendly, well organised text-book. Hans-Joachim Zimmerman, who wrote in detail about the publishing history and historical context of the *Iconologia* in 1995, described it as ‘the first systematic collection of allegorical figures’⁷ to be produced during this period. Its wide

⁴ Hans-Joachim Zimmerman, ‘English Translations and Adaptations of Cesare Ripa’s *Iconologia*: From the 17th to the 19th Century’, *De Zeventiende Eeuw*, 11 (1995), 17 – 25, (p. 17).

⁵ Eleri Lynn, *Tudor Fashion* (London: Yale University Press, 2017), pp. 90 – 94.

⁶ Zimmerman, p. 17 – 18.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

appeal is testament to its effectiveness as a guide, and after spreading quickly through multiple publications, it soon became ‘the standard handbook throughout Europe’.⁸

The *Iconologia* was initially published without any illustrations. Indeed, Ripa’s vivid and detailed descriptions of each motif he identified made them unnecessary. However, an attractive reprint featuring a number of woodcut illustrations appeared in 1603, the year of Elizabeth’s death, and enjoyed a popular reception throughout much of Europe, including England. Many of these illustrations can show us quickly and clearly just how closely much of the imagery in the ‘Rainbow’ Portrait mirrors the emblems in Ripa’s collection, making them a useful aid to this study. However, the text, illustrated or not, was one which was designed to be used by artists and those interested in the visual arts. It was the author’s intention that the book would ‘offer not just a heap of somewhat broken images but a description and explanation of universal pictures which were accessible to any educated man.’ To a modern historian attempting to interpret these motifs in art, especially that produced during the era of the book’s popularity, it therefore performs the function of a very useful phrasebook to a forgotten visual language. For this reason it is also the main tool with which this dissertation will build a meaningful translation of the visual language of the ‘Rainbow’ Portrait.

Books like Geoffrey Whitney’s *A Choice of Emblemes* were part of a particular trend for ‘emblem books’, which were collections of image-text combinations like the one illustrated below. This stylised framework presented a symbol-filled image accompanied by a short poem or inscription. Together they formed an amusing riddle, and coded moral message, which stimulated the reader both aesthetically and intellectually. Whitney’s book, like a number of similar works popular at that time, drew on the same long-standing tradition of ‘symbolic modes’ which Zimmerman described to supply the visual part of this

⁸ Ibid.

composition. Such texts are therefore useful examples of the kinds of visual symbols and motifs that would have been familiar to a contemporary audience. They can also prove helpful to our interpretation of images like the ‘Rainbow’ Portrait, as other scholars have found.⁹ However, due to their riddle-like nature, information about the deeper meaning of the symbols themselves cannot be extracted quickly from these books. Emblem writers also copied from each other, and reinterpreted their sources to suit their purposes, making the derivation of some of the symbolic influences difficult to map. It also meant that many symbols can be found replicated again and again in different books. All these factors together make them rather inefficient as tools for interpretation, and stepping past them, to the source material from which they derive, is inevitably a more rewarding avenue of research in this context. For this reason, and from the desire to avoid the unnecessary reproduction of results, this dissertation will focus its analysis of these motifs primarily on Ripa’s ‘systematic’ guide, rather than building a comparative review of the great many emblem books available. As well as being more efficient, this approach will also allow space for a more detailed and valuable examination of the motifs themselves, unconnected with their use as riddles and entertainment. Through this more detailed approach this dissertation will bring to light useful information hitherto missing from previous discussion of the ‘Rainbow’ Portrait.

However, as previously mentioned, the ‘Rainbow’ Portrait’s complexity suggests the need for a varied, rather than singular approach to its interpretation. And there is another mode of research which has also been neglected in the past, in terms of its potential to inform and develop the study of this painting. As Eleri Lynn demonstrated in *Tudor Fashion*, and Janet Arnold exhaustively and impressively proved in *Wardrobe Unlock’d*, jewellery, clothing and textiles from this period were important repositories both for exquisite artistry and coded communication, and were just as valuable in those terms as portraits and paintings

⁹ For example, see: Arnold, *Wardrobe Unlock’d*, pp. 71 – 7.

could be. An understanding of these more material modes of artistic expression is therefore vital to the accurate interpretation of a painting which focuses on such items almost exclusively. Elizabeth's apparel and adornment are absolutely the dominant features of the 'Rainbow' Portrait; in fact they very nearly form its entire contents. These objects carry implications and a visual language of their own, which must be understood in order to decipher the language of the painting. Indeed, the lack of attention to these matters has led to some misinterpretations of themes in the portrait in the past, which will be explored further in Chapter Two. This dissertation will also begin to address the gaps in this area of the painting's research through a physical and stylistic analysis of the Bacton Altar Cloth, an extant textile sample which very closely resembles the embroidered fabric of the bodice the queen is wearing in the 'Rainbow' Portrait, along with a selection of other similar textiles from the same period. This analysis, greatly assisted by the thorough examination and contextual study offered by its curator, Eleri Lynn, will reveal a great deal about the structure and composition of this textile, and through it the likely properties of its twin in the 'Rainbow' Portrait. A close up look at the 'Rainbow' Portrait shows that the painter has taken great trouble to reproduce the details of this embroidered fabric, its materials and design, with impressive clarity and accuracy. In Chapter Two, information collected through this study of the Bacton Altar Cloth will show us why.

This research will also draw on the work of dress historians to examine certain style elements of the apparel in the 'Rainbow' Portrait and review their significance, supported by comparative analysis with a number of other contemporary portraits featuring similarly dressed sitters in Chapter Five. These research methods, which are central to the practice of dress and textile history, are almost completely missing from the great majority of previous work on this portrait. Even Janet Arnold's thorough examination of the painting's material content in *Wardrobe Unlock'd*, impressive as it is, falls short of taking the next step to

considering how all the information she has gathered could affect the meaning of, and indicate the purpose of the painting. In contrast, the majority of her fellow scholars have applied themselves almost exclusively to analysing the painting's meaning, with very little attention to the kind of physical and stylistic details that Arnold has been so careful to examine. This dissertation will work towards bringing both of these threads together, and through their combination offer some new evidence to the discussion of the painting as a whole.

Neither the intellectual meaning nor the material content of the portrait can be thoroughly dealt with without reference to its context and background. Therefore, to support the central routes of investigation mentioned above, this dissertation will also draw to a lesser extent on methodologies from several other connected fields. The painting's political context will be examined in Chapter Five, with a view of the treaties and political movements of its probable patron, Robert Cecil. In order to offer a rounded picture of Elizabethan cultural perceptions of the botanical world in Chapter One, herbal remedies, botanical illustrations, and Shakespearean metaphor will all be addressed with the support of scholarship from each relevant field. In Chapter Four, examples taken from literature on the subject of courtly gift giving will support an examination of the 'Rainbow' Portrait's potential position as part of this interplay; a question which will be finally answered using primarily art-critical analysis techniques. Altogether, this varied combination of approaches, both central and supplementary, will create an interdisciplinary programme of research which will both draw on and add to the wealth of analysis which has gone before it. It will also present a more interesting and satisfactory outcome than any single thread is likely to have produced alone.

Dissertation Outline

Chapter One: Laughing Flowers: an Emblematic Reading of the Floral Motifs in the ‘Rainbow’ Portrait

This chapter will offer a number of new explanations for the significance of the floral imagery in the embroidery of the bodice in the ‘Rainbow’ Portrait, drawing on contextual sources such as contemporary herbal guide books and plant illustrations, Tudor ‘pattern’ books, and literature, including Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and Edmund Spenser’s *Faery Queene*. It will also draw from Cesare Ripa’s *Iconologia*, to present the emblematic figure of ‘Allegrezza’, (Glee or Joyfulness) as an alternative to Frances Yates’ suggestion of the virgin goddess, ‘Astraea’, as the deity being referred to by this motif.

Chapter Two: Speaking Stitches: The ‘Weight’ of Embroidery for a Contemporary Audience

This chapter will use textile analysis to demonstrate the extreme expense and luxury of the embroidery and fabric of the floral bodice the queen is wearing in the ‘Rainbow’ Portrait, in order to show the connotations of power, wealth and importance it would have held for an Elizabethan or Jacobean audience. It will examine the design and physical composition of the Bacton Altar Cloth, an extant textile which may once have formed part of a skirt belonging to Elizabeth I. The floral embroidery and design of this textile is visually very similar to the embroidery of the bodice in the ‘Rainbow’ Portrait and supplies an unrivalled opportunity for comparative study. This chapter will also use contextual written sources, including personal letters exchanged between courtiers during Elizabeth I’s reign, to demonstrate the social importance of embroidery, and the ‘weight’ of expectation placed upon those who gave embroidered gifts.

Chapter Three: The Presence of the Patron: Deciphering Visual References to Robert Cecil in the ‘Rainbow’ Portrait

This chapter will present evidence for a series of visual references in the ‘Rainbow’ Portrait to both William and Robert Cecil, including a number of emblematic symbols drawn from Cesare Ripa’s *Iconologia* and from classical mythology. It will also discuss the possibility of the plant imagery of the embroidered bodice being linked to William Cecil’s reputation as a gardening enthusiast and patron of the ‘herbal’ sciences.

Chapter Four: Dismantling the ‘Rich Mantle’ of Eyes and Ears: an Impossible Gift in the Midst of a Very Real ‘Gifting Dynamic’.

This chapter will review the portrait as a potential document of gift giving, comparing it with the Hardwick Hall portrait commissioned by Bess of Hardwick. This portrait is thought to have been commissioned by Bess in part to demonstrate and record her gift to the queen of the amazing and very valuable gown she is wearing in the painting; this chapter will review the possibility, suggested by other scholars in the past, that something similar was happening in the ‘Rainbow’ Portrait; and that the ‘Rainbow’ Portrait could have been connected with a particular gifting ceremony, like the Harefield Place celebration of 1602, or Robert Cecil’s house party which took place in the same year.

Chapter Five: Death: the ‘Rainbow’ Portrait as a Posthumous Image of Elizabeth I

This chapter will present new evidence to support a posthumous date for the portrait, by drawing on dress historical analysis, political history, and a final emblem from Cesare Ripa’s *Iconologia*: ‘Death’.

Chapter One: Laughing Flowers: an Emblematic Reading of the Floral Motifs in the 'Rainbow' Portrait

Introduction

The floral imagery in the 'Rainbow' Portrait must mean something; almost every part of this intriguing image does. But, if not 'Springtime', then what? To answer this question, this chapter will examine the medicinal properties of some of the flower species which feature in the embroidery, using John Gerard's herbal text book as a guide. It will also look at the use of similar floral imagery used by Shakespeare in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. It will then present evidence for a new emblematic interpretation for the floral decoration of Elizabeth's dress in the 'Rainbow' Portrait, using the figure of 'Allegrezza': 'Joyfulness', or 'Glee', from Cesare Ripa's emblematic guide book, the *Iconologia*.

The Medicinal Virtues of the Embroidered Plants in the 'Rainbow' Portrait

Flowers in the Elizabethan era could mean lots of things, some of them quite complex. Many portraits contained flowers, and some scholars have dealt with their meanings and interpretations. Maria Hayward's thorough and detailed investigation of the floral imagery in two portraits of Elizabeth I at Jesus College, Oxford, in 2010, for example, showed how specific and complex such meaning could be. In this paper Hayward introduced the potential symbolic significance of individual species of plant and flowers in terms of their 'healing qualities'.¹ Strawberries, for example, were thought to 'strengthneth the gummes, and fastneth the teeth',² thistles could offer protection against all kinds of sickness.³ For a contemporary audience these plants may have held messages about the safe preservation of

¹ Maria Hayward, 'The 'Empresse of Flowers': The Significance of Floral Imagery in Two Portraits of Elizabeth I at Jesus College, Oxford' *Costume*, 44 (2010), 20 – 27, p. 26.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

the queen's health. This was an important concern, particularly towards the end of her reign, due to fears about the succession.⁴

If we apply these ideas to the plants in the 'Rainbow' Portrait, a wealth of possible interpretations spring up. Pansies, for example, also known as 'heartsease', or 'love-in-idleness', were well known in the Elizabethan period, not just for their romantic connotations but for their curative properties. The name 'heartsease' itself suggests their use in easing pains of the heart; perhaps in this case representing the many broken hearts Elizabeth has left in her wake as the impenetrable eternal virgin. Shakespeare certainly made reference to this connection with his description of the plant in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, which was written and first performed around the same time that the 'Rainbow' Portrait is thought to have been painted:

**'...I saw...Cupid all armed: a certain aim he took,
At a fair vestal, throned by the west,'**

[We may take the 'fair vestal' to be a cloaked reference to Elizabeth I]

**'And loos'd his love-shaft smartly from his bow
As it should pierce a hundred thousand hearts.
But I might see young Cupid's fiery shaft
Quench'd in the chaste beams of the watery moon;
And the imperial vot'ress passed on,
In maiden meditation, fancy-free.
Yet mark'd I where the bolt of Cupid fell:
It fell upon a little western flower,
Before milk-white, now purple with love's wound:
And maidens call it 'love-in-idleness'.
Fetch me that flower; the herb I show'd thee once.
The juice of it, on sleeping eyelids laid,
Will make or man or woman madly dote
Upon the next live creature that it sees.'**⁵

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, ed. by Harold F. Brooks, (London: Thomas Learning, 2001), pp. 37 – 8.

In this speech it is suggested that Cupid's arrow, aimed at the heart of the queen, which cannot be pierced, has passed her by and struck the pansy instead: which now by virtue of this mishap holds magical properties. It has been transformed, in fact, into a love drug. This is of course a poetic fantasy, but one which is rooted in scientific understanding of the time. As Hayward also wrote, according to John Gerard's *Herbal*, a popular reference book of the era, violets (a close relative of the heartsease) could provide a good medicinal remedy that 'comforteth the heart and other inward parts'.⁶ Heartsease itself is particularly recommended against fever, light-headedness, inflammations of the chest, and as a cure to ease the pains of syphilis: a particularly unpleasant and literal example of a 'love' related malady.⁷

Shakespeare, through the mouth of Oberon, also goes on to mention more of the plants which decorate Elizabeth's gown in the 'Rainbow' Portrait:

**'I know a bank where the wild thyme blows,
Where oxlips [cowslips] and the nodding violet grows,
Quite over-canopied with luscious woodbine, [honeysuckle]
With sweet musk-roses, and with eglantine'.⁸**

This describes the idyllic bower where Titania, Queen of the Fairies takes her repose. Shakespeare's vivid portrayal of the fairy's boudoir, decked in flowers and medicinal herbs, suggests a potential link between these kinds of plants and notions of etherealness, or otherworldly forces; or perhaps the potency and transformative properties of nature in general. It is tempting to attribute a similar connection to the flowers in the 'Rainbow' Portrait. The 'queen of the fairies', or 'the fairy queen' is another poetic alter-ego of Elizabeth's: most famously expressed by Edmund Spenser in his work of the same name; and I would hardly be the first scholar to recognise the apparent 'ethereal condition' of the queen

⁶ Hayward, 'Empresse of Flowers', p 26, and John Gerard, *The Herbal, or, Generall Historie of Plantes*, (London: John Norton, 1597), p. 702.

⁷ Gerard, p. 705.

⁸ Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, p. 42

in the ‘Rainbow’ Portrait.⁹ It would make sense for Elizabeth, in her role as ethereal queen of the natural world, to be shown dressed in a potent, transformative, magical bounty of curative herbs and flowers. And she is: every species shown on the gown in the ‘Rainbow’ Portrait has a recognised curative property featured in the various herbal texts of the period.

However, the precise meanings for each flower intended by the author of the portrait are hard to determine, given the wealth of possible connotations for each. Lilies, for example, as well as standing for ‘purity’, could also help to heal pustules on the ‘privy parts’, and ease delivery during childbirth.¹⁰ Roses, rather beautifully, were good for ‘strengthening the heart, and refreshing of the spirits, and likewise for all things that require a little cooling’. However, they could also ‘moove to the stoole’ and provide an effective laxative.¹¹ Perhaps the key to understanding this, then, is not in attributing the correct bio-medical significance to each flower, but in simply recognising that they did have this significance. What is being presented here is a plethora of properties; but also, therefore, a plethora of knowledge. And knowledge, scientific knowledge, was something that a contemporary audience certainly would have placed great importance on. In her examination of the Bacton Altar Cloth in 2018, Eleri Lynn noted that ‘botanical motifs’¹² like those featured on this textile and also in the ‘Rainbow’ Portrait, ‘were considered fashionable not only for their beauty but also as symbols of learning and knowledge, and a greater understanding of the natural world’.¹³ This, then, must be the real significance of the great variety of plants and flowers decorating the queen’s bodice.

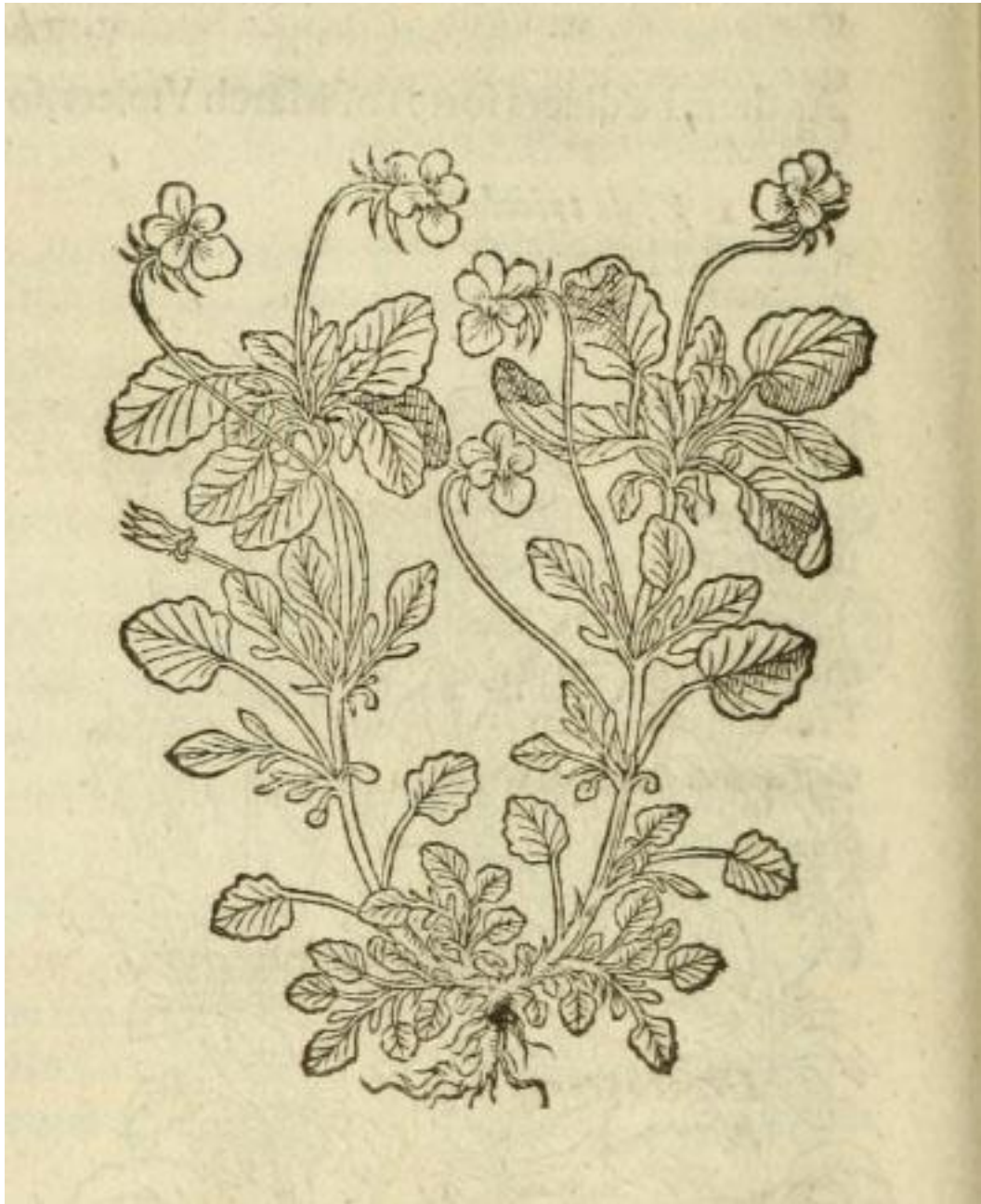
⁹Maria de Jesus C. Relvas, ‘Myths (Re)Told in the Iconography of Elizabeth I’, in *The Power of Form: Recycling Myths*, ed. by Ana Raquel Fernandes, Jose Pedro Serra, and Rui Carlos Fonseca (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015), pp. 116 – 23, (p. 121).

¹⁰ Gerard, p. 147.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 1082

¹² Lynn, p. 15

¹³ Ibid.



Above: Figure [2] An illustration by an unknown artist of a ‘Stonie Heartesease’ plant (Stony Heartsease, or Wild Pansy), from John Gerard, *The Herball, or, Generall Historie of Plantes* (London: Bollifant and Norton, 1597), p. 704.

Shakespeare's Imagery: 'Blooming' Brides and 'Withering' Womanhood

Darlana Ciraulo, in 2014, discussed the complicated relationship between the flower imagery in literature and art during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and the developments in botanical knowledge and scientific illustration that occurred during this period.¹⁴ Particularly interesting to this discussion, she noted the increase of 'the practise of illustrating the life cycle of flowers',¹⁵ with 'newfound enthusiasm'¹⁶ during the mid- to late-sixteenth century, accompanying a 'movement towards illustrative realism in botanical illustration'.¹⁷ This movement expressed itself in the desire to produce 'complete' or 'perfect' illustrations of plants; which documented every part of them. The naturalist Leonhart Fuchs, for example, wrote of his desire to make each illustrated plant "as complete as possible" by including its roots, stems, leaves, flowers, seeds and fruits'.¹⁸ He maintained that a 'complete' diagram was the best method of representation. However, this meant that what was often created was a rather fantastical representation of the living plant as if seen at all stages of its reproductive cycle all at the same time.¹⁹ Some even included examples of different colour or species iterations branching from the same stem.²⁰ Thus, many illustrations found in botanical texts of the sixteenth century, just like many of the embroidered plants we may observe on the bodice in the 'Rainbow' Portrait, are shown not just with a blooming flower, but also a flower bud, leaves and leaf buds, and a wilting flower or flower going to seed. This importantly showed not just the beauty of the flowering plant, but also its functional purpose, and all the scientific data about the life cycle that may be offered by such an inclusive depiction.

¹⁴ Darlena Ciraulo, 'Flower imagery and botanical illustration – Health and Sexual Generation in Romeo and Juliet', in *Disability, Health, and Happiness in the Shakespearean Body*, ed. by Sujata Iyengar (New York: Routledge, 2014), 158 – 175.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 159.

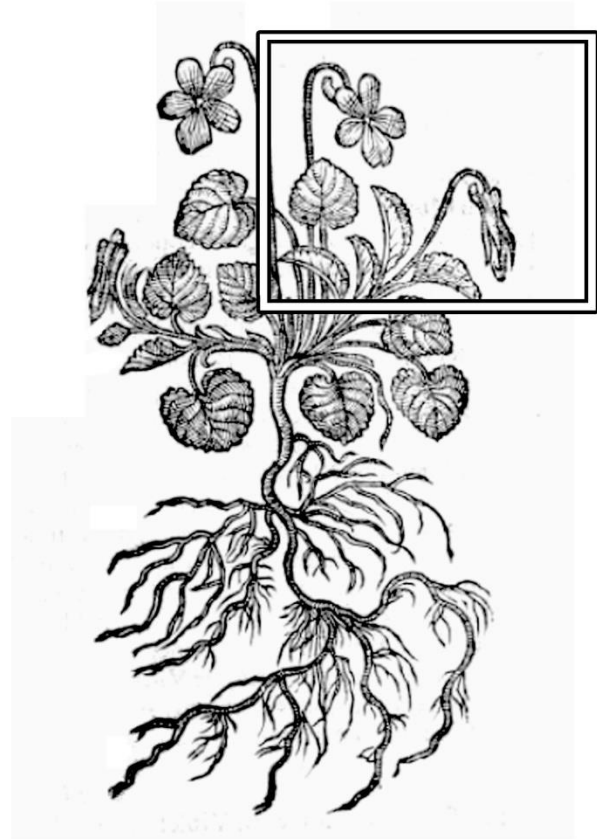
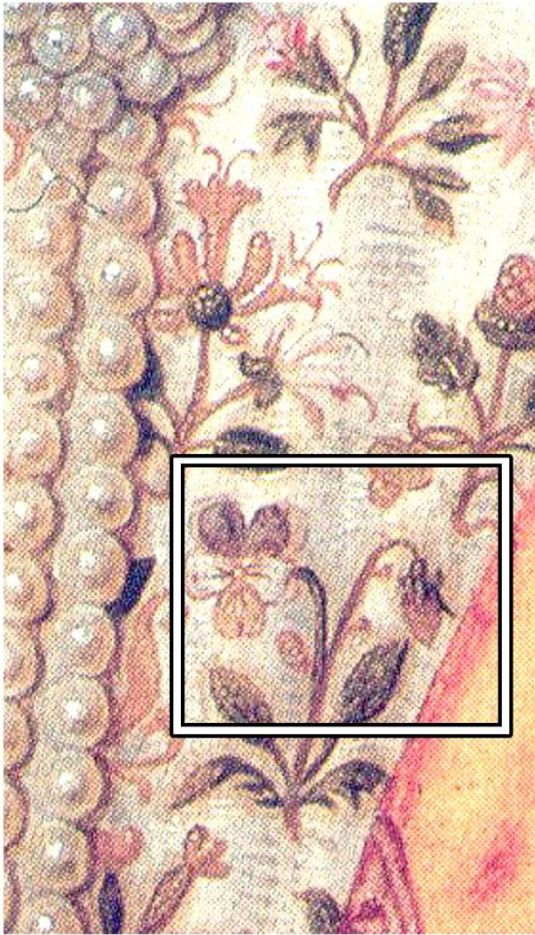
¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Sachiko Kusakawa, *Picturing the Book of Nature: Image, Text and Argument in Sixteenth-Century Human Anatomy and Medical Botany* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), pp. 114.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 115 – 19.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 117.



Above: Figure [3] A close-up of the bodice in the ‘Rainbow’ Portrait, showing an embroidered ‘heartsease’ or wild pansy; and an illustration from John Gerard, *The Herball, or, Generall Historie of Plantes* (London: Adam Islip, Joice Norton and Richard Whitakers, 1636), p. 851, which clearly shows the wilting heads and flower buds of this yellow violet.

Ciraulo’s work also offers us a potential reason for this depiction of the floral life cycle in the ‘Rainbow’ Portrait. In her examination of flower imagery and references to health in *Romeo and Juliet* she discussed Shakespeare’s many analogies of the female body with the various moments of the flower’s life cycle.²¹ This will make perfect sense to a modern reader as well as a Shakespearean one, as many such analogies still exist today. The ‘budding’ maiden, for example, or the ‘blossoming’ young woman, the ‘deflowered’ virgin and the ‘withered’ crone who has ‘lost her bloom’. It is possible that something like this is happening in the ‘Rainbow’

²¹ Ciraulo, pp. 158-9, 170-1.



Above: Figure [4] Illustrations from Jean Jacques Boissard, *Habitus Variarum Orbis Gentium*, 1581, p. 192. Also shown is Elizabeth's unusual headdress from the 'Rainbow' Portrait. The design of this appears to have been taken from the headdress of the figure of the 'bride' or maiden/unmarried woman, from Boissard's trio of ladies of Thessalonica.

Portrait. In a brief article for the *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* in 1959,²² Frances Yates explored the possible connection between the ‘Rainbow’ Portrait and an illustration from J.J. Boissard’s *Habitus variarum orbis gentium*: a book of historical costumes published in 1581. This illustration (see Figure [4]) shows a virgin bride, a wife, and a widow: all supposedly inhabitants of Thessalonica (Thessaloniki, or Salonica, Greece) and wearing the appropriate garb of this city. It is clear that the headdress of the bride is very similar to the odd-shaped headdress in the ‘Rainbow’ Portrait, and, as Yates asserted, the illustration probably inspired the design of this part of the costume in the painting. Mary Erler, writing in 1987, saw a further connection between this illustration of three different female states and a similar triad which feature in a dialogue written by John Davies around 1602.²³ Like his *Hymns to Astraea*, this text can also be connected to the ‘Rainbow’ Portrait. The dialogue was performed at Elizabeth’s visit to the London home of Robert Cecil in December 1602, at which Cecil had arranged elaborate entertainments and treats for his guests.²⁴ It features three female characters, ‘A Wife, a Widowe and a Maide’. All three of them present gifts to ‘Astraea’ (Elizabeth) as part of a ceremonious tribute, which was a typical element of royal visits. Before doing so, they engage in a protracted and entertaining argument about who should have the honour of offering her gift first.²⁵ This results, of course, in the assertion that the unmarried ‘Maide’ is superior to her companions, as her virginity makes her most similar to Elizabeth.²⁶ The blossoms, buds and drooping heads of the plants featured in the embroidery of the ‘Rainbow’ Portrait could potentially be an extension of this theme, which explores the different ages and states of womanhood.

²² Frances A. Yates ‘Boissard’s Costume-Book and Two Portraits’, *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 22 (1959), 365 – 6.

²³ Mary C. Erler, ‘Sir John Davies and the Rainbow Portrait of Queen Elizabeth’, *Modern Philology*, 84, 4 (1987), 359 – 371 (pp. 365 – 7).

²⁴ John Davies, ‘A Contention between a Wife, a Widowe and a Maide for Precedence at an Offringe’, *The Poems of Sir John Davies*, ed. by R. Krueger (Oxford: Oxford Clarendon Press, 1975), pp. 216 – 24.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

However, whether or not this is the case, the plant motifs depicted on the bodice certainly do their best, as Ciraulo put it, to ‘articulate the healthy growth pattern’.²⁷ This suggests, again, that there must be more to this imagery than a simple allusion to spring. One particular seasonal moment is hardly being expressed by these plants: they are giving us all they’ve got.

The ‘Mask of Youth’ and the ‘Subtle Smile’

It is possible that the ‘springtime’ referred to, by Roy Strong in particular, is something which goes beyond mere rationalism and embraces a higher notion: ‘youth’, for example, or ‘renewal’.²⁸ Elizabeth’s young face, the state-sanctioned ‘Mask of Youth’ which Strong has described, would seem to point us in that direction.²⁹ But there may be another, more relevant explanation for the youthful appearance of the queen. As will be explored in more depth in later chapters, the ‘Rainbow’ Portrait can be very effectively interpreted in emblematic terms. Scholars have already found that an emblematic reading can successfully translate the weird imagery of the eyes and ears which decorate the mantle, the serpent which grips a heart on a chain, the armillary sphere that rests by its head, and possibly even the strange headdress which seems to disappear off into the upper edge of the composition. It may seem odd, therefore, that such a reading has never been applied to the gown the queen is wearing, and the floral design it shows us; or, and perhaps more interestingly, to *her*: that is, to the figure, face and body of Elizabeth herself.

This is not to say that her person has not been discussed. Elizabeth’s body and face, and the many interpretations which can be placed upon her physical form in the majority of her portraits have been exhaustively considered. Most relevant to this discussion is Strong’s concept of Elizabeth’s face as the ‘Mask of Youth’, which he began to develop in 1963, expanded upon in 1987, and recently brought forward again in June 2019, in his detailed new

²⁷ Ciraulo, p. 165.

²⁸ Strong, *Cult*, p. 50, and Yates, *Astraea*, pp. 217 – 8.

²⁹ For example, see: Roy Strong, *Gloriana: The Portraits of Queen Elizabeth I* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1987), p. 20.

book *The Elizabethan Image*.³⁰ The majority of scholars who have looked at Elizabeth's face have worked on similar lines to Strong, Richard Brilliant even claimed in 1991 that 'for Queen Elizabeth, the masque (or mask) is all.'³¹ However, perhaps the most thorough analysis of the subject matter is Anna Riehl's impressive unpicking of every nuance of Elizabeth's face and facial expressions, in *The Face of Queenship* in 2010.³² Interestingly, Riehl mentioned some of the connotations to be placed, in particular, on Elizabeth's smile: notably absent from many of her portraits, but in evidence, as she pointed out, in the 'Rainbow' Portrait.³³ An explanation for this apparent solemnity in the majority of paintings, she explained, can be found in 'the culture's suspicion of smiles as signs of moral looseness';³⁴ but Riehl also noted that, in contrast with outright laughter, 'a composed, subtle smile was a safer option', particularly for a female sitter.³⁵

So why is Elizabeth showing us a 'composed, subtle smile' in the 'Rainbow' Portrait? And why would a painter hoping to represent her as an eternally chaste virgin (Astraea), risk adding a touch of sensuality with an indecorous facial expression, no matter how subtle? It would seem an odd choice, even if safer than an outright guffaw. I would suggest that an emblem holds the answer to this question as well.

Cesare Ripa and the Flowers of Mirth

Images from emblem books of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries frequently show human figures, as anthropomorphised embodiments of the various concepts and qualities being visualised. This is particularly true of the *Iconologia*, Cesare Ripa's popular 'Guide to Emblems': a source in which many of the other emblematic themes in the portrait can be

³⁰ Ibid., and Roy Strong, *Portraits of Queen Elizabeth* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1963), and Roy Strong, *The Elizabethan Image: An Introduction to English Portraiture 1558 to 1603* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2019), p. 189.

³¹ Richard Brilliant, *Portraiture* (London: Reaktion Books, 1991), p. 103.

³² Anna Riehl, *The Face of Queenship: Early Modern Representations of Elizabeth I* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

³³ Ibid., pp. 158 – 60.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 158

³⁵ Ibid.

found, as has been mentioned previously. Elizabeth wears a serpent on her left sleeve, just as the figure of ‘Intelligenza’ does in Ripa’s description, which would seem to indicate ideas or themes of ‘intelligence’ in the ‘Rainbow’ Portrait.³⁶ (Please see Figure [5]). This has been noted by many other scholars in the past.³⁷ What has not been mentioned so frequently, however, is the fact that, wearing the serpent in the same manner, in the same place, and even in the same proportions shown in the woodcut illustration which featured in the 1603 edition of this book, it appears that Elizabeth is represented here not merely as *having* intelligence – many other paintings have done that – but as actually *being* ‘Intelligence’: i.e., embodying the emblematic figure of ‘Intelligenza’.

This distinction may seem slight, but if we allow Elizabeth to be not merely connected to such a figure, but to step into the frame herself and actually *become* her, then this opens up a new wardrobe of goddess guises for her to try on. Perhaps, with her serpent sleeve, she becomes ‘Intelligenza’, spirit of wisdom; or perhaps, dressed in her eyed and eared cloak, she is ‘Ragione di Stato’, the spirit of the art of government.³⁸ And perhaps, with her young, plump-cheeked face, her cheeky smile, the loose flowing locks of the maiden, and her white gown covered in flowers and leaves, she could become, not Astraea, but instead the figure described here:

**‘Giovanetta...sara vestita bianco, e desto vestimento dipinto
di verdi fronde, e fiori rossi e gialli.’**

or:

**‘A young woman...dressed in white, her gown painted
with green fronds, and red and yellow flowers.’**

This is ‘Allegrezza’: the spirit or personification of laughter, joyfulness, or glee;³⁹ and although, as previously mentioned, there is only a passing reference to flowers in Ripa’s

³⁶ Ripa, *1603*, p. 239.

³⁷ For example: Yates, *Astraea*, p. 217; Strong, *Cult*, p. 50 – 52; Doran, *Virginity*, p. 191.

³⁸ *Ibid.* p. 427.

³⁹ *Ibid.* p. 10.

description of ‘Spring’, in *this* description they feature again and again. ‘Allegrezza’ is dressed in flowers, crowned in flowers, and to be found in meadows filled with them. In fact, as Ripa explains: ‘The flowers themselves mean Allegrezza [joyfulness/glee], and it is said, that meadows laugh, when they are covered with flowers’.⁴⁰ (For an illustration of this figure, please see Figure [,

‘Allegrezza’ also has, interestingly, a ‘fronte carnosu, liscia, e grande’, or a ‘fleshy, smooth and chubby face’.⁴¹ Another translation could be: a ‘wrinkle-free, well-filled-out face’, and this description is almost certainly meant to emphasise the youth and health of this figure. Such a description could offer a more concrete reason for the pronounced ‘Mask of Youth’ that Strong noted in the ‘Rainbow’ Portrait; after all, the plump, smooth face of youth is certainly presented by Elizabeth in the ‘Rainbow’ Portrait, despite her real age at the time. And there may also be an explanation here for Elizabeth’s risky ‘subtle smile’. I have translated ‘giovanetta’ above, as ‘young woman’, but the word can also carry rather more bawdy overtones: another translation could be ‘wench’. At any rate, she is certainly a ‘young woman’ as opposed to a ‘maiden’, which could explain the rather knowing expression on Elizabeth’s face, and perhaps also the sensual positioning of her left index finger. Several scholars in the past have noted the eroticism of this portrait, which will be considered in more detail in Chapter Five. Perhaps the most telling visual clue, however, to the presence of this more risqué layer of symbolism is the fact that the focal point of the painting, the very rainbow that Elizabeth grasps in her right hand, ‘springs’, as Maria Relvas wrote in 2015 ‘from the regions of her femininity’.⁴²

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Maria de Jesus C. Relvas, ‘Myths (Re)Told in the Iconography of Elizabeth I’, in *The Power of Form: Recycling Myths*, ed. by Ana Raquel Fernandes, Jose Pedro Serra, and Rui Carlos Fonseca (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015), pp. 116 – 23, (p. 121).



Above: Figure [5] 'Intelligenza', a woodcut illustration by an unknown artist from Cesare Ripa's *Iconologia* (Padua: P. P. Tozzi, 1618), p. 265. The figure of 'Intelligenza' is represented as a young woman with a large snake entwined around her left arm. This is echoed by the snake which decorates Elizabeth's left sleeve in the 'Rainbow' Portrait.



Above: Figure [6] 'Allegrezza', or 'Glee' or 'Merriment', a woodcut illustration by an unknown artist from Cesare Ripa's *Iconologia*, (Padua: P. P. Tozzi, 1618), p. 13.



Above: Figure [7] Woodcut illustrations by an unknown artist of three figures from Cesare Ripa's *Iconologia*, next to their emblematic representations in the 'Rainbow' Portrait. 'Allegrezza' (left) (Padua: P. P. Tozzi, 1618, p. 13) and the floral bodice; 'Intelligenza' (top) (ibid., p. 265) and the coiled serpent; and 'Ragione di Stato' (bottom right) (Rome: Appresso Lepido Facij, 1603, p. 427) next to the mantle covered with eyes and ears.

Indeed, it is worth remembering that 'holiness' is not the only idea connected with virginity. A virgin is also 'ripe' for the plucking.⁴³ As mentioned earlier, too, the Holy Virgin is far from being the only personification Elizabeth can be connected with, and not all of her 'cult'-ish invocations champion virginal innocence. In fact, in some cases this connection may be not just inappropriate but problematic. Susan Doran, for example, explored and questioned the ideas of divine virginity surrounding Elizabeth's portraiture in modern scholarship, and pointed to the complexity of the apparent Marian iconography in many of

⁴³ William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, ed. by Roma Gill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 13.

these paintings.⁴⁴ Catherine Loomis has also presented the incongruity between ideas of the chaste virgin queen and the kingly woman, who Elizabeth embodied in many other images.⁴⁵ Helen Hackett showed just how problematic Elizabeth's depiction as any kind of virgin goddess could have been in the middle and latter part of her reign: because of the need to avoid connecting her to the idolatry of the Catholic saints.⁴⁶ Hackett's analysis demonstrated that imagery of classical (pagan) goddesses offered a suitable alternative to the Madonna: not just replacing the Holy Virgin, but in fact forming a new 'Protestant iconography' more palatable to the dominant religious and political feeling of the time.⁴⁷ These investigations show us the complexity of any kind of 'virgin' iconography when it is applied to Elizabeth I. They also pave the way for a potential reinterpretation of the imagery of the 'Rainbow' Portrait; and its apparent representation of yet another virgin goddess.

Conclusion

Through a close examination of the floral motifs present in the 'Rainbow' Portrait, this chapter has presented some previously unconsidered themes for this painting. The individual plant species shown, for example, champion each of their medicinal virtues. The sheer quantity and variety of plants shown reference the achievements of the proto-botanists who compiled the popular herbals and plant catalogues of the period. The flowers also point, like the flowers in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, to Elizabeth's own ethereal qualities. And they suggest her representation in the guise of 'Allegrezza', the bold and joyful goddess of mirth. Combined, all these themes show that the symbolism of the flowers in the 'Rainbow' Portrait presents a meaning completely opposite to Yates' original conjecture. They show, not

⁴⁴ Susan Doran, 'Virginity Divinity and Power', in *The Myth of Elizabeth*, ed. by Susan Doran and Thomas S. Freeman (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), pp. 171 – 199, (p. 172).

⁴⁵ Catherine Loomis, "'Bear your body more seeming": open-kneed portraits of Elizabeth I', in *The Emblematic Queen: Extra-Literary Representations of Early Modern Queenship*, ed. by Debra Barrett-Graves (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 53 – 68.

⁴⁶ Helen Hackett, 'A New Image of Elizabeth I: The Three Goddesses Theme in Art and Literature', *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 77, 3 (2014), 225 – 256 (pp. 239 – 40).

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 240.

innocence, but knowledge. Not virginity, but pleasure. Elizabeth is presented here, not as the ‘Just Virgin’ of the nostalgic ‘Golden Age’⁴⁸ at all: but as a fun-loving reveller, and supporter of modern scientific endeavour. This characterisation, so different from any so far attributed to her here, surely demands an entirely new reading of the portrait and its purpose.

⁴⁸ Yates, *Astraea*, p. 217.

Chapter Two: Speaking Stitches: The ‘Weight’ of Embroidery for a Contemporary Audience

Introduction

A third reversal could be added to the brief list in the previous chapter: not the spiritual, but the physical. Another reason it may be tempting to connect the floral gown Elizabeth wears in the ‘Rainbow’ Portrait with ideas of spring and virginity, is that, to our modern tastes, and in comparison with many other examples of her wardrobe in other portraits, these pastel shades and pretty flower sprigs may appear ‘light’ or ‘youthful’ in style. Because of this, we may find ourselves unconsciously drawn to those ideas and themes that we would connect with such a description when interpreting this portrait. However, this design would not necessarily have suggested such ideas to the minds of a contemporary viewer. This chapter will use art critical analysis of a small selection of visual sources from the modern and early modern periods to demonstrate how our present perceptions of floral decoration have been shaped by recent design and artistic influences. Such influences would, of course, not have affected a sixteenth or seventeenth-century viewer of the ‘Rainbow’ Portrait. This chapter will also show how much social importance would have been placed on embroidery during the period in which the ‘Rainbow’ Portrait was painted, with extracts from a series of letters analysed by Janet Arnold.¹ These discuss the correct choice of colour, design, and species of flower to be used in a gift of floral embroidery commissioned for Elizabeth I by two of her subjects. An analysis of the Bacton Altar Cloth, an extant textile very similar in design to the floral embroidered bodice in the ‘Rainbow’ Portrait, will also demonstrate the great physical luxury and expense which such embroidery would have represented at the time.

¹ Arnold, *Wardrobe Unlock'd*, p. 95.



Above: Figure [8] Attributed to Nicholas Hilliard, *The ‘Ermine’ Portrait of Elizabeth I*, 1585, Oil on panel, Hatfield House, Hertfordshire.

Modern Perceptions of Floral Decoration

It is true that, when contrasted with other examples, this gown does indeed appear deceptively simple, and we need not travel far for such a comparison. In the ‘Ermine’ Portrait, for example, which also hangs at Hatfield House, Elizabeth is dressed in heavy, dark velvet and pearls, her ensemble decorated not with flowers but with thick, impressive gold trims, crammed with jewels, and actually picked out on the painting’s surface with real gold foil applied with ‘limning’ techniques. (See Figure [8]). A better example of the richness and indulgence of both a work of art and the clothing it depicts may be hard to find; and if

viewing it side by side with its housemate, it would be easy to assume that the ‘Rainbow’ Portrait’s ensemble is meant to appear ‘simpler’ or less ornate. With such an impression, it would be natural to feel that the ‘Rainbow’ has less to say about the wealth and power of its sitter: and more to tell us of her youth and naiveté.

However, this connection is problematic for several reasons. First, it requires a modern, rather than contemporary understanding, of what types and styles of clothing would have indicated opulence, seniority, and, for want of a better word: ‘weight’ to the viewer. To our eyes, gems, gold trims, rich velvets and dark colours speak of wealth and grandeur, whereas light colours, pastel palettes, flower patterns and floral embroidery speak of pastoral, romantic ideas, and seem less ‘heavy’, so philosophically less connected with the weight of material possession. However, it is important to recognise that many of these ideas and connections are recent ones. Some of them have been brought to us via the general upheaval and rejection of Renaissance ideas which marked the voluptuous baroque and rococo movements of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, others via much more recent artistic movements like Romanticism, Arts and Crafts, Pre-Raphaelitism, and even Art Nouveau. Many of these glorified and fetishized the purity and primitivism of natural forms. They also romanticised the past, celebrating old-fashioned crafts and techniques in a reaction to modern rationalism and industrialisation.² Jean-Honoré Fragonard’s painting *The Swing* (1767), and William Morris’s *La belle Iseult* (1859) both illustrate this well (see Figures [9] and [10]). *The Swing* is a pastoral pastiche, and a perfect example of the tendency, in eighteenth-century rococo art, to connect nature, floral motifs and natural forms with ideas of naiveté, hedonism, youth and ‘lightness’. Here the painting’s heroine, dressed in pastel colours and a ‘shepherdess’ hat, floats, weightless, in her eternal upswing, over her lover and the carpet of blossoming flowers beneath her. Her slipper, flung from her foot in gay abandon, also hovers, in its own

² An introduction to some of these themes and their connection to artistic symbolism can be found in Michael Gibson’s *Symbolism* (Köln: Taschen, 1999), pp. 63 – 77.

frozen arc. She even floats over the surface of the painting itself, or seems to, thanks to the optical illusion technique of *trompe l'oeil*. Morris has dressed his Iseult, the timeless romantic maiden, in a gown of white and pale pastel shades, which stand out like a moment of purity against the dark colours that surround her. Her gown, and the textiles that cover the room, are decorated with heavily stylised natural forms: pine cones, poppy heads, scrolling daisies and fruit-laden trees. Her head is crowned with a garland of green herbs. Art and design of the Pre-Raphaelite and Arts and Crafts movements often fetishized medieval motifs, plant forms and decorative floral designs like these, connecting them with the romantic, pre-industrial ideal which they celebrated.

Modern industry itself, too, has had its influence on our perception. Images of mass produced floral prints made popular by designers like Laura Ashley, and affordable to the masses by modern machinery, may now come unbidden to the modern mind when considering any design of flowers on fabric. (See Figure [11]) We must remember that as modern viewers, influences like these and countless others have left their legacies in our cultural understanding of these motifs in art, along with the incalculable numbers of other developments in our visual comprehension that have occurred between the time of the 'Rainbow' Portrait and our own. Elizabethan or early Stuart viewers of this painting would have been working from a very different diet of influences, and they may well have taken away quite a different impression from this embroidery design.



Above: Figure [9] Jean-Honoré Fragonard, *The Swing*, c. 1767, The Wallace Collection, London.



Above: Figure [10] William Morris, *La belle Iseult*, 1859, oil on canvas, Tate, London.



Above: Figure [11] Laura Ashley's popular print design, *Honeysuckle Trail*, next to a close-up of the floral embroidery on Elizabeth's bodice in the 'Rainbow' Portrait. *Honeysuckle Trail* takes its inspiration from an antique wallpaper design, originally printed in 1912. The colour and composition of this mass-produced textile print make it appear very similar to the embroidery in the 'Rainbow' Portrait, if glanced at quickly.

The Gift Worth More than Money

Fortunately, in order to understand a more contemporary interpretation of embroidered artwork like that seen in the 'Rainbow' Portrait, we can look to research undertaken by modern scholars which addresses these themes. Several academics have explored the cultural, social, practical, philosophical and economic factors associated with needlework during this period; and the way it was used, viewed and experienced. Perhaps the most valuable to this discussion is the work of Janet Arnold, in the 1970s and 80s, which looked in great depth at the prevalence and importance of embroidery as represented in portraiture and other images of the early modern period. In *Queen Elizabeth's Wardrobe Unlock'd* (1988) she

demonstrated clearly that embroidery, and floral embroidery in particular, did have weight, both socially and financially. In fact, for some it was worth more than gold. In a short series of letters which Arnold dissected we follow the exploits of an anxious courtier, Anthony Wingfield, and his wife, who were apparently commissioned by Bess of Hardwick to sound out the Ladies of the Privy Chamber for a perfect New Year's gift for the queen.³ On the advice of Lady Sussex, a new cloak and safeguard, embroidered with pansies 'all mannar of coulloures'⁴ is chosen, instead of money or jewellery, and a great deal of care taken to ensure the design of the embroidery will be exactly to the queen's liking. Even the narrow, inch-wide size of the trimming (garde) is selected carefully, because the pansies 'wyll shoue best in a small garde'.⁵ The colour of the base fabric, 'a lyte wacheytt',⁶ is chosen because the queen currently 'hathe no garmentes off that colore'⁷ already, and the species of flower itself, the pansy, is picked because it is Elizabeth's favourite: 'ye queen lekes byst off that floware.'⁸

It is hoped, clearly, by all parties concerned in this exchange, that the work they put into designing and commissioning this embroidery will make the gift more valuable than the sum of its parts, and impress the queen as much as possible, gaining them favour.

Fortunately, they are successful in this wish: on the reception of the gift Elizabeth Wingfield is able to write back to Bess of Hardwick that they have all 'reped such recompence' for their efforts 'as could not dissire better.'⁹ The choice of colour, and design of the 'strange triminge' (the embroidered trim)¹⁰ along with the 'grat cost bestowed upon yt'¹¹ apparently

³ Arnold, *Wardrobe Unlock'd*, p. 95.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

impressed the queen very much, and it is the opinion of Elizabeth that, indeed, ‘if my lord and yow ladyship had geven v hundrd pound...yt would not have bene so well taken.’¹²

These letters show the significance of embroidered objects, in terms of the political and social relationships they served between the queen and her subjects. These themes were covered in more detail in 1997 by Lisa Klein, who examined the complexities of many such exchanges. ‘A gift of needlework,’ she wrote, ‘allowed the giver a moment of elaborate, often complex self-presentation that was at once personal and social, and often political as well.’¹³ Klein’s particular focus, in this instance, is the even greater value placed on needlework that was actually created by the giver; which ‘testified to hours spent in devotion and service to the recipient’.¹⁴ This is inarguably true. However, it also testifies to the recognition and understanding, among the elite classes at least, of the amount of time and skill which were required to create embroidery and needlework, whether made by the giver or not. As Klein explained, ‘the value of an item worked on cloth with silk and gold threads was compounded by the time invested, and by the message conveyed in its design.’¹⁵ As the Wingfields’ letters have shown above, this investment of time and thought was very important to those who were commissioning an embroidery, as well as those who were stitching it themselves.

This is worth mentioning, because it is important to remember that not all embroidery was ‘hand-made’ by a ‘humble handmaid’.¹⁶ Perhaps some of the modern tendency to view this kind of floral embroidery as something which may be less than completely luxurious also comes from the idea of the amateur needlewoman, working at home to produce charming ‘slips’ of floral designs, like these examples at the Victoria and Albert Museum. (See Figure [12]).

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Lisa M. Klein, ‘Your Humble Handmaid: Elizabethan Gifts of Needlework’, *Renaissance Quarterly*, 50 (1997), 459 – 493 (p. 483).

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 480, 483.



Above: Figure [12] embroidered ‘slips’ of flower motifs, sewn by an unknown amateur embroiderer, c. 1600, linen canvas, embroidered with silks in tent stitch, The Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

This image, of the well-to-do amateur needlewoman of times past, sitting in her leisure hours with her embroidery hoop in her lap, will feel familiar to most modern readers. It can be found, after all, in numerous examples of popular classic fiction. Jane Austen, for instance, featured some variation of it in every one of her novels. And ‘every variety of embroidery and needle-work’ are promoted among ‘those virtues which characterise the young English gentlewoman’ by Miss Pinkerton, teacher to Becky Sharp in Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair*.¹⁷ But this image, too, is problematic. Easily found in pattern books, herbals and bestiaries featuring illustrations of plants and flowers, floral designs like these certainly did make attractive and simple motifs when copied on to the hobbyist’s frame, and we know that, indeed, many such embroideries were stitched at home. We also know that in some instances, this needlework was performed by the lady of the house, as an ‘appropriate’ employment for a high-status

¹⁷ William Makepeace Thackeray, *Vanity Fair* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Ltd., 2001), p. 4.

woman. Several amateur works like this have survived, decorating examples of soft furnishings and linens once owned by members of the Tudor and early Stuart middle classes. Some are more skilfully executed than others. However, this narrative is very far from telling the whole story. As Patricia Wardle wrote in 1994, concerning modern scholarship of the history of English needlework, ‘the erroneous impression has all too often been given that embroidery in England was largely an amateur pursuit’,¹⁸ and as she went on to very clearly demonstrate in her examination of the life of Edmund Harrison, a successful and ambitious professional embroiderer of the seventeenth century, ‘this was far from the case, of course.’¹⁹

Woven with Silver, Embroidered with Gold

In Tudor and Stuart England, embroidery was not just a hobby, but an industry; and a skilled craft. It is difficult to judge, by simply looking at the second-hand, painted portrayal of the embroidery of Elizabeth’s bodice and sleeves in the ‘Rainbow’ Portrait, whether it was made by a professional or amateur hand, or just how much luxury it might have embodied in real terms. This is a shame, as these details would tell us a lot about the potential monetary value of this textile. We have records of embroidery bills and warrants from professional workshops around this time, and this evidence alone shows just how valuable and expensive professionally embroidered clothing could be.²⁰ However, although it is impossible to make this assessment from the painting alone, surviving textiles from this period, and analysis of one such textile in particular, can give us a very good idea of the likely origins and value of the ‘Rainbow’ Portrait bodice embroidery.

¹⁸ Patricia Wardle, ‘The King’s Embroiderer: Edmund Harrison (1590–1667) I. The Man and His Milieu’, *Textile History*, 25, 1 (1994), 29–59 (p. 29).

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ For example see: Arnold, *Wardrobe Unlock’d*, pp. 190 – 192.





Above, and previous page: Figures [13,14] The Bacton Altar Cloth, made by an unknown maker, c. 1590 – 1600, white ribbed silk with an additional weft of silver strip thread, embroidered with floral motifs in coloured silks, and gold and silver thread, owned by the Church of St. Faith, Bacton, Herefordshire, and on loan to Historic Royal Palaces, Hampton Court, Richmond Upon Thames. (Photo credit: Historic Royal Palaces).

In fact, the ‘Rainbow’ Portrait is almost unique in providing us with an opportunity to study the materiality of Elizabeth’s painted wardrobe, not merely through our observation of the portrait itself, but through a three-dimensional object, the survival of which from the Elizabethan fin-de-siècle may seem almost miraculous when compared with the utter dearth of similar artefacts from this era. The Bacton Altar Cloth, currently undergoing conservation at Hampton Court Palace, is a large embroidered silk textile which originally formed part of a luxurious skirt or forepart. At some point during its long life it was cut up, and made into an altar cloth, giving it a second life which has been the means of its preservation for the last four hundred years or so. For most of that time its home has been the Church of St Faith, in Bacton, Herefordshire. There it performed its function as an altar cloth, presumably until the



Above: Figure [15] The floral embroidery of the Bacton Altar Cloth, next to a close-up of the floral bodice from the ‘Rainbow’ Portrait. The composition and design of the motifs in both are noticeably similar. (Bacton Altar Cloth photo credit: Historic Royal Palaces).

end of its useful life, and was then preserved for generations as a cherished artefact, behind glass in a frame on the church wall. In composition, colour and in the design of its motifs it presents a striking similarity to the embroidery of the bodice in the ‘Rainbow’ Portrait. This resemblance is so striking, in fact, that it suggests an exciting possibility: that the painting and the cloth could represent both a depiction and physical portion of the very same garment. If this were the case, it would also suggest strongly, in corroboration with a number of other indicators, that the Bacton Altar Cloth once formed part of a skirt which was actually owned and worn by Elizabeth I herself.²¹ If so, this would make it unique, as almost nothing of the remains of her living wardrobe is known to have survived to the present day.²²

²¹ See: Eleri Lynn, ‘The Bacton Altar Cloth: Elizabeth I’s “long-lost skirt”’, *Costume*, 52, 1 (2018), 3 – 25.

²² Lynn, *Altar Cloth*, pp. 5 – 6.



Above: Figure [16] The Bacton Altar Cloth, c. 1590 – 1600, white ribbed silk with an additional weft of silver strip thread, embroidered with floral motifs in coloured silks, and gold and silver thread, owned by the Church of St. Faith, Bacton, Herefordshire, on loan to Historic Royal Palaces, Hampton Court, Richmond Upon Thames. This photograph shows the back of the cloth, where some of the original vibrant colour of the embroidery threads is still evident. (Photo credit: Natalie Bramwell-Booth).

Such exciting prospects aside, the Bacton Altar Cloth can certainly tell us a great deal, perhaps more than ever before, about the physical properties of any gown worn by the queen: and in particular, about the likely properties of the embroidery featured on the bodice in the ‘Rainbow’ Portrait. And in an analysis of this textile, the question over the professional or amateur origins of the floral embroidery is immediately answered. There can be no doubt that the author of the Bacton Altar Cloth embroidery was a professional, and one of the highest calibre. As Eleri Lynn explained, in her examination of the cloth in 2018, even when compared with other surviving textiles from this period, the quality and craftsmanship of the

embroidery of the Bacton Altar Cloth show it to be far superior.²³ Perfect in every detail, worked in tiny, professional-quality seed stitches, and presenting a range of design knowledge and compositional skill which marks it as a cut above the rest, a technical examination of this object alone, even with no consideration of its style or context, pronounces it to be almost un-mistakably the product of a royal workshop. The fact that the embroidery has been performed directly on to silver chamblet, or cloth-of-silver, which was a woven silk fabric constructed with threads of real silver metal running through the weave, serves to support this conclusion, and also to improve our recognition of the very high monetary value this garment must have held. To form an impression of the value of silver chamblet which we as a modern audience may find easier to comprehend, Lynn has pointed out that Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, once spent the same amount of money (£60) buying a suit made from this fabric that Shakespeare paid to purchase ‘New Place’, his grand final residence in Stratford-upon-Avon.²⁴ This house featured ten fireplaces, and enough acreage outside for two barns and an orchard. It is hard not to wonder just how many houses, barns, or other valuable chattel might have comprised the value of an entire ensemble made of such stuff for Elizabeth. A bodice or jacket and skirt fit for a queen would have required significantly more yardage to construct than Dudley’s suit.

Looking closely at the ‘Rainbow’ Portrait, tiny silver-coloured lines can also be observed, running through the weave of the creamy ground fabric on the queen’s bodice, behind and between the flowers and plants that cover its surface. (See Figure [17]). It is hard to resist pronouncing these little lines to be the artist’s effort to reproduce the effect of similar silver threads in this painted gown – and to demonstrate to the viewer, by doing so, the impressive wealth of the wearer of such an object. It is true that the ‘Rainbow’ Portrait does not present us with the rich velvet decorated with gold that the ‘Ermine’ Portrait does. But the

²³ Lynn, *Altar Cloth*, pp. 12 – 14.

²⁴ Lynn mentioned this in an interview for the Yale University Press blog: ‘Yale Books’, in November 2017. <https://yalebooksblog.co.uk/2017/11/17/elieri-lynn-lifts-the-lid-on-tudor-fashion/>

artist appears to have taken some pains to show us, with this delicate silver tracery, that Elizabeth's clothing is in fact not merely decorated with precious metal but *made* of it. The 'Rainbow' Portrait's message is subtler perhaps, but the actual value of both garments may be more comparable than first appears.



Above: Figure [17] A close-up from the 'Rainbow' Portrait, showing the silvery lines the artist has included in his intricate detailing of the floral bodice.



Above: Figure [18] Close-up details from of the back of the Bacton Altar Cloth. In these images it is possible to discern some of the subtle ‘needle painting’ stitches that have been made using two or more different coloured threads pulled through the eye of the same needle. In the bottom image, the inked lines of the design drawn by the embroiderer on to the fabric before they began sewing have been left partially uncovered, possibly deliberately as a subtle boast of craftsmanship.²⁵ Only a very confident embroiderer would draw with ink directly on to silver chamblet: a mistake would have been very costly indeed.²⁶ (Photo credit: Natalie Bramwell-Booth).

²⁵ Lynn, *Altar Cloth*, p. 14.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

As the analysis continues, so does the expense. Thus far, I have only given an appraisal of the base fabric itself. Add to this the cost of commissioning many hours of labour from the royal embroiderers' workshops, and supplying them with imported silk floss, dyed with expensive cochineal and indigo, fine silver and gold wires, and silver and gold threads to decorate their work, and the cost very quickly increases. Even the labour itself would have been especially intensive. While it is certainly true that the pearls and precious stones decorating the queen's clothing in many of her other portraits are very valuable, the skill of stitching them to a ribbon or rosette, to produce a simple repeat pattern, is very limited when compared with the artistry and concentration required to produce finely drawn depictions of living flowers using advanced 'needle painting' techniques. With a magnifying glass it is possible to discern in the Bacton Altar Cloth those areas where two or more slightly different shades of coloured silk have been pulled through the fabric in the eye of the same needle, in order to produce the subtlest possible grading of shade across the coloured surface of a petal or leaf, much as a painter mixes two pigments on the same brush to blend the colour on the canvas.²⁷ (See Figure [18]). Skill and execution cost money, and it is evident, from numerous sources like those cited above, that this would have been well known and appreciated by many contemporary viewers of the 'Rainbow' Portrait. As Lynn wrote, 'The quality and technique of the work would have been apparent to the Tudor courtier well versed in embroidery and needlecraft. It would have spoken of conspicuous wealth.'²⁸

Indeed, we can know for a fact that this kind of floral embroidery, featuring richly covered, dense designs of lifelike, colourful flowers on a pale ground, was a specific marker of 'conspicuous wealth' at this time. This is because of the enormous popularity that similar designs gained around the turn of the century, and then on into the early years of the Jacobean era. A great many wealthy women who sat for their portraits during this period wore a jacket

²⁷ Lynn, *Altar Cloth*, p. 13.

²⁸ Lynn, *Altar Cloth*, p. 14.

or other garment covered, as thickly and extensively as possible, with intricate, artistic floral needlework; and like most garments worn for a portrait by a member of the social elite, these would have been chosen to display not just the fashion and taste of the sitter, but her wealth and ease as well. In fact, to an audience viewing this portrait during the first decade of the seventeenth century, detailed floral embroidery like this would have indicated, not simplicity at all, but status, power, and money. The distinctive design of upright rows of singular plant motifs in the ‘Rainbow’ Portrait and Bacton Altar Cloth may have been a little unusual, but the floral theme, and the technique, colour pallet and density of the needlework would have been an unmistakeable sign of fashion and wealth to a contemporary viewer.



Above: Figure [19] Marcus Gheeraerts the Younger, *Portrait of Margaret Layton (formerly Laton)*, c. 1620, oil on oak panel, The Victoria and Albert Museum, London; and, by an unknown English maker, *Jacket*, c. 1610 – 15, linen, embroidered with coloured silks, silver and silver-gilt thread, and lined with silk, The Victoria and Albert Museum, London. (Photo credit: The Victoria and Albert Museum, London).

Included here is a photograph of a portrait of Margaret Layton (formerly Laton), a wealthy middle-class woman dressed, according to the V&A's description, in 'the height of expensive fashion', to show off her status. (See Figure [19]). Beside her is displayed the floral embroidered jacket she is wearing in the portrait; a beautiful survival and proof of the importance and monetary value of such clothing. Examination of the jacket shows that it has not only been preserved with care by its owners, but that the fastenings and trims have even been carefully altered over time, to meet the changing fashions and make its wearable life last as long as possible.²⁹ At the time the portrait was painted, around 1620, the embroidered jacket was in fact already about ten years old; Margaret has disguised its unfashionably low waistline for the period by tying a red silk petticoat and apron high across her middle.³⁰ An embroidered garment like this would have been far too valuable to give up simply because the cut was no longer in style; and as she has chosen to wear it while sitting for her portrait, it seems likely that it was the most expensive item in her wardrobe.

For Eleri Lynn, the very presence of the floral embroidery design in the 'Rainbow' Portrait indicates that this style of embroidery was probably 'particularly fashionable' around c.1600, when the 'Rainbow' Portrait is thought to have been painted.³¹ This makes sense because, as she suggested, it seems logical that 'only the most fashionable clothing' would have been depicted in any portrait of the queen. This is especially true of one which had probably been commissioned, like the 'Rainbow' Portrait, by a courtier wishing to impress his contemporaries. Simply put, it is worth remembering that floral embroidery of this kind would never have become so popular amongst the wealthy portrait sitters of the period, if it did not look, in their eyes, very definitely 'rich'.

²⁹ Janet Arnold, *Patterns of Fashion 3, The cut and construction of clothes for men and women c1560 – 1620* (London: Macmillan, 1985), p. 51.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Lynn, *Altar Cloth*, p. 19.

Conclusion

Considering the technical and stylistic aspects discussed in this chapter, it is clear that the ‘Rainbow’ Portrait’s ensemble would not have been considered by a contemporary audience as anything less than extremely luxurious, and would not have been seen as any less of a representation of status, power, and ‘weight’, than the velvet and frogging to be found in other portraits of the queen. The floral bodice and sleeves in the ‘Rainbow’ Portrait indeed would not have appeared any less impressive than the rest of the queen’s wardrobe; and in fact were the more fashionable signifiers of material wealth and status at the time. Astraea’s home, the ‘flower-decked’,³² Eden-like ‘golden age’,³³ to which Yates and Strong found reference in these garments, does not sit well with such worldly connotations. That realm was a spiritual place, like the archetypal pastoral idyll, where money, social hierarchies and material possessions were non-existent: food grew by itself for free, and ‘gentle zephyrs with warm breath played with the flowers that sprang unplanted’.³⁴ If an evocation of this innocent paradise is woven into the symbolism of the floral embroidery in the ‘Rainbow’ Portrait, it is in real danger of being crowded out by the certain presence of much louder, more material messages, about fashion, prestige, and indulgent earthly luxury. It is therefore necessary for us to consider a different possibility: that such an evocation is not present at all, and that in fact the meaning behind this floral embroidery is not the promotion of a spiritual ideal of justice and purity, but instead a simple celebration of conspicuous consumption.

³² Strong, *Cult*, p. 50.

³³ Yates, *Astraea*, pp. 217 – 8.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 217.

Chapter Three: The Presence of the Patron: Deciphering Visual

References to Robert Cecil in the 'Rainbow' Portrait

Introduction

As Maria de Jesus C. Relvas elegantly expressed in 2014, the commissioning of a portrait of Elizabeth I was an opportunity for the patron of the work not merely to pay tribute to the queen, but also to take hold, literally, of her image, and figuratively, of her body, and dress it: 'wrapping the "Body Politic"'¹ in whatever visual metaphor one might choose (and be permitted) to employ. The queen in these moments, depicted and immortalised by her most powerful contemporaries, was always, to some extent, at their mercy; although they too, of course, were also always at hers. This delicate balance of power was addressed by Louis Adrian Montrose in *The Subject of Elizabeth: Authority, Gender and Representation*, in 2006, in which Montrose also wrote that 'Elizabethan subjects who commissioned and paid for portraits of the Queen ... were likely to have been motivated not only by devotional impulses but also by self-interested strategies'.² This chapter will examine some of the visual messages in the 'Rainbow' Portrait which seem to relate, not to Elizabeth herself, but to the 'self-interested strategies' of the painting's commissioner, thought to be Robert Cecil.

This examination will focus on three specific pieces of imagery present in the portrait. Each of these has been ascribed a meaning by previous scholars, relating to the queen herself; but all of them could be referring to the Cecil family instead. The mantle or cloak, decorated with eyes and ears, holds an emblematic message which has been discussed by numerous

¹ Maria de Jesus C. Relvas, 'Icons of Supremacy and the Birth of an Empire', in *Reviewing Imperial Conflicts*, ed. by Ana Cristina Mendes and Cristina Baptista (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014), pp. 84 – 93 (p. 88).

² Louis Montrose, *The Subject of Elizabeth: Authority, Gender, and Representation* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2006), p 105.



Above: Figure [20] Unknown artist, after John De Critz the Elder, *Robert Cecil, 1st Earl of Salisbury*, 1602, oil on panel, The National Portrait Gallery, London.

scholars in relation to two sources: Cesare Ripa's *Iconologia*, and John Davies' *Conference Between an Usher and a Post*, performed at Robert Cecil's entertainment for Elizabeth at Salisbury House in 1602. Both of these suggest a link in the 'Rainbow' Portrait with ideas of good government, and effective intelligence gathering, which the majority of scholars have previously interpreted as relating to Elizabeth's own powers and talents. Taking inspiration from Susan Doran's reinterpretation of the serpent and heart motif on Elizabeth's sleeve, in which she found an additional reference to the 'wise counsel' of William or Robert Cecil, rather than just to Elizabeth herself,³ this chapter will offer evidence for a similar reinterpretation of the mantle, suggesting a connection with the powers and talents of Robert Cecil. The embroidered plants which cover the bodice, as discussed previously in this paper, have been connected in the past with Elizabeth's personification as the springtime goddess 'Astraea'. This chapter will draw on contemporary sources and herbal guide books to show how they could in fact relate instead to Robert or William Cecil; who were both enthusiastic gardeners and supporters of the proto-botanical sciences. The crescent moon jewel which sits at the top of Elizabeth's headdress has been viewed in the past as a reference to Elizabeth's personification as Diana, Cynthia, or another 'moon goddess'. This chapter will demonstrate that it could also have had another cryptic connotation, as a jewelled 'C', for 'Cecil'.

The Mantle Covered with Eyes and Ears: a Compliment or a Boast?

The importance of iconography which celebrates the queen in many (if not all) of her portraits, is clear. But it is in these images, too, that some of the most interesting appropriations of the queen's visual power have taken place. Roy Strong addressed an example of this kind of appropriation by a patron in 1977, in his interpretation of the 'Procession' portrait of Elizabeth I. Here he established a potential primary purpose for the

³ Doran, *Virginity, Divinity*, p. 191.

painting in promoting the career of its patron, the Earl of Worcester.⁴ Susan Doran also explored this practice in ‘Virginity, Divinity and Power: The Portraits of Elizabeth I’, in 2003, finding that ‘...patrons evidently not only experimented with devising novel and fashionable ways of representing their monarch but also gave careful thought to methods of incorporating signs or symbols to denote their own status, intimacy with the queen, or political standpoints.’⁵

In seeking to establish the meaning and intention behind the ‘Rainbow’ Portrait, it would make sense to follow Doran’s lead in this case and examine the painting for signs or symbols to denote the ‘status, intimacy with the queen, or political standpoints’ of its own patron, thought to be Robert Cecil, 1st Earl of Salisbury. Mary Hazard, in 1990, clearly identified the numerous visual word games that appear in many of Elizabeth’s portraits, including those to be found in the ‘Rainbow’ Portrait,⁶ and Doran, in her paper, examined the almost verbal comprehension which can be placed on the combination of the serpent and the heart on Elizabeth’s sleeve. In her analysis, she discussed an alternative to Roy Strong’s ideas about this emblem, and a development of those of Frances Yates. Both Strong and Yates discussed the idea of a combined meaning for the serpent and the heart. For Strong, the serpent, with a heart shaped ruby hanging from its mouth, represented the queen’s passions (denoted by the heart) which are ruled by her wisdom and reason (denoted by the serpent).⁷ Yates explained it differently. ‘This serpent of wisdom’, she wrote, ‘is wise both in the things of the intelligence...and in the things of the heart, knowing how, through good counsel, to make wise and virtuous decisions’.⁸ Doran, like Yates, used the *Iconologia*, to interpret the combined emblem. However, she found that the serpent and the heart may in fact combine

⁴ Strong, *Cult*, p 46.

⁵ Doran, *Virginity, Divinity*, p. 190.

⁶ Mary E. Hazard, ‘The Case for "Case" in Reading Elizabethan Portraits’, *Mosaic*, 23, 2 (1990) 61 – 88. For the ‘Rainbow’ Portrait in particular, see p. 76.

⁷ Strong, *Cult*, pp. 50 – 2.

⁸ Yates, *Astraea*, p. 217.



Above: Figure [21] A close-up of the coiled serpent ornament on Elizabeth's left sleeve, from the 'Rainbow' Portrait. From its mouth hangs a heart-shaped ruby, dangling from a chain. These two emblems, the serpent of intelligence, and the heart of counsel (see Figure [22]) can be combined to form the phrase: 'wise counsel', or 'good advice'. (Attributed to Isaac Oliver, *The 'Rainbow' Portrait of Elizabeth I*, c. 1600, oil on canvas, Hatfield House, Hertfordshire)



Above: Figure [22] Two woodcut illustrations by an unknown artist from Cesare Ripa's *Iconologia*. Left: 'Intelligenza', or Intelligence, from the first illustrated edition (Rome: Appresso Lepido Facij, 1603), p. 240; and Right: 'Consiglio', or Counsel, from the 1618 extended edition (Padua: P. P. Tozzi, 1618), p. 100.

to produce something quite different: 'wise counsel';⁹ i.e. good advice. In this configuration, the serpent, still representing 'Intelligence', 'Wisdom' or 'Prudence', connects with the heart, which Ripa described as representing 'Counsel', or advice, which comes from the heart. Thus the two elements are brought together, like words, to produce a visual phrase.¹⁰ Doran also made a move towards developing this discussion further, when she suggested that such a reinterpretation, taking this new emblematic meaning into account, would seem to point to an intelligent advisor, (i.e. probably William or Robert Cecil, both the queen's privy councillors), rather than to the queen herself.¹¹ Such an interpretation begs an additional

⁹ Doran, *Virginity, Divinity*, p. 191

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

question: could some, if not all, of the other emblematic and symbolic motifs woven into this painting also refer, not just to the queen, but to one or both of the Cecils?

Although Robert Cecil is the most likely candidate for the commissioning of this portrait, he is not the only Cecil whose work or character may be represented. His father, William, is also a likely figure. Lord Burghley, although dead by the time the portrait is thought to have been painted, could have been memorialised by his son in this image. There are a few motifs which may suggest this. The ‘wise counsel’ which the serpent and heart refer to could have been Burghley’s as well as Robert’s, for example. After all, of the two, William Cecil was councillor to the queen for far longer than his son. Both men also held another position, as acquirers of intelligence for the crown. This may also be referenced by Elizabeth’s clothing. It has been well established that some form of reference to the gathering of information and intelligence must surely be offered by the eyes, ears and mouths decorating Elizabeth’s mantle, for example. For Roy Strong, who in 1977 quoted John Davies’ poetic claim that ‘many things she sees and hears through them, but the Judgement and the Election are her own’,¹² they symbolised ‘those who watched and listened to purvey their intelligence’ to the queen.¹³ Janet Arnold, in 1988, pointed to another figure from the *Iconologia*.¹⁴ ‘Ragione di Stato’, or ‘The Art of Government’, is described by Ripa as a woman dressed in a garment covered in eyes and ears. These symbolise ‘her desire to have the eyes and ears of spies’.¹⁵ Susan Frye, writing in 1993, noted, in the eyes and ears, ‘a sense of governmental surveillance’.¹⁶ For Daniel Fischlin, in 1997, ‘the function of the eyes and ears is political service that gives ‘intelligence’’.¹⁷ An implied reference to Robert Cecil,

¹² Strong, *Cult*, p. 52.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Arnold, *Wardrobe Unlock'd*, pp. 81 – 2.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 81.

¹⁶ Susan Frye, *Elizabeth I: The Competition for Representation*, Oxford University Press, 1993, p. 103.

¹⁷ Fischlin, p. 183.



Above: Figure [23] ‘Ragione di Stato’, or ‘The Art of Government’, a woodcut illustration by an unknown artist from Cesare Ripa’s *Iconologia* (Rome: Appresso Lepido Facij, 1603), p. 427.

as ‘master of the queen’s intelligence service’¹⁸ was also suggested in 1987 by Mary C. Erler, though to her the reference was a self-deprecating one. In this work Erler drew on the same work by John Davies which supplied Strong with his quote; this was a short theatrical dialogue, sometimes titled *A Conference between a Gentleman Usher and a Post* (or something to similar effect), which is thought to have been performed as part of the

¹⁸ Mary C. Erler, ‘Sir John Davies and the Rainbow Portrait of Queen Elizabeth’, *Modern Philology*, 84, 4 (1987), 359 – 371 (p. 370).

entertainment for Elizabeth at Robert Cecil's house party in the Strand in December 1602. In the dialogue, an Usher is approached by a Post (a deliverer of letters), who is looking for Robert Cecil (the Queen's Secretary of State), in order to give him an important letter from the Emperor of China. Via a series of complimentary exchanges disclosing Elizabeth's superior intelligence, independence, knowledge of languages, fame, excellent leadership skills and personable manners, he is admonished by the Usher and persuaded to deliver his letter of state, not to Cecil, but directly to the queen herself instead. For Erler, as for Strong, the mantle in the 'Rainbow' Portrait 'embodies visually' some of these themes from Davies' dialogue.¹⁹

Cecil was Davies' patron, and according to Erler, 'in its courtly deprecation of Cecil, the evening's host, Davies' work reveals his patron's hand'.²⁰ It is certainly true that the dialogue 'can be read as a tribute to Elizabeth's abilities ... which emphasizes the queen's skills by deprecating those which might be thought to belong particularly to her host';²¹ and this was almost certainly just the kind of self-effacing compliment that Robert Cecil would have wanted to deliver. The whole point of a worshipful 'entertainment' for the queen was to flatter her as much as possible, after all. Erler also suggested, however, that 'the robe of eyes and ears'²² in the 'Rainbow' Portrait is also fulfilling exactly the same task. She conjectured that the 'Rainbow' Portrait's mantle was actually a depiction of a real garment, presented to Elizabeth as a gift from her host 'which concluded that December night's entertainment' but also 'summed up its themes'.²³ The intelligence gathering 'abilities', then, which the mantle in the 'Rainbow' Portrait represent, in Erler's interpretation, though numerous, centre not on

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

Robert Cecil, but on the queen's own 'controlling intelligence'; depicted in '*An Usher and a Post*' as being far superior to Cecil's own.²⁴

However, although the language of Davies' dialogue undoubtedly supports Erler's view, it does not necessarily follow that the visual language of the 'Rainbow' Portrait is doing the same thing. If we turn Erler's assessment on its head for a moment, and look in the painting, not for a compliment, but a boast, then the imagery of the eyes and ears on the mantle takes on quite a different light. If they refer to a 'political service that gives intelligence', and Robert Cecil was 'master of the queen's intelligence service', the mantle could simply be referring to Cecil's mastery of this skill, and his attainment of this enviable position. Even in the guise of a self-deprecating compliment to the queen, a humble brag of that kind must have been a possible, if not an unavoidable part of that symbolism. There is also some reason to suppose, looking at the other apparent visual references to the Cecils in the 'Rainbow' Portrait, like the 'wise counsel' highlighted by Susan Doran, that this painting is in fact far more daringly self-serving than might have previously been thought. It is worth noting, too that the eyes and ears of the mantle cover and enwrap the queen, possibly suggesting a protective, or even controlling element to this particular bit of symbolism. This may indeed echo the large size and overpowering centrality of composition of the serpent, too.

One further piece of evidence appears to support the idea that the mantle refers to Robert Cecil, rather than Elizabeth. In the *Iconologia*, there is another emblematic personification dressed in a garment decorated with eyes and ears. This is the figure of the spy, who is draped in a mantle or cape covered in eyes, ears and tongues, and this figure would in fact seem to be the most likely source for the inspiration for the mantle in the 'Rainbow' Portrait. (See Figure [24]). Unlike Ripa's other figures 'Gelosia', 'Ragione di

²⁴ Ibid.

Stato', or 'Fame', which all also feature the motif of eyes and ears, 'Spia', 'The Spy', is wearing the correct garment: a mantle, which the others are not; and the design also features a mouthpart (the tongue) along with the eyes and ears, similar to the mouths which cover the mantle in the 'Rainbow' Portrait. The cloak of the spy would also be the most logical image to connect to the queen's 'spy master', Robert Cecil. However, 'Spia' is a late addition to the *Iconologia* and does not appear until an extended edition, printed in Padua in 1618.²⁵ A reference to this specific motif in the 'Rainbow' Portrait therefore seems unlikely, unless the portrait was painted several years later than has been supposed; however, a similar theme may well have come to the artist from another source before that time.



Above: Figure [24] 'Spia', or The Spy, a woodcut illustration by an unknown artist from Cesare Ripa's *Iconologia*, (Padua: P. P. Tozzi, 1618), p. 493.

²⁵ Cesare Ripa, *Iconologia*, (Padua, 1618), p. 493.

An Embroidered Garden, a Celebrated Gardener

As Elizabeth Woodhouse wrote in 1999, ‘much of the diverse and symbolic spirit of the Elizabethan garden may be visualized’ through the ‘Rainbow’ Portrait.²⁶ To spot another potential boast, we have to come back to the floral embroidery; or more specifically, its composition. It is worth noting that each plant is shown complete with the stem, leaves and flowers. As discussed in Chapter One of this paper, each of these motifs seems almost to be an attempt to represent an accurate illustration of the plant, as scientifically as possible, rather than a simplistic mimicry of its attractive qualities for the purposes of decoration. A particularly interesting and distinctive design element, too, is the depiction of the sliced end of the stem of the plant in several of the motifs, which is turned up towards the viewer, to show the dissection of the cut stem itself. As an artistic touch, this is powerful: it is almost as if, in an attempt to show off or highlight the verisimilitude of the embroidered plants, each motif has been designed to look as though it were a real, living frond, that moment freshly cut from its bed, and laid upon the fabric for our perusal. However, it comes, not from art, but once again, from science.

The depiction of cut fronds, or ‘scions’ in herbal guides was not uncommon in this era, and claims its roots in much older historical bestiaries, herbariums and pattern books which would have been copied and handed down through the generations from the very earliest days of the Tudor dynasty (see Figures [25] and [26]). The scions are cut in such a way in order to make them easier to graft on to a root stock or to re-plant: a reference to the important technical knowledge required for propagation and gardening.

²⁶ Woodhouse, p. 25.



Above: Figure [25] A scientific illustration by an unknown artist of a rose from John Gerard's *The herball, or, Generall historie of plantes* (London: Bollifant and Norton, 1597), p. 1085. Note the appearance of the sliced stem at the base; and the presentation of a bud, a full blossom and a finished flower head containing seeds, all on the same stem. This is another example of the 'absolute' or 'complete' illustration type popular with naturalists like Fuchs and Gessner, and present in the design of the 'Rainbow' Portrait as shown in Chapter One.



Above: Figure [26] A selection of plant images from *The Tudor Pattern Book*, c. 1520-1530, Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS. Ashmole 1504. Note the sliced ends of several of the stems: these are 'scions' used for propagation. In these illustrations the ends of the cut stems often flick up to one side, making an attractive shape which also reveals the interior of the stem. This effect is reproduced in the embroidered bodice in the 'Rainbow' Portrait as well as the plant motifs of the Bacton Altar Cloth.



Above (top): Figure [27] By an unknown British maker, *Long Cushion Cover*, c. 1600, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, USA. Above (bottom): Figure [28] By an unknown English maker, *Coif*, c. 1580, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, USA. (Photo credit: Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia).



Above: Figure [29] Unknown maker, The Bacton Altar Cloth, c. 1590 – 1600, white ribbed silk with an additional weft of silver strip thread, embroidered with coloured silks and gold and silver thread, Hampton Court Palace, Richmond Upon Thames. Just the middle panel is shown here. (Photo credit: Historic Royal Palaces).

However, it is not just the ‘scion’-like shape of the motifs which suggests a connection between the embroidered plants of the ‘Rainbow’ Portrait, and the living plants cultivated by herbalists and gardeners. It is also the large variety of species depicted in the embroidery. Many examples of floral textile decoration from the Elizabethan era, just like floral decoration today, presented deliberately stylised, unnatural looking plants and blossoms. This is because they were created to look attractive, rather than to be scientifically accurate; to produce a symmetry, perfection and repetition not found in nature, but enjoyed by the human eye. Also common, then as now, were repeating floral patterns, where a small number of individual floral motifs would be replicated, connected by scrolling foliage, and repeated in a certain order, to produce a geometrically pleasing strip or carpet of decoration. (See Figures [27] and [28]). In these examples an interconnected scrolling floral design is shown, which was more typical of fashionable floral embroidery of this period. This is quite

different from the distinctive separation of motifs in the design of the Bacton Altar Cloth (see Figure [29]) and the bodice embroidery in the ‘Rainbow’ Portrait. In these instances, although the pattern of composition is repeated, the species are apparently not: in both we see a large variety of different plants depicted, without obvious repetition of motifs. Some years after the floral embroidery of the Bacton Altar Cloth was made, another embroiderer decorated the spaces between the plant motifs, filling the gaps with little animals and storybook narratives. However, in Figure [29] it is still possible, especially in the top row, to see the distinct separation and spacing there would have been between the individual motifs in the original design.

Although the design can still be described as a pattern, due to repetitions of spacing, size and orientation – the plants are presented in a series of rows, the same way up, roughly the same size, and evenly spaced – it would perhaps be fair to describe the motifs in both the Bacton Altar Cloth and the bodice of the ‘Rainbow’ Portrait as unusually individualised, when compared with examples of similar textiles and paintings of the era. There are a small number of other examples of embroidery which look quite similar to that of the Bacton Altar Cloth and the ‘Rainbow’ Portrait, visible in other portraits of a similar period. One example is the petticoat of Countess Vernon, in a portrait *c.* 1600, and another is in a further portrait of Elizabeth I, painted a little earlier *c.* 1580-85 (see Figures [30] and [31]). Both of these designs also feature fairly naturalistic, upright plants, ‘scions’, on a light background, in equally spaced but unconnected rows. The composition is therefore very similar; and at first glance they may appear a close match for the designs in the ‘Rainbow’ Portrait and the Bacton Altar Cloth. However, by observing the individual motifs in these two other paintings more closely, it is possible to see that they are in fact quite different. In both, only a very small number of species of plants are represented, and in both there are several repetitions of motifs.



Above: Figure [30] Marcus Gheeraerts the Elder, *The 'Wanstead' or 'Welbeck' Portrait of Elizabeth I*, c. 1585, oil on panel, The Harley Foundation, Welbeck, Nottinghamshire.



Above: Figure [31] Unknown artist, *Elizabeth Vernon, Countess of Southampton*, c. 1600, panel painting, Boughton House, Kettering, Northamptonshire.

There is also a clear ordering of the motifs, to produce deliberate repeat patterns. This is very different from both the Altar Cloth and the ‘Rainbow’ Portrait, where the intention seems to have been quite the reverse: to give the impression that there are no repeats at all, but endless variety. This makes it seem likely that the intention of the designer was to create a celebration of that very variety itself. This would probably have been intended to echo the glorious variety of nature, or of God’s creation, of course. However, it may also be referencing the impressive job humankind has done, of meticulously documenting so much of it. These precisely arranged little rows of species echo the neatly catalogued lists of plants and virtues to be found in contemporary ‘herbal’ books of the period. Just like the careful detailing of the full reproductive cycle already mentioned in Chapter One, this surely demonstrates a pre-occupation, not just with art, but with science; and with the burgeoning botanical sciences in particular.

Such a reference might suggest another interesting connection with the Cecil family, and in particular William Cecil, Lord Burghley. Burghley was a well-known patron of the herbal arts and enthusiastic gardener. Like many nobles at this time, both Robert and William promoted themselves as supporters of learning, and worked to foster both scientific and philosophical endeavour. As well as nurturing various cultural contributions by sponsoring the work of artists like Isaac Oliver and poets like John Davies, they both also lent their support in more practical areas of study. William gained a reputation as a lover of horticulture, through his interest in the cultivation of exotic species in his own gardens.²⁷ Importantly, he also supported and patronised the work of others. He was often recognised for his contribution to the advancement of knowledge in this area (albeit in a sometimes self-

²⁷ B. W. Beckingsale, *Burghley: Tudor Statesman* (London: Macmillan, 1967), p. 263.

serving, or perhaps even toadying, manner), by his fellow proto-botanists. John Gerard, for example, dedicated his popular herbal guide to William (as Lord Burghley), in 1597, as well as his *Catalogus Arborum* of 1599, and an edition of Thomas Hill's *Gardener's Labyrinth* was also dedicated to Burghley.²⁸ Robert Cecil, too, was interested in investing in this area. A 'keen gardener' himself, he even took over a part of Gerard's own gardens adjoining Somerset House in 1605.²⁹ He was also praised by some as 'improving' on the gardens of his father, after his death.³⁰ Taking all this into account, a reference in the 'Rainbow' Portrait to gardening, cultivation and plant knowledge, must also be viewed as another possible allusion to the achievements of one or both of the Cecils.

A 'C'-shaped moon

Many scholars have pointed to the crescent moon-shaped jewel that tops the crown in the unusual headdress Elizabeth is wearing in the 'Rainbow' Portrait, and made a connection between this object's shape and the cult of Elizabeth I as a 'moon goddess' (for example, Cynthia or Diana).³¹ (See Figure [32]). This connection works on more than one level, as the rainbow which Elizabeth holds in her right hand is almost undoubtedly also a reference to her personification as Diana the Huntress, who is often represented holding her bow in the same manner. The bow has here been replaced with a rainbow, or 'rain-BOW', in a visual pun. As such, it works very nicely with the crescent moon headdress, which is also a common part of Diana's ensemble in her visual representations.

²⁸ Ibid.

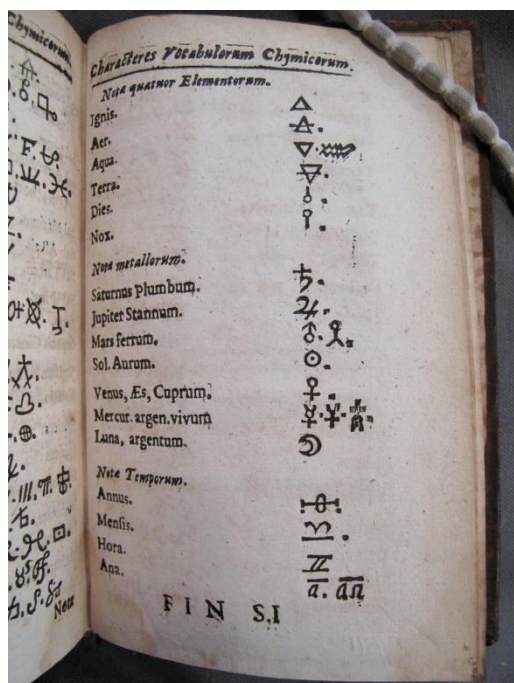
²⁹ Charles E. Raven, *English Naturalists from Neckam to Ray: A Study of the Making of the Modern World*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1947), p. 243

³⁰ Edward Nares, *Memoirs of the Life and Administration of the Right Honourable William Cecil, Lord Burghley, Secretary of State in the Reign of King Edward VI and Lord High Treasurer of England in the Reign of Queen Elizabeth*, (London: Colburn and Bentley, 1831), p. 215.

³¹ For example see: Woodhouse, p. 25, or Yates, *Astraea*, p. 217.



Above: Figure [32] A close-up of the crescent moon brooch from the 'Rainbow' Portrait. (Attributed to Isaac Oliver, *The 'Rainbow' Portrait of Elizabeth I*, c. 1600, oil on canvas, Hatfield House, Hertfordshire).



Above left: Figure [33] A page of alchemical characters from William Johnson's *Lexicon chymicum, cum obscuriorum verborum, et rerum hermeticarum, tum phrasium Paracelsicarum, in scriptis ejus* (London, 1652 -3), Marsh's Library, Dublin, Ireland. (Photo credit: Marsh's Library, Dublin). Note the alchemical symbol for the Moon (Luna), and Silver (Argentum) is a traditional, left-pointing crescent.



Above right: Figure [34] (Unknown artist, *An Astronomer (or Aristotle, or Elucidarius)*, a woodcut illustration from *Elucidarius*, (Stainer: Augsburg, 1540).

However, as a representation of a crescent moon, this object is puzzling: because it is facing the wrong way. In fact, the orientation of the crescent here is problematic for two reasons. Firstly, the classical crescent, which represents the moon goddess in classical literature and imagery, and was worn by Diana the Huntress, points *upwards*: creating an effect like horns. Thus the moon goddess is sometimes also referred to as a ‘horned’ goddess: ‘Diana represents the moon; therefore she appears horned’, wrote Benjamin Martin in 1737.³² This is an established part of the symbolism of the crescent, and clearly evident in several images of the goddess produced around this period. (For example, see Figure [35]). Diana, like most other moon goddesses, is most often depicted with her crescent moon forming the horns of her headdress; rather than pointing jauntily off to the side as it is in the ‘Rainbow’ Portrait.

This leads us to the second problem: the fact that the crescent is pointing to the *right*. The symbol of the crescent moon, which certainly does represent the moon and was a recognised symbol in sixteenth and seventeenth-century astrology and alchemy, always points to the *left*: indicating the waxing phase of the moon’s progress. (See Figures [33] and [34]). The very word, ‘crescent’, is derived from the present participle of the Latin verb *crescere* “to grow”: denoting the ‘growing’ or waxing moon (*luna crescens*).³³ The fact that this crescent noticeably points to the right, as if signifying the ‘waning’ phase of the moon, (even if it is at a slightly jaunty angle), might mean one, or both, of two things. It may be a significant hint at the ‘waning’, of the reign of the queen. Or, even more simply than that, and perhaps forming a symbol far easier to decipher than all the other symbols in this painting: it might also be a letter of the alphabet. In conjunction with and in light of the other potential

³² Benjamin Martin, *Bibliotheca Technologica; or, a philological library of literary arts and sciences, etc.*, (London: John Noon, 1737), p. 123.

³³ See: The Oxford English Dictionary, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), entry: ‘Crescent’, etymology.



Above: Figure [35] Francesco Rosaspina, after Antonio Correggio, *Diana in her Chariot* from ‘Pitture di Antonio Allegri detto il Correggio’ (series), 1800, The British Museum, London. This beautiful print was taken from Correggio’s c. 1520 fresco at the Camera di San Paolo (Chamber of St. Paul) in the former Monastery of San Paolo, in Parma, northern Italy. It shows the classical goddess Diana, wearing a crescent moon headdress in the typical style associated with her image. The tips of the crescent point directly upwards; giving her the look which inspired her sometime description as a ‘horned’ goddess.

references to the painting's patron, this leads us to a potentially interesting new significance. Could it be possible that the queen is actually wearing a big 'C' for 'Cecil' on her head? If so, it would surely place the possible intentions behind this image in an entirely new light.

Conclusion

This chapter has shown that a number of references to either Robert or William Cecil, and their various accomplishments and interests, can be found in the 'Rainbow' Portrait. The floral embroidery of the bodice suggests both Robert and William's interest in gardening and plant science. The 'wise counsel' indicated by the serpent and heart emblems on the sleeve of Elizabeth's dress refers to Robert's or William's wise counsel in their roles as advisors to the crown, rather than to Elizabeth's own wisdom. The eyes and ears which decorate the mantle, are a boast about their shared position as 'spy master' and head of intelligence gathering for the state, rather than a simple reference to the fame of their monarch. The crescent moon is really a letter 'C', pointing to a link with the Cecil family. This 'C' sits right at the top of the image: above the crown. The eyes and ears envelope and cover the queen, with the potentially controlling, or protective implication this must give. The enormous serpent obscures Elizabeth's arm, and dominates the whole image. Combined and interpreted in this way, all these references suggest a visual message about the intimacy of the relationship between the queen and the Cecil family, and the interplays of power within that relationship, which should not be ignored. They also necessarily suggest a quite different meaning for the portrait as a whole, one less eulogistic, and more pragmatic, and more self-serving on the part of Robert Cecil than we have ever previously imagined.

Chapter Four: Dismantling the ‘Rich Mantle’ of Eyes and Ears: an Impossible Gift in the Midst of a Very Real ‘Gifting Dynamic’.

Introduction

One purpose has been suggested for the ‘Rainbow’ Portrait by more than one scholar: that it in some way played a role in a ceremonial party or event at which the queen was given gifts. Frances Yates, writing in 1952, considered the possibility that the painting could be related ‘to a ceremonial tilt’;¹ she also compared it with the ‘Ditchley’ Portrait, ‘said to commemorate a visit of Elizabeth to Sir Henry Lee at Ditchley in 1592’.² In 1959 she went on to wonder if ‘the clue [to the ‘Rainbow’ Portrait] may be that it records Elizabeth’s presence at some masque’, featuring the presentation of ‘allegories in her honour’.³ Roy Strong, in 1977, connected the ‘Rainbow’ Portrait to the queen’s visit to Robert Cecil in December of 1602,⁴ and Janet Arnold suggested another royal visit, this time to Sir Thomas Egerton at Harefield Place in July of the same year, as the inspiration for the painting.⁵

Arnold went on to make a further connection, with the ‘robe of rainebowes’:⁶ a real gift of a garment, which was presented to Elizabeth at this event. She even considered the possibility that Sir Thomas ‘may also have given Elizabeth the jewelled serpent’⁷ which she wears on her left sleeve in the ‘Rainbow’ Portrait, as an additional gift. This chapter will examine some of this evidence and draw on contemporary sources to weigh up the possibility of the ‘Rainbow’ Portrait having a connection of this kind. These will include one of two scripts of dialogue which were written by John Davies for the entertainment at the 1602 party

¹ Yates, *Astraea*, p. 219.

² Ibid. 218.

³ Ibid., pp. 220 – 221.

⁴ Strong, *Cult*, p. 52.

⁵ Arnold, *Wardrobe Unlock’d*, p. 83.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., p. 84.

at Salisbury House, and an eye witness account of this event from John Manningham, a diarist who attended.

The importance of the social contract in the giving and receiving of royal gifts during this period has also been addressed by numerous scholars in recent years. This chapter will use examples from Robert Cecil's personal correspondence at this time, as well as visual analysis of the 'Rainbow' Portrait itself, to examine Cecil's own position within this dynamic, and the possibility that he may have intended the 'Rainbow' Portrait to form a part of it in some way. In 1987, Mary Erler reviewed Roy Strong's suggested link with the Robert Cecil visit, and added a new connection: the gift of a 'rich mantle' which Elizabeth received at this event. To Erler, this 'rich mantle' was the same mantle Elizabeth wears in the 'Rainbow' Portrait: suggesting that at least one purpose of the painting was to celebrate and document this gift, as well as the event at which it was given.⁸ This chapter will use a comparative analysis with another portrait, the 'Hardwick' Portrait, thought to have been commissioned by Bess of Hardwick at some point in the 1590s, to review this possibility, and demonstrate its complexity. The 'Hardwick' Portrait is thought almost certainly to have been a celebration of a royal gift of clothing, but a visual comparison with the 'Rainbow' Portrait reveals a number of key differences between the two paintings. This chapter will show how these differences suggest a much more complicated intention for the 'Rainbow' Portrait, than simply the documentation of a gift or gifting event.

The Power of Royal Gift Giving

The work of several scholars in recent years has provided an impressive wealth of information about the importance of royal gift giving in the Elizabethan period, and especially the giving of clothing and jewels to the queen. The careful transcription and analysis of Elizabeth's Wardrobe records of 1600 by Janet Arnold in 1988 has been very

⁸ Erler, p. 370.

influential in this area for the past thirty years;⁹ and interesting developments in the last decade or so include the transcription of the extensive New Year's Gift Rolls by Jane A. Lawson in 2013.¹⁰

The queen's 'progresses', which were prolonged tours of the nation hosted by various towns and individuals, have left behind several sources which offer us a glimpse into the many gifting ceremonies that took place during these events and their accompanying celebrations. 2014 saw the culmination of an extensive project transcribing and re-examining John Nichols' 1823 written record of a number of these royal visits, by Elizabeth Goldring, Faith Eales, Elizabeth Clarke and Jayne Elisabeth Archer, resulting in the publication of a new edition of this work with accompanying sources.¹¹ This project and its contributory research has opened up the scope for analysis of this subject, and seen a number of in-depth investigations published in recent years, several of them covering the intriguing socio-political role of gift giving. Of particular interest here is Mary Hill Cole's 2017 paper which finds that hospitality and gifts could be used by hosts, not merely to impress, but also to make political manoeuvres.¹²

As Felicity Heal explained in 2014, courtly gifts were 'public and highly visible...but also intimately personal'.¹³ In fact the 'language of gift giving'¹⁴ allowed for a much greater level of intimacy with the monarch than the usual conventions of social intercourse ever could. The implied reciprocity that the traditions of giving and receiving created enabled courtiers, in the guise of making an offering, to also make demands of Elizabeth. Sometimes

⁹ Arnold, *Wardrobe Unlock'd*, pp. 251 – 350.

¹⁰ Jane A. Lawson, *The Elizabethan New Year's Gift Exchanges, 1559-1603*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

¹¹ *The Progresses, Pageants, and Entertainments of Queen Elizabeth I*, ed. by Elizabeth Goldring and others (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

¹² Mary Hill Cole, 'Religious Conformity and the Progresses of Elizabeth I', in *Elizabeth I: Always Her Own Free Woman*, ed. by Carole Levin, Jo Eldridge Carney, and Debra Barrett-Graves (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), pp. 63 – 77.

¹³ Felicity Heal, *The Power of Gifts: Gift Exchange in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 4.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

these were teasing, or flirtatious: the example offered by Heal is a saucy suggestion of a marital obligation from the Earl of Leicester.¹⁵ But sometimes they concerned more formal exchanges.

In her 1999 book, *The Portable Queen*,¹⁶ Hill Cole had already noted the serious nature, and the reciprocal contract, that lay behind the ostentation and ritual of these events. It was the hosts' job to supply hospitality, adoration, and rich gifts to the queen: it was her job to return the favour, by offering what benefits and assistance her presence could provide. On one occasion, for example, it is recorded that Elizabeth 'thanked the people of Warwick for their gift, "praying God that I may perform, as Mr. Recorder saith, such benefyt as is hopid,"' in return.¹⁷ In fact, gifts, in many cases, though apparently given from motives of loyalty and generosity, were zealously recorded, remembered, and presented as evidence of what the crown owed the giver. In one letter from the Dowager Lady Russell to Robert Cecil in 1599 or 1600, she makes this implicit contract quite clear, listing the expenses she has gone to over a course of several years in supplying the queen with extravagant gifts, with the express purpose of obtaining her objective in return.¹⁸ This objective was the rights to the lease of some valuable tenanted land. To persuade Elizabeth to grant her this, Lady Russell has apparently given her 'a gown and petticoat...full dearly bought', 'a canopy of tissue with curtains of crimson taffety', 'two hats with two jewels' one of which was made of white beaver fur, the jewel of which was worth 'above a hundred pounds price'; as well as a substantial gift of '30l' (£30) of gold.¹⁹ After listing in detail all these fabulous presents, she comes to the point: 'Sir, I will be sworn that, in the space of 18 weeks, gifts to her Majesty

¹⁵ Ibid. pp. 3 – 4.

¹⁶ Mary Hill Cole, *The Portable Queen: Elizabeth I and the Politics of Ceremony*, (USA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999).

¹⁷ Ibid. p. 126.

¹⁸ Hatfield House Archives, a letter from Elizabeth, Dowager Lady Russell to Mr. Secretary [Robert Cecil], 5 March 1599/1600, transcribed in *Calendar of the Cecil Papers in Hatfield House: Volume 10, 1600*, ed. R A Roberts (London, 1904), pp. 46-71.

¹⁹ Ibid.

cost me above 500l in hope to have Dunnington lease'.²⁰ And her distress is understandable: 500l, or £500, would be worth the equivalent of about £2.5 million today.

Some scholars maintain that the social and economic politics of royal gift-giving in the Elizabethan court, by the end of Elizabeth's reign, had reached a depth of complexity and extravagance to rival any before or since. 'Elizabeth's subjects offered her gifts', as Lisa M. Klein explained in 1997, 'with an eye toward what they could expect in return',²¹ but things went much further than that. Klein's close examination of gift giving during this period went on to compare the ritualised giving of the Elizabethan court with ceremonial potlatch offerings: North American tribal ceremonies of presentation and sacrifice that can be so extreme, that the presenters are sometimes 'constrained to expend everything...and to keep nothing',²² i.e. to sacrifice all their possessions and become destitute, in their efforts to preserve social status and rights for their clans. This would seem like an extreme comparison, but Klein offered examples to support it: Sir Francis Walsingham, for instance, whose extravagant gifts to the queen put him into so much debt that his lands had to be sold upon his death to pay his creditors.²³ Klein also points us to many courtiers' 'conspicuous expenditures'²⁴ on things like hospitality, building and clothing, in aggressive efforts to prove their strength and maintain their positions. So many nobles in fact went into debt because of this behaviour that it 'undermined' the English aristocracy as a whole, according to Lawrence Stone's 1971 analysis of this particular dynamic: *The Crisis of the Aristocracy 1558-1641*, which Klein also cited.²⁵

Taking the importance of royal gifting into account, it seems appropriate to review the 'Rainbow' Portrait in more depth in terms of its potential purpose as a part of this dynamic in

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Lisa M. Klein, 'Your Humble Handmaid: Elizabethan Gifts of Needlework', *Renaissance Quarterly*, 50 (1997), 459 – 493, (p. 460).

²² Ibid. p. 463.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

some way. Robert Cecil gave many gifts to his queen: could this painting be documenting and celebrating one of them? The series of letters mentioned in Chapter Three demonstrates the effort that subjects would go to in order to commission gifts that would be acceptable, and Robert Cecil himself was not a stranger to such exchanges. Another letter from the family archives at Hatfield House, which must have formed part of a similar epistolary discussion between Cecil and its author, the Attorney General Sir Edward Coke, shows Cecil's own importance as a guide in such matters.²⁶ The letter concerns some arrangements for a royal visit to Coke's house in Stoke Poges, in 1601. On the subject of arranging a gift from himself to the queen to mark the occasion, Coke wrote: 'For the gown and jewel, whatsoever you shall think fit I will assent unto'.²⁷ His trust in Cecil in these matters is clear, as is his desperate desire to give the queen something she will like. He writes that he would rather spend 'above the sum your Honour mentioned than under, for I would give that which shall be acceptable, whatsoever it cost.'²⁸

Cecil was, of course, not just a guide to those wrestling with the pressures to please Elizabeth, but subject to those pressures himself. If we look at the care taken by Cecil in making arrangements for the entertainment and gifts for Elizabeth at the 1602 party in the Strand, it is clear how important it was to him to impress the queen on visits to his own home. For this lavish evening Cecil arranged a boat trip on the Thames, and a rich banquet, as well as the two masque performances written for the event by John Davies. The queen was also presented with a gift at this party. According to a description given by the diarist John Manningham, who seems to have attended the occasion, at the end of the staged dialogue between the Usher and Post which was put on to entertain the queen, the Post also 'presents

²⁶ Hatfield House Archives, a letter from the Attorney-General [Coke] to Sir Robert Cecil, 10 August 1601, transcribed in *Calendar of the Cecil Papers in Hatfield House: Volume 11, 1601*, ed. R A Roberts (London, 1906), pp. 313-332.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

hir with a rich mantle’.²⁹ This mantle was almost certainly a real gift of clothing from her host, presented to Elizabeth as part of the celebrations.

So could Cecil have commissioned this portrait, in part at least, to document and show off his expensive gift to the Queen? If he had made such a gift, commissioning a flattering portrait to show it off would be not mere self-aggrandizement, or toadying, but also a shrewd move, politically and personally. Any visitor to a Cecil home in which such an image was displayed would see a very obvious affirmation of the occupant’s power, wealth, and relationship with the queen. Some clues point towards this idea as a possibility. One is simply the extravagant luxury of the clothing depicted. The floral bodice, for example, as the Bacton Altar Cloth has shown, could have been very valuable indeed, and the mantle may have been made of cloth-of-gold, and lined with silver chamblet. Auerbach, in her examination of the portrait in 1971 noted the use by the artist of real gold leaf over the surface of the orange mantle.³⁰ This suggests an attempt to replicate the effect of gold fabric. A gift as rich as that would certainly have been an object worth celebrating and documenting.

The ‘Rainbow’ and the ‘Hardwick’ Portraits

Portraits that featured valuable gifts to Elizabeth I were not uncommon. The ‘Hardwick’ Portrait, for example, is thought to have been commissioned by Bess of Hardwick, Countess of Shrewsbury, to show off the magnificent apparel Elizabeth is wearing: a documentation of an extravagant gift to the queen from Bess herself, perhaps. (See Figure [36]). As Janet Arnold wrote in 1988, it seems likely that the elaborately embroidered and decorated clothing in this portrait was an expensive New Year’s gift from the countess to Elizabeth; perhaps even worked on by Bess

²⁹ Goldring, *Progresses*, p. 205.

³⁰ Auerbach, p. 59.



Above: Figure [36] Unknown artist, English School, *Queen Elizabeth I*, c. 1592/1598-9, Hardwick Hall, Derbyshire. Also known as the 'Hardwick' Portrait of Elizabeth I; this painting shows the impressively decorated apparel which may have been a gift from Elizabeth Talbot, Countess of Shrewsbury (Bess of Hardwick).

herself, who was ‘a notable needlewoman’.³¹ It is also quite possible that Bess ‘wanted to keep a record’ of her work, and gift, ‘for posterity’, and ‘commissioned the portrait for this reason’, as Arnold suggested.³²

It would therefore be logical, in trying to determine if the ‘Rainbow’ Portrait was also celebrating a royal gift, to examine the ‘Hardwick’ and ‘Rainbow’ Portraits together; and look for visual clues to support this idea. However, compositionally, these two paintings are so different that it is hard to feel they could possibly have been designed with the same aim in mind. In the ‘Hardwick’ Portrait, Elizabeth stands in a sumptuously decorated room, surrounded by lustrous textile furnishings. Her fingertips rest upon the velvet and gold-work embroidered cushions which have been piled on the throne beside her. Even beneath her feet the luscious pile of the carpet on which she stands has been carefully painted in. Not here the darkness and spidery lines of a cold and ancient archway, like that forming the mysterious backdrop to the ‘Rainbow’ Portrait. In the ‘Hardwick’ Portrait Elizabeth has been cosseted in a plush chamber of warm surfaces and lovingly crafted needlework. Every inch of her ensemble is visible and bright, from the tip of her toes to the top of her crown. Everything is neatly and symmetrically arranged, every garment has been tweaked into the proper position, to be shown off to perfection. It is a fashion plate. In fact, the extraordinary detail in which the textiles and jewellery in this portrait have been depicted contrast only with the clashing lack of sensitivity in the reproduction of Elizabeth’s person, in particular her rather unnatural stance, and unsubtly drawn facial features. Compare this with her face and posture in the ‘Rainbow’ Portrait. One face is sensitive and beautiful, the other almost stilted or unstudied.

This all makes perfect sense, of course. Bess’s portrait shows off the apparel to perfection, because that is its purpose. The queen looks a little unnatural and awkward perhaps, but that is unimportant. The picture is really not about her. She is present primarily

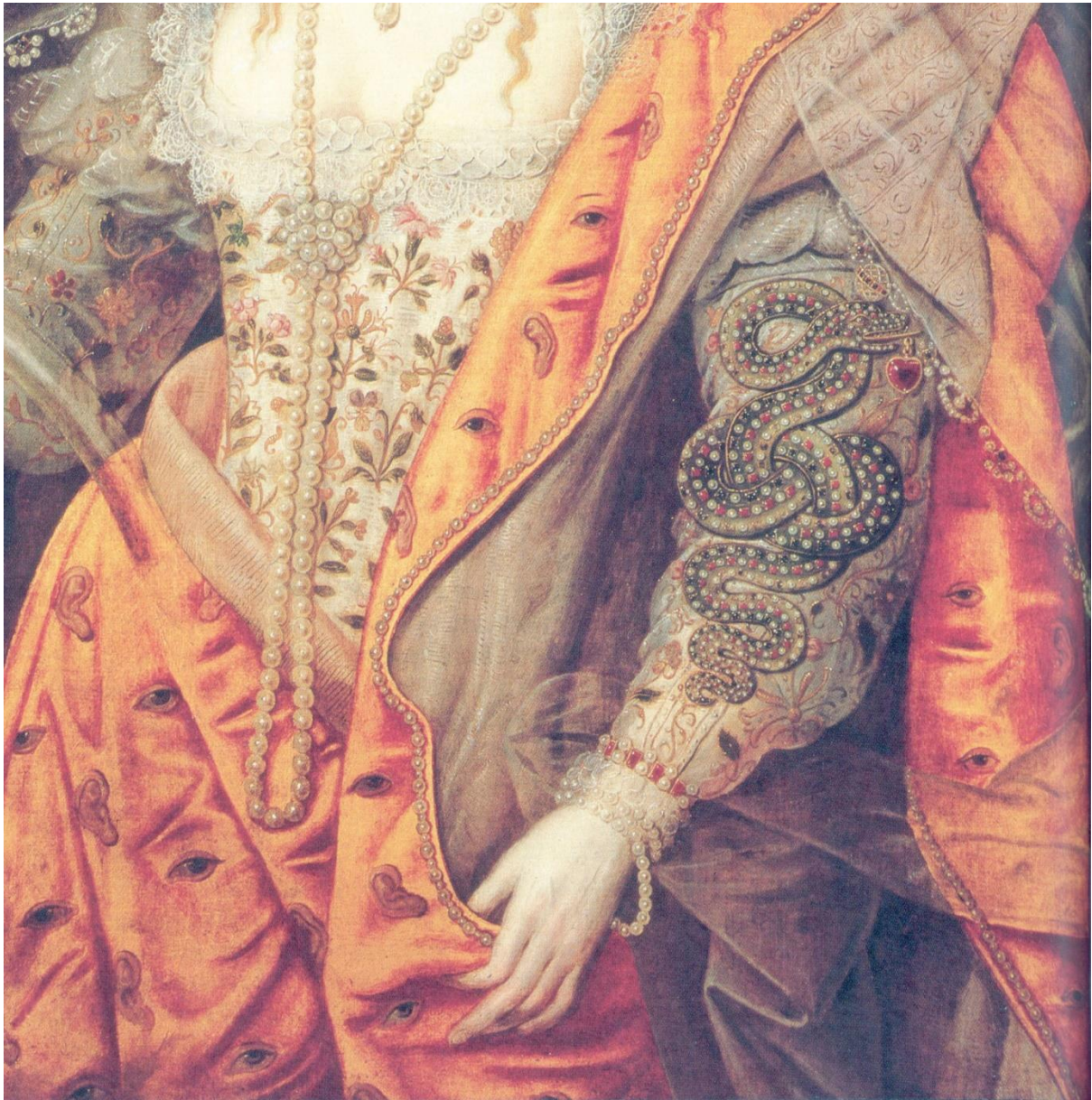
³¹ Arnold, *Wardrobe Unlock’d*, p. 80.

³² Ibid.

as a clothes horse for the fantastic collection of textile confectionery, and to be marked down for posterity as the recipient of a generous and glorious gift from the painting's patroness. In this picture the clothes are very clearly the stars of the show. In the 'Rainbow' Portrait however, the emphasis is completely different: it is the emblematic elements which are important here, and in fact in places they literally obscure the clothing itself. A large portion of the bodice of floral embroidery, despite what we know of its likely value, is covered by the orange mantle, with its bizarre proliferation of eyes and ears; the skirt, which the Bacton Altar Cloth shows could have been just as luxuriously decorated, is obscured entirely. The left sleeve is almost completely hidden by the serpent brooch, with its emblematic significance, which has probably been somewhat exaggerated in size by the painter. The right sleeve disappears into shadow, behind the all-important rainbow Elizabeth is holding. Even the fabulous mantle itself is overshadowed, by the emblematic imagery which decorates it. All this suggests that while the documentation or celebration of gorgeous textile gifts may have formed some part of the intention of this portrait, that part must be inferior to its obvious main purpose, which scholars have really long agreed on: that is the communication of far more complex ideas using a visual code of imagery and symbols.

The Real Versus the Fantastic in our Imagining of the Mantle

It would be foolish to suggest, of course, that any of the discrepancies mentioned above indicate that the 'Rainbow' Portrait is completely unconnected to the royal gifting dynamic. That dynamic, both reciprocal and ubiquitous, was simply part of courtly life, as has been shown by the many scholars referred to previously in this chapter. In Mary Erler's examination of the December house party in the Strand, mentioned in Chapter Three, she explored the possible connections between the 'Rainbow' Portrait and a gift of a valuable



Above: Figure [37] Attributed to Isaac Oliver, *The 'Rainbow' Portrait of Elizabeth I*, c. 1600, oil on canvas, Hatfield House, Hertfordshire. This close-up shows the eyes and ears decorating the orange mantle which Elizabeth wears draped around her body.

mantle which may have been presented to Elizabeth at this event.³³ John Manningham, a diarist who attended the party, wrote that at one point during the performance of Davies' *Conference Between an Usher and a Post* one of the characters begs to be admitted to the queen's presence and then 'presentes hir with a riche mantle'.³⁴ However, her suggestion that the mantle in the 'Rainbow' Portrait is the same 'riche mantle' that Manningham reported,³⁵ and 'the gift which concluded that December night's entertainment and summed up its themes',³⁶ is problematic. The eyes and ears which decorate it, 'summing up' the themes of the entertainment, could potentially really have existed on the surface of this garment, as Janet Arnold has shown.³⁷ They could have been 'stained', i.e. painted on by a textile artist, much like the zoological cornucopia in the 'Hardwick' Portrait.³⁸ However, it seems unlikely that they were actually present on a real garment for a number of reasons.

The first of these is the odd positioning of the painted eyes. Observe, for example, the one giving the side-eye to Elizabeth's finger, slipping into the metaphorical vulva which has been formed by the silk fold in her left hand.³⁹ (See Figure [37]). This has been placed there, almost certainly deliberately, by the artist, and not copied from real life. An 'exceptionally pornographic ear' has also been placed over the queen's genitals, as Joel Fineman noted in 1991.⁴⁰ This, too, seems like it must be an imaginary addition. It perhaps also combines deliberately with the composition of the folds and crease which form the shape of meeting thighs, right where Elizabeth's crotch would be, to produce the kind of 'erotic quality' Fineman saw there. The mouths, too, raise further questions, and these have split opinion. Some scholars have seen them as an intended part of the design of the mantle; Janet Arnold,

³³ Erler, pp. 369 – 70.

³⁴ Goldring, *Progresses*, p. 205.

³⁵ Erler, p. 370.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Arnold, *Wardrobe Unlock'd*, p. 81.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Daniel Fischlin discussed the 'masturbatory significance' and 'sexual autonomy suggested in the positioning of her left hand' in *Political Allegory*, pp. 186 – 7.

⁴⁰ Joel Fineman, *The Subjectivity Effect in Western Literary Tradition: Essays Towards the Release of Shakespeare's Will* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1991), p. 228.

on the other hand, was certain that they are simply representations of natural folds and wrinkles in the fabric, and not meant to be seen as mouths at all. In fact, they are both folds and mouths. Folds in the fabric of the mantle have been depicted by the artist in such a way that they appear to form the shape and indication of mouths. This effect simply could not have existed in the original textile: it has been deliberately produced by the artist. Many of the ears, which seem almost to float about among the eyes and mouths like little separate entities, have been given shadows at their edges, to make it seem as if they sit proud of the surface of the fabric. This is an effect which could have been added by a fabric stainer, but why? It is much more likely that it was done by the painter of the portrait, to make the ears seem as lifelike as possible: as if they are real, fleshy organs which are truly listening and hearing. Finally, and perhaps most significantly: all of these motifs are dreadfully ugly. The effect of the whole design, while striking, is also off-putting, and unattractive; and this would of course have been absolutely the last thing any giver of a gift of clothing to Elizabeth I would have wanted. Indeed, as has been shown in Chapter Two, records indicate that many went to extraordinary lengths to avoid this at all costs. The queen must love her clothes, find them beautiful, and feel beautiful in them. Any real garment made to the design of the mantle in the 'Rainbow' Portrait would have represented an enormous waste of money; even a risk to the giver, as the queen would certainly never have worn it, and her displeasure at an ugly gift could have risked a breakdown in relations with the donor in question.

Janet Arnold wrote that motifs of eyes and ears were not unknown in the queen's wardrobe, and this is true; but importantly, in these other instances, they are used attractively and subtly. The eyed ribbon (see Figure [38]) which Arnold used as an example, when held next to the wonky, clumsy spattering of orifices in the 'Rainbow' Portrait, bears no comparison.⁴¹ It is charming, elegantly composed, and attractively coloured. The eyes in the

⁴¹ Arnold, *Wardrobe Unlock'd*, p. 84.



Above: Figure [38] Unknown maker, *Ribbon*, c. 1600, embroidered silk, Victoria and Albert Museum, London. This is a section of the embroidered guard (a kind of decorative ribbon for hiding seams) decorated with eyes which Janet Arnold referenced in *Queen Elizabeth's Wardrobe Unlock'd* (p. 84). This image has been digitally enhanced to restore the original colour of the satin fabric, which the Victoria and Albert Museum describe as a 'rich purple'. This colour is still detectable on the back of the ribbon, even though the front surface has since faded to a dull brown. Photo credit: Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

'Rainbow' Portrait, on the other hand, peer at the viewer from strange angles, in unpleasantly drab flesh tones which clash with their orange ground. This description is in no way given with the intention of disparaging the talent of the artist who painted the 'Rainbow' Portrait, however. Indeed, only a skilled painter could have created such an uncomfortably realistic impression; and perhaps only an artist as gifted and imaginative as Isaac Oliver proved himself to be, in many of his known works, could have presented such a bizarre, frightening garment, and still made it so magnificent. This effect is successful because for this garment, its meaning, not its prettiness, is what gives it its exotic allure. Nobody could be proud of presenting such an awkward item of clothing to the queen. However, in the meaning of its visual messages, which speak of intelligence, information, power, and intimacy with the crown, there is a great deal to be proud of.

Conclusion

The mantle of the ‘Rainbow’ Portrait may indeed have been the ‘rich mantle’ presented to the queen at Salisbury House in 1602.⁴² However, the eyes and other orifices that decorate it are an emblematic addition by the artist. This does not lessen the impact of the painting, or of its representation of the gift, if that is what it was. In fact, it creates a demonstration of status even more powerful than the Countess of Shrewsbury’s self-congratulation in the ‘Hardwick’ Portrait. The mantle is surely a double layered tribute to Robert Cecil, whose intangible powers of seeing, hearing, and the ‘art of government’ actually wrap, and cover the queen, at the same time as his extravagant material gift. But this metaphor is exclusive to the ‘Rainbow’ Portrait itself. The compelling image painted by Erler, of the ‘robe of eyes and ears’ being presented to Elizabeth at the end of that night in December 1602,⁴³ can only be an enjoyable fantasy. In reality, the only place the seeing and hearing mantle could ever have existed is the same place it exists today: painted on the surface of the ‘Rainbow’ Portrait, and alive in the minds of its audience.

⁴² Erler, p. 370.

⁴³ Ibid.

Chapter Five: Death: the 'Rainbow' Portrait as a Posthumous Image of Elizabeth I

Introduction

Throughout the many years that this portrait has been subject to study, its date and author have remained mysterious. As for so many artworks produced during this period, there is no date or signature on the painting itself to tip us off as to who painted this portrait and when; and, like so many other works of art, the current date given by most authorities, *c.*1600, is the result of the deductions of generations of historians. These scholars have analysed style, context and costume to produce a range of clues, each of which, over the years, has nudged the proposed date up or down the scale of history and into its current position. In this final chapter, I would like to propose that the emblematic and stylistic nature of the apparel in the portrait offers us the potential for yet another such nudge, and one which may open up an interesting avenue for further discussion of this remarkable painting.

The currently accepted date derives from the portrait's possible connection to one of two entertainments given for the queen in 1602, as mentioned in the previous chapter. One is the entertainment hosted by Robert Cecil on 6 December at his new house in the Strand, Salisbury House. The other is the queen's visit in July to Sir Thomas Egerton at his home, Harefield Place. This chapter will use a comparison with another painting of Elizabeth, the 'Procession' Portrait, to demonstrate that the 'Rainbow' Portrait could, in fact, have been completely unconnected to either of these events. It will also offer an examination of the dress in the 'Rainbow' Portrait, as well as a look at the trend for masque dress in portraiture in the seventeenth century, to provide evidence that the 'Rainbow' Portrait may have been painted some years after Elizabeth's death.



Above: Figure [39] Unknown artist, English School, *An Allegorical Painting of Queen Elizabeth I in Old Age*, c.1610, Corsham Court, Wiltshire.

The Significance of a Significant Event

In 1977 Roy Strong suggested the possibility that the ‘Rainbow’ Portrait formed part of an offering on a theatrical ‘shrine’ to Astraea which was created for the Salisbury House party.¹ This connection was supported by Mary C. Erler, as mentioned in Chapter Three,² and Susan Doran in 2015 wrote that ‘almost certainly, Cecil commissioned the ‘Rainbow Portrait’ to commemorate the queen’s visit to his new town house’.³ The other possibility is an occasion on which the queen visited Sir Thomas Egerton, the Lord Keeper, at Harefield Place, a manor and park which once stood near the village of Harefield, now in the London Borough of Hillingdon. Janet Arnold suggested this event as a possible source of inspiration for the portrait in 1988.⁴ She pointed out that, like John Davies’ dialogue at the Salisbury House party, some of the written imagery from the script of the entertainment at Harefield also matches the visual imagery of the ‘Rainbow’ Portrait.⁵ On looking at the example she offered, it becomes clear that, in one sense, this text surely has an even stronger claim to be the portrait’s inspiration than Davies’ script.

The Harefield Place ‘masque’, a form of theatrical performance which was popular at court gatherings during this period, was performed as part of the celebrations hosted by Sir Thomas, on the occasion of the queen’s visit to his home in July 1602. In it the theme of rainbows featured prominently. As part of the show, the queen was ceremoniously presented with a gift of clothing from her hosts: a ‘robe of rainbowes’.⁶ At the same time she was entertained with a poem of adoration, claiming that though this garment belonged once to ‘Iris’ (the classical goddess of the rainbow), it should now be presented to Elizabeth, because

¹ Strong, *Cult*, p. 52.

² Erler, p. 370.

³ Susan Doran, *Elizabeth I and Her Circle* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 300.

⁴ Arnold, *Wardrobe Unlock’d*, p. 83.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

she knows ‘better how to raine’: a pun, on ‘rain’ and ‘reign’, of course.⁷ As Arnold conjectured, the inscription in the ‘Rainbow’ Portrait, ‘NON SINE SOLE IRIS’ (‘No rainbow without the sun’), could be a reference to this little bit of theatre.⁸ I would go further, and say that, if so, the inscription also underlines the theme of the poem. ‘NON SINE SOLE IRIS’ could also be read as something more like: ‘Without the sun, the rainbow is nothing’, i.e., it cannot exist: it is insubstantial, inferior, dependent upon the sun. The implication could be, not that the rainbow itself is inferior to the sun, but that ‘Iris’, the classical goddess, is so. In Latin, the word ‘Iris’ can stand for either the phenomenon or the goddess; and in the inscription in the ‘Rainbow’ Portrait, the word ‘Iris’ is indeed capitalized, as if it were a name. So is ‘Sole’ (Sun). Elizabeth then, in one of her many incarnations, is represented here as the Sun, and her superiority over the character of Iris, the rainbow goddess, is emphatic in both the portrait and the poem.

These possible connections are very interesting, and certainly there is no lack of evidence to suggest some kind of visual reference to one or both of these events in the ‘Rainbow’ Portrait. However, even those scholars who have argued the case for such a connection have also acknowledged that nothing in a situation like this can be certain. Strong noted the conjectural quality of his surmise, even as he made it: ‘is it too fantastic to suggest that this shrine centred on the Rainbow Portrait?’⁹ He clearly explained that it was his interpretation of the themes and tone of the painting that lead him to this idea, simply making him feel, of the Salisbury House visit, that ‘no other setting seems to provide a context better suited’ to the portrait. Obviously, there is nothing wrong with the use of such extensive knowledge and experience to make deductions like these. In fact, with little hard evidence from the period to guide us this may be the best and only method with which to determine a likely date; until, perhaps, technical analysis of the painting reveals more. It is worth

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Strong, *Cult*, p. 52.

remembering, however, that another explanation for this portrait's moment and setting may yet be uncovered. For example, it is perhaps important to keep in mind that it is not necessary that a single event, or even two events, should have engendered the painting at all; Roy Strong himself pointed out the danger of falling into that trap in 1977, in his examination of the 'Procession' Portrait, mentioned in the previous chapter. (See Figure [40]).



Above: Figure [40] Robert Peake the Elder, *The 'Procession' Portrait*, c. 1600, Coleshill House, Oxfordshire.

This intriguing painting, which appears at first sight to be a representation of a great parade day or celebratory event, features not just one sitter but a sea of faces and bodies, all picked out in meticulous detail. Many of them are in fact accurate portraits of identifiable courtiers, including six Knights of the Garter, who walk along the road in front of Elizabeth I, as she is born along upon a hand-pushed carriage under a canopy held by her subjects. Many of these subjects, despite apparently progressing along a crowded street, are looking towards

the viewer, almost as if posing for an individual portrait. They are certainly meant to be recognised, and for many years, scholars assumed that this picture performed exactly the purpose which it appears to: that of celebrating a special occasion, and perhaps documenting the important guests that were present. In fact, one event in particular had been accepted by most as the probable occasion in question, until Strong's reanalysis: the wedding of Lady Anne Russell and Lord Herbert, held at Blackfriars in 1600. However, Strong's thorough debunking of this idea, and re-examination of the painting in *The Cult of Elizabeth* opened up a fascinating new possibility: that this image could in fact be, not a commemoration of an event, but of a person. In fact a portrait – not of Elizabeth, although she is present: and not Lady Anne or Lord Herbert either, but someone else entirely.

Look at the 'Procession' Portrait again, and, glancing immediately down from the queen, into the front and centre foreground of this image, one's eye lands upon the balding head of Edward Somerset, 4th Earl of Worcester. This man, according to Strong, is the real subject of this painting. His life, accomplishments, lands and possessions, and even a particular moment of apotheosis in his career, his elevation to the position of Master of the Horse, are the themes being presented to the viewer and explored within the imagery shown here. Strong's examination of the historical context, style, dress, and composition of the painting clearly demonstrated this; but he also made another very important point which is particularly relevant to this paper. As he put it: 'the idea of a picture being direct reportage of a single event', was not just uncommon, unlikely, or low on the agenda for painters and artists during this period, but in fact 'utterly alien to the Elizabethan mind.'¹⁰ 'Utterly alien' would seem to be a bold claim. However, a quick look at the majority of Elizabethan painting will show any academic interested in finding pathways into the elusive 'Elizabethan mind' that a great number of other things were far more important to the artistic taste of this period

¹⁰ Strong, *Cult*, p. 46.

than something as mundane as the accurate reporting of events. In sixteenth century paintings, times, places, dates, and even people could all be mixed together and swapped around to a degree almost alarming to our modern perceptions. The example Strong used to demonstrate this is the ‘Armada’ Portrait. (See Figure [41]). Here, Elizabeth sits, apparently with a view out of the two windows beside her of two completely different geographical places, neither of which would have been actually visible from the room in which she sits. The narrative images framed in these two seascapes also depict two separate events which happened at completely different times. It is an impossible image: a summary, of time, space, and occurrences, which is not even slightly interested in recording reality, but completely concerned with presenting an overall sense of something much more intangible than that. In this case, it is triumph: simultaneously that of England, in both a battle against the Spanish fleet and in the larger European war in which that battle had occurred, and that of Elizabeth herself, as a powerful and successful monarch celebrating her reign and all its achievements to date. The title we have given it, the ‘Armada’ Portrait, perfectly reflects our modern propensity to link particular images like this with single, specific events or phenomena, our need to anchor paintings to a singular moment in history, perhaps in order to help us digest them. But, as Strong suggested, this would almost never have been their purpose for a contemporary audience in this period.

The ‘Rainbow’ Portrait does not need to be connected to an event. It could exist in its own right, or as a celebration or commemoration of something much larger, just like the celebration of a life and culmination of accomplishment which Strong found in the ‘Procession’ Portrait. It perhaps makes sense as a commemorative image: a collection of symbolic references that celebrate the entire reign of the queen, rather than any one particular moment of it. This is an idea that holds weight for a number of reasons, and if it were necessary to pick a specific point on a calendar, for the actual creation of such an image, one



Above: Figure [41] George Gower, *The 'Armada' Portrait of Elizabeth I*, 1588, oil on panel, Woburn Abbey, Bedfordshire.

stands out immediately. Elizabeth's life and reign came to an end in 1603: surely the perfect moment to commemorate both. After all, even if the portrait were connected to one particular event, these two parties in 1602 are far from being the only noteworthy things that happened around that time. Elizabeth's death, which came a mere three months after Cecil's entertainment in the Strand, may be the most noteworthy of all, and perhaps the very best moment at which to place an image seemingly designed to celebrate her life. I would go further, too, and bring to discussion some of the many things which were set in motion by Elizabeth's death. Some of these, perhaps, were equally worthy of celebration or commemoration in the eyes of those left behind.

The end of Elizabeth's reign also brought on the end of something else: the Anglo-Spanish conflict. This was finally terminated by the Treaty of London, one of Robert Cecil's proudest moments, which was put in motion by the queen's death, and only reached its final conclusion on 28 August 1604.¹¹ It was a treaty which was 'better seen as the last chapter of Elizabethan foreign policy rather than the first Jacobean peace initiative', and also 'largely written by ... Robert Cecil', according to Pauline Croft, who examined this pivotal period in 2006.¹² This surely would have seemed an appropriate moment to a man like Cecil, to commission a portrait of his dead queen: celebrating her as a monarch, as a passed, eulogised soul, but most importantly, also as a bringer of peace. An additional motive, of course, could have been similar to that of Edward Somerset in the 'Procession' Portrait, i.e. the celebration of a significant achievement in his career. In the 'Rainbow' Portrait, Elizabeth grasps a rainbow in her right hand. The rainbow was an unequivocal symbol of 'Peace', remembering the moment of receding flood and the abatement of God's fury which saved Noah and his grateful cargo in Christian tradition.¹³ It also represented tranquillity or calmness,¹⁴ which could have been a reference not just to the resting of arms between England and her rival Spain, but also to the final rest Elizabeth had taken. As Rene Graziani and Susan Doran have shown,¹⁵ according to the Elizabethan rules of symmetry and connection, what appears on one side is linked to the other. By this rule, as Doran suggested, it seems likely that the 'Rainbow' Portrait is offering a very clear message: the 'wise counsel' of Robert and/or William Cecil, represented by the serpent and heart on the left arm, is linked, in some way, to the 'Peace' represented by the rainbow in the other hand.¹⁶ Doran considered a potential

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Pauline Croft, 'Rex Pacificus, Robert Cecil, and the 1604 Peace with Spain', in *The Accession of James I: Historical and Cultural Consequences*, ed. by Glen Burgess, Rowland Wymer and Jason Lawrence (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), pp. 140 – 154 (p. 140).

¹³ Graziani, p. 249.

¹⁴ Arnold, *Wardrobe Unlock'd*, p. 84.

¹⁵ Doran, *Virginity, Divinity*, p. 191, and Graziani, pp. 248 – 9.

¹⁶ Doran, *Virginity, Divinity*, p. 191.

reference to the positions of both Robert and William Cecil as ‘advocates for peace with Spain in the late 1590s’.¹⁷ However, a more direct reference to a celebration of the peace secured by the Treaty of London is surely just as possible. The connection between the two symbols could be celebrating the fact that the ‘wise counsel’ of the Cecils has led, at last, to the very real ‘Peace’ which Robert had finally brokered; shortly after Elizabeth’s passing (and becoming, herself, finally, ‘at peace’).

The Disappearing Farthingale

If the ‘Rainbow’ Portrait were connected to Elizabeth’s death in 1603, or the peace treaty of 1604, it would of course require that the portrait’s date be pulled a little further up the scale of time, into the Jacobean era. Interestingly, this is a position for which there may be stylistic evidence in the portrait itself. One of the reasons for the uncertain dating and interpretation of this painting is the incongruity of some of Elizabeth’s apparel. This has seemed, for some, to have ‘little concern with plain fact’;¹⁸ the implication being, that much of it is so strange and bizarre, that it must have been a product of the artist’s imagination. Janet Arnold opposed such a notion, stating that ‘a detailed study of the picture shows that the painter observed each item very carefully’,¹⁹ and actually picked out one or two of these objects from their physical records in the Stowe Manuscripts to prove this.²⁰ The jewelled serpent, for example, ‘may be the ‘Jewell of golde like a Snake wound together garnished with small Opalls and Rubies’’ of 1600.²¹ This analysis of the written record is very helpful, but almost unnecessary in proving this point, when one considers some of the astonishing items from this period which still survive for us to review. (For an example see Figure [42]).

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Arnold, *Wardrobe Unlock’d*, p. 81.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.



Above: Figure [42] Unknown maker, *Petticoat Panel*, c. 1600, The Victoria and Albert Museum, London. This image shows part of an embroidered forepart (the front panel of a skirt) which features a variety of emblematic motifs, including an armillary sphere (bottom right) and a sky full of stylised lightning bolts. (Photo credit: The Victoria and Albert Museum, London).

However, while it can be demonstrated that many of these strange and extravagant decorations really could once have existed and been worn, another aspect of the style of the ‘Rainbow’ Portrait’s ensemble remains a little more perplexing. Arnold in her analysis also noted ‘the absence of a farthingale’;²² which brings us to the interesting question concerning the portrait’s date. The ‘farthingale’ was a stiffened structure, worn beneath the petticoat, which performed the task of supporting the weighty folds of a Tudor or early Stuart skirt, in the fashionable shape which can be observed in many examples of portraits from these periods. Initially this article of clothing began its life as a fairly simple hoop skirt, usually referred to as a ‘Spanish’ farthingale, which served to form the typical ‘bell’ shape of fashionable skirts in England during the first two thirds of the sixteenth century.²³ However, by the 1560s the fashion for the ‘French’ farthingale or ‘bum rowl’, had gained popularity. This item consisted of a stuffed and stiffened ‘roll’ worn around the hips to produce a more pronounced silhouette.²⁴ In the 1590s this trend was refined further, resulting in a much larger and more distinctive ‘cartwheel’ or ‘drum’ shape silhouette around the hips, and fashionable farthingales evolved a wider, more flattened shape to accommodate this.²⁵ The larger ‘wheel’ shaped farthingales can be observed in use in many popular portraits of Elizabeth from this period, and the striking silhouette it created was at the height of fashion at the turn of the century, precisely the moment when the ‘Rainbow’ Portrait is thought to have been painted.²⁶ (See Figure [43]) However, it is quite clearly absent from the ‘Rainbow’ Portrait. The hanging of the mantle over the skirt makes it hard to be certain, but the drape seems to indicate very little support and shaping beneath. Wide farthingales became much less popular

²² Ibid., p. 82.

²³ Herbert Norris, *Tudor Costume and Fashion*, (New York: Dover Publications, 1997), pp. 199 – 200.

²⁴ Arnold, *Patterns of Fashion*, p. 10.

²⁵ Ibid., pp. 10 – 11.

²⁶ Ibid.

in England during the early 1600s, and slowly died out completely after about 1617.²⁷ In portraiture, the shape was gradually replaced by the more fluid, 'romantic' or 'undressed' silhouette which was to become popular in the mid to late seventeenth century.

This subtle absence in the 'Rainbow' Portrait may seem insignificant, when held next to the more eye-catching peculiarities in the rest of the dress in this picture; but in fact it actually presents something of a conundrum for any dress historian attempting to date the painting accurately. This is because it is so incongruous with most of the other fashionable elements in the portrait: 'the hairstyle',²⁸ as Arnold pointed out, and 'wired veil',²⁹ and the standing collar too. This is notable, not because it is standing, but because of its shape. After Elizabeth's death, the upright, rounded frills of her day began to be replaced with the flatter, square-cornered styles associated with the Jacobean era. These, though still sometimes stiffened for support, and frequently edged with 'needle' lace, usually formed quite a different shape to that of their Elizabethan forerunners. (For examples of these Jacobean style collars see some of the portraits included in the next subsection, e.g. Figures [48], [49] and 51]) Because of this, the magnificent, circular explosion of collar frills in the 'Rainbow' Portrait, in combination with a number of other small details of dress and style in her hair and jewellery, would seem to place Elizabeth's upper half squarely in the years pre-1603. However, her lower, un-farthingale-d portions seem to belong to a later period.

²⁷ Janet Arnold, *Patterns of Fashion 3, The cut and construction of clothes for men and women c.1560 – 1620* (London: Macmillan, 1985), p. 12.

²⁸ Arnold, *Wardrobe Unlock'd*, p. 82.

²⁹ Ibid.



Above: Figure [43] Marcus Gheeraerts the Younger, *Queen Elizabeth I (The 'Ditchley' Portrait)*, c. 1592, oil on canvas, The National Portrait Gallery, London. This portrait of Elizabeth shows her wearing a large farthingale, which gives the distinctive spreading shape to her skirts.

There are a few possible explanations for this apparent discrepancy. One is that the painting could have been altered, years after it was originally painted. This is not an uncommon fate for very old portraits, and a number of portraits of Elizabeth I have been altered by artists and owners, often well-meaning, since her reign. Sometimes changes were even made deliberately to keep the fashions in the portrait up to date; which explains the stylistic incongruities which can sometimes be found. However, in the ‘Rainbow’ Portrait, this does not appear to have happened. On inspection of the painting ‘at waist level’, Arnold asserted that ‘there is no sign of any later alteration’ of Elizabeth’s dress, to explain the hang of the mantle.³⁰ This is also supported by the assessments of the painting by both David Piper and Erna Auerbach. In fact, Auerbach asserted in the Hatfield House catalogue of 1971 that the portrait ‘shows no signs of having been altered’ at any time.³¹

The Mystery of the ‘Masque’ Costume

Another possible reason for this fashion *faux pas*, of course, is that the artist of the ‘Rainbow’ Portrait simply either was ignorant of, or chose not to follow, the fashions of the day.

Ignorance, in this case, is unlikely: Isaac Oliver, the artist to whom the portrait is currently attributed, was a master of his art, and particularly adept at depicting clothing and adornment. Observation of his other works, however, does suggest the possibility of the latter option. A number of miniatures produced by Oliver, for example, demonstrate his tendency to dress his sitters in very theatrical, sometimes fantastical clothing, hinting at a possible preoccupation on his part with expression, or fancy, over fashion. (See Figure [44]).

³⁰ Arnold, *Wardrobe Unlock’d*, p. 82.

³¹ Auerbach, p. 60.



Above: Figure [44] Isaac Oliver, two miniatures of ladies dressed for a masque. Both are watercolour on vellum. Left: *Portrait of a Lady Dressed as 'Flora'*, c. 1575-1617, The Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam; right: *An Unknown Woman in Masque Costume*, 1609, The Victoria and Albert Museum, London. Photo credit: The Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam; The Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

The two examples of Oliver's work given here, in which both ladies are 'dressed for a masque', lead neatly on to the other most obvious possible explanation for the incongruities in Elizabeth's dress, and perhaps the one most favoured by recent scholars. It can be summarised in Auerbach's description of 'the spirit of pageantry and masques'³² which for her was 'so strongly expressed'³³ in the 'Rainbow' Portrait, and also typical of Oliver's style. Arnold also wrote of masques: when considering the absence of the farthingale in the 'Rainbow' Portrait, she noted that 'it may be conjectured that this is because the costume was specially designed for a masque'.³⁴ Arnold was referring to the relaxing of the 'rules' of

³² Auerbach, p. 60.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Arnold, *Wardrobe Unlock'd*, p. 82.

fashion, in dress designed for a masque performance. As discussed in previous chapters, a ‘masque’, of the kind Arnold and Auerbach were referring to, was a particular style of theatrical performance popular at court during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Courtiers themselves could participate in these performances, which took place during lavish parties and celebrations, and a masque costume would have essentially been what we might today refer to as ‘fancy dress’. It was often fanciful and exotic, and could pluck its inspiration and composition from any moment in history, or even purely from the imagination of its designer. Therefore, if the ‘Rainbow’ Portrait is a depiction of Elizabeth in a masque costume, or even just designed to exude ‘the spirit of pageantry and masques’³⁵ which Auerbach perceived, then this could technically offer an explanation for almost any oddness of style in her dress.

Given Oliver’s occasional penchant for painting his sitters in masque costume, this would seem to make sense. However, it is important not to fall into the trap of assuming too much, especially when trying to date a portrait. One could say, for example, with the use of such a coverall conjecture, that the elements of dress which fit with the moment we believe the portrait to have been painted are accurate to their time; and all those, like the missing farthingale, which do not fit, are there merely because Elizabeth is wearing ‘masque dress’, and can therefore be safely ignored. This argument is not very satisfactory, for obvious reasons, and in fact obscures some important details about the vogue for ‘masque’ dress itself. It was during the decades which followed Elizabeth’s death that the trend for being painted in ‘masque’ dress grew so popular. In fact, although her ensemble looks rather odd when compared with other portraits from her lifetime, if we set it for a moment among some of those painted in the first twenty years following her death, it starts to look almost at home.

³⁵ Auerbach, p. 60.



Above: Figure [45] Unknown artist in the style of Robert Peake the Elder, *Portrait of a Lady of the Hampden family*, c. 1610, oil on canvas, Rhode Island School of Design Museum, Providence, Rhode Island, USA. One of a large number of Jacobean portraits of female sitters adopting a similar pose and wearing a similar ‘masque’ ensemble to that in the ‘Rainbow’ Portrait.



Above, from left to right: Figure [46] Unknown artist, British School, *Unknown Lady*, c. 1605-10, Museums Sheffield; Figure [47] Marcus Gheeraerts the Younger, *Frances Howard, Countess of Hertford, later Duchess of Lennox and Richmond*, 1611, private collection; Figure [48] William Larkin, *Isabella Rich*, c. 1614 – 1618, Kenwood House, London; Figure [49] Unknown artist, *Lettice Knollys, daughter of Henry Knollys, Lady Paget, granddaughter of Catherine Carey, great-granddaughter of Mary Boleyn*, c. 1615, private collection; Figure [50] Robert Peake the elder, *Portrait of a Lady said to be Cecilia Nevill, daughter of Lord Abergavenny*, c. 1617, oil on canvas, private collection.



Above, from left to right: Figure [51] William Larkin, *Frances de Vere*, c. 1615, private collection; Figure [52] Marcus Gheeraerts the Younger, *Portrait of a Lady thought to be Arabella Stuart Countess of Lennox*, c. 1608-1610, Temple Newsam House, Leeds.

Included above and on the previous pages are a selection of the large number of surviving portraits of fine Jacobean ladies dressed in outfits which are similar in style to Elizabeth's ensemble in the 'Rainbow' Portrait. All are wearing bodices or jackets which are embroidered with floral motifs on a pale or cream coloured ground. All are wearing a mantle or sash over this, frequently in a bold, self-colour satin and sumptuously lined. All of them are wearing these draped across one shoulder and swathed loosely around their bodies. And all appear to lack a large farthingale. Instead a subtler, 'padded roll'³⁶ as described by Janet Arnold is apparent, which reduces in size over time. In the portrait of an unknown lady c.

³⁶ Arnold, *Patterns of Fashion*, p. 12.

1605 – 10, a deep shadow over her hip and posterior indicates a fairly pronounced lift to her skirt under the waist, but by the time we reach Larkin's portrait of Frances de Vere c. 1615, (see Figure [51]) this has all but disappeared, leaving a silhouette not dissimilar to the bell shape of the earlier 1500s. It is also similar to the shape that Elizabeth's skirt appears to take under the folds of her mantle in the 'Rainbow' Portrait.

The various similarities between these later portraits and the 'Rainbow' Portrait may be coincidence, of course. Or the 'Rainbow' Portrait might simply have been ahead of its time, or one of the forerunners of a burgeoning fashion trend which gained much greater popularity after Elizabeth's death. However, it would be a mistake to neglect the possibility that the 'Rainbow' Portrait resembles these other portraits simply because it belongs among them and should also be placed at some point a little further into the seventeenth century. This would make it, if so, a very firmly 'post-mortem' image of Elizabeth. Again, this proposition does not deny the possibility of the painting's being connected in some way with one of the entertainments of 1602. It merely presents the possibility that, although the painting might have been remembering one of these events, it may really have been created several years after the dates on which they actually occurred.

Morte' and the Mask of Death

In consideration of the possibility of a post-mortem date for the 'Rainbow' Portrait, I would like to offer up one last piece for the puzzle. Yet another bit of visual language plucked from the pages of the *Iconologia* could offer a final answer to this conundrum, and it is fitting that it should be the last one discussed here. It is 'Morte', or 'Death' herself; and she is represented by Ripa as a 'pale woman' who is draped in a 'mantle made of gold'.³⁷ (See Figure [53]. Given the

³⁷ Ripa, *Iconologia* (1603), p. 339.



Above: Figure [53] 'Morte', or 'Death', a woodcut illustration by an unknown artist from Cesare Ripa's *Iconologia* (Venice: Presso Cristoforo Tomasini, 1645), p. 423. A 'pale' and beautiful woman wearing a 'mantle made of gold' lifts her mask, to reveal the skeletal face of death beneath.

apparent importance the artist has placed on so many other emblematic motifs, it is tempting to wonder if this, too, is an intended incarnation for Elizabeth in the 'Rainbow' Portrait. If so, a more sombre departure from Yates' springtime goddess would be hard to imagine; however, the grim reaper, for Ripa, is also a kind of 'Just Virgin' in her own right. She offers the certainty of ultimate equality for all souls, by stripping the great and powerful of their possessions, yet also brings kind relief from pain to the sick and the suffering. As goddess incarnations go, there are worse ones for a queen to assume, and if we allow her a presence among the little crowd of deities that has been gathered in the 'Rainbow' Portrait, she would offer up a neat answer to the question of Elizabeth's vitality (or lack thereof) at the moment of this painting's creation. Depicted as 'Morte', of all beings, in this portrait so filled with metaphor, the queen's own mortality surely could not have been anything but a confirmed fact.

Conclusion

As Roy Strong's analysis of the 'Procession' Portrait shows, it is not necessary to connect the 'Rainbow' Portrait to one particular event or occasion in order to interpret its meaning and purpose. Even without knowing the precise date of its creation, one thing about the symbolism of this painting is clear. The discrepancies in dress, the representation of Elizabeth as a young woman despite her real age, the mysterious wealth of symbolic imagery that fills the frame: all these things point to the fact that to some extent the 'Rainbow' Portrait must exist outside of time. It is a collection of ideas and themes, messages and mysteries, which may refer to many points in time, or none at all. In trying to interpret its meaning, many historical moments must therefore be considered, not just one or two.

However, an accurate dating of the painting could reveal the possibility of links with specific political events, like the Treaty of London, or a particular political programme, like the promotion and celebration of peace-making initiatives by William and Robert Cecil. It

could also shed light on the concerns and interests its patron and painter might have had at the time, by giving us the context of their various concurrent life events. Knowing if the queen were alive or dead at the time of the portrait's conception, too, would be very helpful. It would quickly determine, for example, if the flattering depiction of Elizabeth in the 'Rainbow' Portrait is a grieving eulogy, or a simple act of toadying to a living monarch. It is therefore important for us as historians to attempt to isolate the moment of its creation as accurately as possible.

The evidence presented in this chapter, which deals not only with the symbolism and imagery in the portrait, but with practical and stylistic elements of its dress and composition too, shows us that while the subject of the image may be Elizabethan, its genesis and production surely are not. It is evident from the symbolism connected with ideas of death and peace, and the clear presence of the masquing dress style most popular in the first quarter of the seventeenth century, that the 'Rainbow' Portrait belongs to a period after the end of Elizabeth's life. Just how long after is a question yet to be satisfactorily answered. However, the evidence which this investigation has produced strongly suggests that at least one year, and possibly several, had passed after the death of its subject before this portrait was painted.

Final Conclusion

Reinterpretations

It seems that ultimately, those innocent flowers patterning the queen's bodice have led us all down a garden path, to an interpretation of the 'Rainbow' Portrait which contains a flaw so large in its first step that it severely compromises the rest of the journey. To believe that the floral embroidery represents only a 'flower-decked springtime' is to miss a multitude of other messages; some of which are important enough to change the way we view this portrait significantly. This dissertation has shown that several of the themes which have formed the bedrock of our understanding of the 'Rainbow' Portrait must be displaced, or even inverted, with a review of some of the contemporary sources which have been connected with it. Yates's pure and virginal 'Astraea', for example, is undermined by 'Allegrezza': the demi-goddess of laughter, pleasure and libation, from the pages of Cesare Ripa's *Iconologia*. Contemporary illustrations of horticultural 'scions' show that the flowers of the bodice represent, not the spiritual return to an ancient 'Golden Age' of eternal springtime and innocence, but a celebration of modern, worldly knowledge as well as man's pioneering scientific dominion over nature. They speak, not of 'green garlands, never wasting', but of the endless turning of the cycles of life and death, to be found in the imagery of Shakespeare's writing. Their great variety signals a celebration of the extensive plant cataloguing in herbal guide books like those of John Gerard. They speak, too, of the worldly accomplishments of the men, like William and Robert Cecil, to whom tribute was paid in those very texts.

This dissertation has also identified these two men, William and Robert Cecil, as subjects of a much larger portion of the imagery of the 'Rainbow' Portrait than has been previously recognised. It has shown how literal readings of the emblematic phrasing in the portrait, of the serpent and heart, and the eyes and ears, tell us that much of the imagery is

concerned with ideas of ‘advice’, ‘wise counsel’ and ‘the art of government’: themes which celebrate the role of a chief advisor to the crown. Contemporary paintings like the ‘Hardwick’ Portrait and the ‘Procession’ Portrait demonstrate how the promotion of the patron, rather than the sitter, in portraits of the queen, could take precedence. A reading of two letters to Robert Cecil, along with the contemporary account of the royal visit to Salisbury House in 1602 by John Manningham, and the words of John Davies written for this event, show how this kind of self-promotion was present in the ‘Rainbow’ Portrait, as part of Robert Cecil’s role within the ‘gifting dynamic’ of courtly life. Visual analysis and comparison with the ‘Hardwick’ Portrait, however, also shows that this could not have been its only purpose. Stylistic analysis of the fashion of the clothing Elizabeth is wearing in the ‘Rainbow’ Portrait, and an apparent emblematic reference to ‘Morte’, another figure from the *Iconologia*, also provide evidence that the ‘Rainbow’ Portrait was painted after Elizabeth’s death. This dissertation has also demonstrated, with these sources, that the painting may have had little or no connection with one of the royal visits of 1602, as other scholars had previously maintained.

Material Insights

Perhaps the most intriguing results from this reinterpretation are those provided by the analysis of a completely different object from the ‘Rainbow’ Portrait: the Bacton Altar Cloth. The opportunity to examine such an exceptional survival, alongside what may be a contemporary depiction of it, has paved the way in this dissertation toward discoveries about the value, composition, materiality and social significance of the apparel in the ‘Rainbow’ Portrait that might otherwise never have come to light. The Bacton Altar Cloth tells us that the floral embroidery of the ‘Rainbow’ Portrait bodice was almost certainly professionally produced by a royal workshop and stitched with gold threads and cochineal dyed silks on to silver chamblet (or ‘cloth of silver’). None of these factors is particularly apparent from a

visual reading of the painting alone; but all of them significantly influence our appraisal of the meaning and value of this garment and its presence in the portrait. This, then, brings us to the real conclusion of this research: that the thorough consideration of every variety of contemporary source, visual, textual and material, is the only satisfactory way to develop our understanding of this portrait's meaning for a modern audience. Combining evidence from all these areas, through a programme of interdisciplinary research, has enabled this project to present a number of new pathways for discussion of the 'Rainbow' Portrait, and I would suggest that this approach is the best possible basis from which to begin the next phase of scholarly research of this painting.

Future Study

In a larger sense, this project demonstrates the benefit that such an interdisciplinary approach offers to the study, not just of the 'Rainbow' Portrait, but of any similarly symbolic portrait from this period. Indeed, another painting (see Figure [54]) which came to light in an auction at Sotheby's in 2014, and is so far almost undiscussed by scholarship, certainly must produce results from any research method which has been applied successfully to the 'Rainbow' Portrait. This is because it appears to mimic the symbolism of the dress in the 'Rainbow' Portrait almost exactly. Perhaps the most noticeable elements are the serpent on the left sleeve, the floral 'scion' motifs of the embroidered jacket, the gauntlet jewel hanging from the standing collar, and the 'C'-shaped crescent moon brooch at the top of the headdress. As a piece of art, this intriguing doppelganger begs numerous questions of its own, and a thorough investigation into the provenance and imagery of this painting may produce answers not only about itself, but about the 'Rainbow' Portrait as well, and the Bacton Altar Cloth. There is insufficient space to establish those answers here. However, their pursuit may provide a useful framework for future research in this area.



Above: Figure [54] Attributed to Isaac Oliver, *The 'Rainbow' Portrait*, c. 1600, oil on canvas, Hatfield House, Hertfordshire (left), next to an obscure Jacobean mimic: Circle of Marcus Gheeraerts the Younger, *Portrait of a Lady, Said to be Lady Arabella Stuart* c. 1600 – 1620, oil on panel, private collection; sold at Sotheby's, London, 30 April 2014, lot 709 (right).

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