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*The Queen's Mercy: Gender and  
Judgement in Representations of  
Elizabeth I*

Mary Villeponteaux,  
(New York:

Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

Review by: Estelle Paranque

*The Queen's Mercy: Gender and Judgment in Representations of Elizabeth I.* By Mary Villeponteaux. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014. ISBN: 978-1-1373-7174-9. x + 227 pp. £55.

**T**he *Queen's Mercy* is a fascinating piece of work, focusing on the representations of mercy, justice, and clemency in the various descriptions of Elizabeth I of England. As Mary Villeponteaux explains at the beginning of her book, *The Queen's Mercy* is the first detailed study on the merciful aspect of Elizabeth's representation (2). Throughout the book, the author is interested in the construction of the image of a merciful queen in the Elizabethan literature. More importantly, and to some extent more interestingly, Villeponteaux reveals the different definitions of "mercy" depending on the context. Based on these definitions, she is able to provide an in-depth analysis of the different primary sources included in her study. Moreover, by looking at some of the best known and most important plays and poems from that time, along with official letters and the Calendar of State Papers, the author is also able to share with the reader the political and religious context in which these works were printed, published, or performed in public. The book has no proper introduction or conclusion, but rather offers six body chapters examining key primary sources.

At first glance, this book may be seen as a mere analysis of contemporary plays and poems when in fact it engages with the political and historical context. This enables the reader to understand why the representations of the Virgin queen as a merciful and clement queen played an important role in the success associated with her reign. In fact, through thorough analysis of key political events, this book offers a very unique study of how Elizabeth was perceived and portrayed by the artists and writers of her time, when the notions of justice and clemency were paramount in the construction of her reputation.

In the first chapter, which could be considered to some extent as an introduction, Villeponteaux engages with the feminine ideals in this age and explains how the concept of mercy was problematic for Elizabeth's royal authority as it insisted on her feminine qualities (3). Women were, by nature, perceived to be more clement than men, and as a result were considered less fit to rule (7). The author also explains the importance of mercy in Elizabeth's representation as a mother to her country. However, what is not mentioned is that in 1516, Erasmus praised the importance for any monarch to be merciful and benevolent in order to become a good father to their people. As such, the concept of mercy was not necessarily intertwined with the concept of motherhood only, but rather to the one of fatherhood, which Elizabeth embodied by remaining unmarried and therefore acting as both the

queen and the king of England. Finally, also in the first chapter, Villeponteaux convincingly reveals how the religious turmoil during Elizabeth's reign also played a key role in her representation as a clement or cruel queen, and insists on the ambivalence of such representations for the English queen and how it could at times challenge her royal authority (25-8).

In chapter two, Villeponteaux looks at the concept of mercy in the famous poem *The Fairie Queene* by Edmund Spenser. By offering a detailed and persuasive analysis, Villeponteaux demonstrates the importance of the politico-religious context in the portrayal of mercy within the poem. She also highlights the difficulty and the ambiguity of such a representation for Elizabeth (65).

In the following chapter, chapter three, Villeponteaux focuses on the tradition of the sonnet and argues that, "many writers participate in the construction of Elizabeth's image as a merciful queen" (67). Therefore, the representation of mercy in sonnets was intertwined with court life and the role of the courtiers. Moreover, the role of the courtiers and the political context have to be taken into account in order to fully understand the motives for depicting Elizabeth as merciful. Villeponteaux persuasively argues that the poets were seeking royal favour from Elizabeth and associated the representation of mercy with the concept of justice in order to obtain this favour (70 and 106).

In chapter four, the author analyses the concepts of mercy and justice through the representation of Elizabeth as a Protestant champion in the infamous Shakespeare play, *The Merchant of Venice*. For Villeponteaux, "Shakespeare constructs a queenly figure in whom the conflicting demands for feminine compassion and masculine rigor are both fulfilled" (131). This demonstrates how Elizabeth's mercy was sometimes represented as feminine and masculine at the same time.

The two last chapters are particularly fascinating as they deal with the transition of Elizabeth's reign to James' reign as well as with the representation of Elizabeth after her death and how it impacted the notion of mercy and clemency. In *Measure to Measure*, Villeponteaux associates the ideas of justice and clemency and elaborates on the differences in how Elizabeth and James approached these two ideas.

The final chapter focuses on the representation of Elizabeth's clemency after her death by looking at three main plays by Heywood and Dekker. According to Villeponteaux, the queen's clemency is deeply intertwined with her gender. And although this representation could be seen as problematic during her reign, after her death "the image of the clement queen that was contested during her reign now serves the cause of Protestants who most resisted it" (173).

With an engaging writing style and a thorough analysis of poems and plays, Villeponteaux has managed to reveal Elizabeth's different roles, representing mercy, clemency, and justice. The strength of Villeponteaux's work is that she relies on significant historical primary sources, such as letters and the Calendar of State Papers, to highlight a particular event and to put the literary texts into a crucial political context that has to be taken into account in order to fully understand the stakes of such representations. By this means, she shrewdly combines literary skills with historical savvy. *The Queen's Mercy* will be of great interest for scholars in both English literature and history, as well as for students who have developed a particular interest in the Virgin queen. It is a valuable contribution to the field of representations of Elizabeth I and it is likely to inspire future scholars to draw parallels with other monarchs who might also have been represented as merciful, clement, or just—sometimes even beyond the gender issue.

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