In Search of the Elizabethan Woman

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IN SEARCH OF THE ELIZABETHAN WOMAN

by

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in

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The modern woman, who analyzes every detail of her existence by means of the written word, finds the Elizabethan woman an enigma that defies a satisfactory solution. She received the finest education available in her day, and she lived during some of the most stirring events in English history; yet she has left us almost no written record of her personal life and her attitude toward the world she knew. We catch glimpses of her materialistic life in the detailed accounts in which she recorded the financial transactions affecting her husband's properties, but we do not know how she regarded the husband, whose records she kept so meticulously, nor do we know whether she was contented with her life or had ambitions beyond those of being a good wife and mother.

It is disappointing to discover that we must view the Elizabethan woman almost entirely through the eyes of Elizabethan men, who could hardly be expected to understand her point of view. Nor could they be expected to write objectively, for men are generally influenced emotionally in their consideration of women. They write in the light of their experiences as lovers, husbands, brothers, or fathers, relationships in which the vision may be blurred by love, jealousy, or disenchantment. However, we do find, preserved from the Elizabethan era, a few letters written on a platonic plane between friendly persons of opposite sexes, and we do read interesting comments of tutors concerning some rather remarkable female scholars. This type of writing is generally more objective, but while it indicates the high degree of scholarship achieved by many of the Elizabethan women, it does not give us significant insight into the women themselves.

If we are disappointed to uncover so little written by the Elizabethan woman, we are fortunate in that there was so much written about her.
Carroll Camden says:

The Elizabethans seemed fascinated with the Elizabethan woman. The many books which were written about her are concerned with many facets of her life and many attempts to analyze her. These were written both in praise and condemnation of her, and concerned her differences from man, physical, mental, and spiritual. Some writers even argued that women had no soul. She was considered to be better than man by some, and worse by many. It must be considered that these appraisals of women are made by men.¹

It should also be considered that material written about women during the period when Elizabeth was governing England was influenced by the fact that the person endowed with sufficient powers to make or break the ambitious courtiers surrounding the monarchy was a woman. This was galling to many men, and they reacted characteristically. Those who curried favor avoided acts which might offend her, for although Elizabeth was extremely intelligent, shrewd, and a most able administrator, she also possessed some of the less noble traits of monarchy: she was arrogant, extremely jealous, and the owner of a mighty temper, easily aroused. Consequently, it was politically expedient for writers to extol the virtues of all womankind, lest the virgin queen consider the disparaging of women a reflection upon herself. Nevertheless, men, opposed to her religiously or politically, sometimes took out their bitterness in criticism of women in general, calling attention to their excesses in dress and other extravagancies, criticism particularly applicable to the vain queen.

Nevertheless, in our search for the Elizabethan woman, it will not be possible to avoid completely sources of information which may seem unduly biased, for often these sources provide information concerning the temper

of the times or give us glimpses of the external life of the Elizabethan people. We shall, however, rely rather heavily on three major sources of information which may give us a more objective picture of the times. These are: records of the political history of the time; conduct books, which prescribe in detail nearly every aspect of daily existence; and the literature of the day, which is demonstrated most significantly in the drama form.

These sources furnish information concerning woman's place in Elizabethan history, her education, her legal rights (these affect her relationship to her parents, husband, and children), her duties as a homemaker, her clothing, her manners, her recreation, and even the meaning of the word "honor" as applied to women. Each of these aspects of life will be considered in this paper, but they cannot be considered separately in tight compartments labeled "education" or "legal rights" because, in life itself, there are close and significant relationships among all areas of living. For example: the fact that the educated woman was so seldom involved personally in the arts was, no doubt, directly related to her inferior legal status. The man who wanted his wife to be educated for his own personal satisfaction may, as her lord and master, have forbidden her to participate in artistic activities beyond those relating to her housewifely duties.

Beyond the restraints of the law and the precepts of the conduct books, there were, however, two influences which were of paramount importance in the Elizabethan age: one was the sheer vitality of the times; the other was Queen Elizabeth herself. These influences were interacting. In all probability, Elizabeth could not have restrained the progress of her age; but it is quite certain that her encouragement and approval advanced that progress significantly. Obviously both men and women were caught up in
the spirit of the times, and both were influenced by the Queen and her court, but the Elizabethan woman, in particular, looked to the Queen for leadership in fashion, entertainment, and even manners.

It becomes increasingly clear that to obtain a more fully rounded picture of the Elizabethan woman, it will be necessary to consider her within the framework of the world in which she lived; therefore, it would be well to review briefly the conditions of that world. In attempting to describe the Elizabethan Age, one wishes the word "fabulous" had not been so indiscriminately applied to trivialities in the current generation, for this is a word that springs instantly to mind when one thinks of the Age of Elizabeth. It was an era of infinite contrast: the extreme wealth of the rich, the utter poverty of the masses; the extravagance and delicacy of dress, the filth in the streets; rich food, coarse manners at table; and great progress contrasted with terrible peril—exploration, trade, and conquest carried to incomparable successes in spite of enemies abroad and the devastating black plague at home.

The Elizabethans, spurred on by their queen, did not require that the wealth of England be accumulated legitimately; they were extremely proud of the courage and seamanship that brought to England the treasure that was pirated from other countries. Wealth obtained from any source helped England in her fight for political recognition as an important power, and the defeat of the Spanish Armada pretty well established her supremacy at sea and smoothed the way for future prosperity.

But it was not only in materialistic gain that Elizabethan England was so fantastically successful; the religious schism, which had imperiled the unity of England since the Act of Supremacy (1534), was being gradually but firmly brought together by the Protestant Queen. It is difficult to
determine the extent to which the casting off of the asceticism of Catholicism affected the spirit of the times, for even prior to the establishment of the Anglican Church, many of the Catholic clergy had repudiated in action the self-denial they advocated in principle. However, it must have been comforting to the layman to be freed from the tradition that sensuousness was a sin, for the Elizabethan rejoiced in the sensuous approach to life. He enjoyed eating, drinking, dressing in clothing that was pleasant to the touch, dangerous amusements, and what Virginia Woolf called "ribald merriment."²

The Elizabethan Age did not spring into existence Phoenix-like; it was the culmination of forces that had been rising for centuries, but it was also a time when England stood at a cross-roads, and the mishandling of any of the conflicting forces might have created an imbalance that would have plunged the country into chaos. The political, religious, social, and economic problems pushing to the fore were like obstreperous children who need the guidance and discipline of a firm hand. Is it not strange that, in a time when male supremacy was a sacred covenant ordained by God, the hand which led England into its Golden Age was that of a woman?

It is the more incredible when one considers the real power granted to this woman. While it is true that the monarchy under which she reigned was answerable to Parliament, it was her own firm will that kept tight rein on all the areas of government. Furthermore, she was strengthened in her role of Queen by the tradition of rule by divine right and the belief that the sacred ordination of the ruler gave her supernatural powers, even

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to the healing of the sick, and she exercised the power implicit in such a belief. That she often abused her power and let her vanity affect her judgment was not an entirely feminine deficiency; the history books are filled with records of kings who equaled her in these faults, but few who equaled her in achievement.

Perhaps it would be well to turn to a historian of her own period for an evaluation of Elizabeth by her contemporaries. Sir Robert Maunton (1563-1635), a courtier, wrote an interesting appraisal of her in his *Fragmenta Regalia: Or Observations on the late Queen Elizabeth Her times, and Favourites*:

She was of personage tall, of hair and complexion fair, and therewith well favoured, but high nosed, of limbs and feature neat, and which added to the lustre of those exterior Graces, of Stately and Majestick comportment; participating in this more of her Father than Mother, who was of inferior alloy... If we search further into her intellectuals and abilities, the whole course of Government deciphers them to the admiration of posterity; for it was full of magnanimity, tempered with Justice, and Piety; and to speak truly, noted but withone act or taint; all her deprivations either of life or liberty, being legall, and necessitated. She was learned (her sex, and the time considered) beyond common belief... Her warres were a long time more in the auxiliary part, in assistance of forraign Princes and States, than by invasion of any,

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An interesting note identifying Sir Robert is found on page 82:

"Sir Robert Maunton (1563-1635), courtier and political figure, was under the early patronage of the Earl of Essex, who planned for him a diplomatic career. He was Secretary of State under James I, a member of the commission to examine Sir Walter Raleigh in 1618, and by popular report largely responsible for Raleigh's execution. Maunton's *Fragmenta Regalia*, though sketchy, is an interesting account of the men around Elizabeth and has the attributes and weakness of personal reminiscence. One of the most attractive sketches is that of Elizabeth."
till common policie advised it for a safer way, to
strike first abroad, than at home to expect the warre,
in all which she was felicious and victorious. The
change and alteration of Religion upon the instant
of her accession (the smoak and fire of her Sisters
Martyrdomes scarcely quenched) was none of her least
remarkable accounts; But the support and establish-
ment thereof, with the means of her subsistence,
amidst so powerfull enemies abroad, and those many
domestique practices, were (me thinks) works of in-
spiration, and of no human providence...

She was absolute and sovereign Mistress of her Graces;
and...all those, to whom she distributed her favours,
were never more than Tenants at will, and stood on no
better ground than her Princely pleasure, and their
own good behaviour.5

Perhaps, on the theory that he who holds the purse strings, holds the
power, Queen Elizabeth held on to her money; however, Sir Robert seems
to find ample excuse for her action:

Her rewards consisted chiefly in grants of Leases and of
Offices, Places of Judicature: but for ready money, and
in any great summes, she was very sparing; which we partly
conceive was a vertue rather than drawn from necessity,
than her nature, for she had many layings out, and to
her last period. And I am of opinion with S. Walter
Raleigh, that those many brave men of our times, and
of the Militia, tasted little more of her bounty than
in her grace and good word, with their due entertainment,
for she ever paid the Souldiers well, which was the honour
of her times, and more than her great adversary of Spain
could perform. So that when we come to the consideration
of her frugality, the observation will be little more,
than that her bounty and it were so inter-woven together,
that the one was suited by an honourable way of spending,
the other limited by a necessitated way of sparing.

Elizabeth reigned for forty-five years (1558-1603) and left such an
impact on her country that today we refer to a whole century (1540-1640)

5. The underlining is mine. I want to emphasize the power of
Elizabeth and her reluctance to delegate that power.
as the Elizabethan Age. It is not strange that such a woman was the major influence on the women in her kingdom. Besides being responsible for the setting of fashions, the queen was also responsible for the education and status of women. During her reign, women continued to be well educated and seemed to enjoy more status as persons than was granted to them previously or would be granted them later—this in spite of the fact that the queen did nothing to improve women’s legal position. We do not know whether this failure to aid her sex directly was a source of disappointment to the Elizabethan women or whether they were so accustomed to yielding to male supremacy that they did not expect relief from their subserviency. A knowledge of the Elizabethan woman’s feelings concerning this situation would provide much insight into her attitude both toward her queen and the world in which she lived. We can hope, however, that women enjoyed their Golden Age, for, as Jean Gagen shows, their position deteriorated under Elizabeth’s nephew, James I:

By her own dominant personality, Elizabeth had helped to raise the status of her sex to unprecedented heights. Society women, taking their pattern from the queen, had also wielded great power. But James disliked women both collectively and individually, and he had no intention of allowing them to meddle any longer in state affairs. In every way possible, he attempted to decrease their influence upon political matters and to belittle their importance or capabilities in any sphere outside the home.  

It should be noted that, although the queen by being queen, helped maintain the educational standards for the girls who were being reared during her reign, she seemed jealous of other accomplished women. This


fact may have hastened the recession of feminine intellectual opportunities which occurred after her death. Gamaliel Bradford comments on the queen's faults:

Her extraordinary and devouring jealousy probably extended to mental excellence as well as to bodily charms. Therefore we do not find her surrounding herself, as we might have expected, with women whose knowledge was on a level with her own. Instead of this, as the preceding generation gradually died out, we hear less and less of remarkable intellectual gifts. 8

If Queen Elizabeth seems to have done nothing officially to further either the legal rights or educational privileges of her sex, the mere fact that she acted as a stimulus to an era of great vitality provided a continuously invigorating atmosphere that acted upon the daily lives of all her subjects. She expected the men of action to be men of high intellectual achievements. The Raleighs and the Sidneys, who sailed the seas and fought the wars, came home to write poetry and participate in the intellectual life at Court under Elizabeth, where the courtiers were as clever at repartee and the writing of verse as they were at the game of politics. They were aided in their endeavors by the various conduct books of the period, some of which prescribed the graces to be cultivated by the politically ambitious. One of the most famous of these books was Sir Thomas Hoby's translation of Castiglione's The Courtier, published in 1561.

Men who thrived in such a highly intellectual atmosphere needed intelligent companionship from the women who shared their worlds. It was the realization of this need that caused practical fathers to pay for good

educations for their girls, in the hope that such an education would increase their chances to make advantageous marriages. Some of the most learned men in England tutored the daughters of the nobility and those of other wealthy men. It is probably because of the prominence of these teachers and the political importance of many of the girl-students that we have so much information about education for women in the days of Elizabeth. The source of much of this information is in the political history of England.

If we seem to spend an excessive amount of time on the education of the Elizabethan woman, it is because education for women was such a phenomenon. It did not originate with the Elizabethans, but it was still a comparatively new idea, and it rose to its peak during the reign of Elizabeth and dropped rapidly soon afterward. Perhaps the best way to illustrate the extent of woman's education is to mention the achievements of some of the better known lady-scholars.

Queen Elizabeth, of course, was among those whose education had been strictly attended to. Roger Ascham whose Scholemaster (published posthumously in 1570), recommended some very advanced theories of education, tutored her, and he read the Greek New Testament and Sophocles with her every day. After she became Queen, she continued to read Greek with him. Concerning this practice, A. L. Rowse says:

Elizabeth was brought up on his method of double translation, from Latin into English, from English back into Latin. She was an apt pupil; she had natural duplicity of mind.

In addition to Greek and Latin, she spoke French, German, and Italian.

It is probable that Elizabeth owed her splendid education in part to the earlier efforts of her father's first wife, the brilliant Catherine of Aragon, who is considered by one Elizabethan scholar, Foster Watson, to have "been the source of the English renascence of women's education." Among those she seemed to have inspired with the belief in the need for feminine education was Sir Thomas More, who gave his daughters the same training as his son. His daughter Margaret became very skilled in Latin composition, a skill which her proud father said sometimes "excelled his own in elegance and grace." In 1524 she translated Erasmus' *Treatise on the Lord's Prayer*, which was published with an introduction by Richard Hyrde, in which he writes on the need for education of women, stating that to deny them education is to blight one-half of the human family.

One of the most famous girl-scholars was the poignantly lovely and ill-fated Lady Jane Grey. Roger Ascham, writing in his *Scholemaster*, describes an incident in which he came upon her reading in Greek "with as much delight as some gentlemen would read a merry tale in Boccace." She explained her delight in learning by saying her happiest moments were associated with her gentle schoolmaster, who was so different from her strict, stern parents. Besides Greek, Lady Jane was also proficient in Hebrew, Chaldee, Arabic, French, and Italian.

The education of both boys and girls of the upper classes started early. As soon as possible, each was tutored in good manners and court


12. Ibid., p. 37.
etiquette. Shortly after the third birthday, the children were turned over to a family tutor for instruction, and the girls were usually included in this early schooling. In the middle classes, "the boys were sent to the local schools, and the girls, until later in the century when they also attended school with their brothers, were given to their mothers to train."[^13]

It must have been disconcerting to the educated Elizabethan girls to realize how little choice they had in living their lives. They had virtually no legal rights, being required to obey a father who might be loving and kind or might be brutal, but, in either case, was the strict master of his household; after marriage, girls were controlled by husbands who exercised the same restrictions. This system was upheld by the conduct books which prescribed in detail the duties of children to parents and also delineated the responsibilities of parents to children and husbands to wives. But there was also another force that sanctioned obedience to parents; this was the church, which cited Biblical precedent for parental reverence.[^14]

Obedience to parents restricted the lives of the boys as well as the girls. The parents chose the marriage partners of sons as well as of daughters. The only difference was that the son now was free to set up his own household and rule it as he chose.

That such a system led to intolerable abuses goes almost without saying. The days had long since passed when a father would offer his daughter to his guest as proof of his hospitality, but the reasons the girls were


permitted to remain virgins were practical ones. The prospective bridegroom, and what was more important, his father, expected the bride to be a virgin. There was, however, no legal recourse for the girl who wished to remain a virgin if her father wanted to use her to further his own political career. The Elizabethan woman was a helpless pawn, maneuvered by the will of ambitious husbands and fathers. Marriages were arranged to consolidate property holdings, to increase prosperity, or make favorable family connections; very young girls were mated with old men to provide heirs for important families, and girls, not yet out of childhood, were sold into virtual prostitution at court.

The histories of the time are full of incidents which indicate the tragedy of being a woman at court. One of the most poignant, of course, is the sad story of the gentle, brilliant Lady Jane Grey. Forced, at sixteen, by an ambitious father-in-law, to take the throne of England after the death of the boy-king Edward VI, she was too intelligent not to realize that her reluctant reign would be short—it lasted nine days—and would end in her death. The tragedies of the wives of Henry VIII are too well known to need review, but there were, in all probability, countless other unknown girls whose lives were ruined by a sovereign who was appraised by a contemporary as a man who "never spared man in his anger, nor woman in his lust." But it was not only at court that this type of tragedy occurred, this is borne out by the literature of the day, which we shall examine later.

If convenience, not romantic love, was the motivating factor behind most marriages, the fact that this was a religious union contracted for

life was an essential factor in keeping the couples together. Another factor was that the Elizabethans had been indoctrinated since infancy with the importance of doing one's duty in life. Knowing one might as well make the best of the situation probably contributed to an attitude that resulted in happy marriages.

The legal age for marriage was twelve years for a girl and fourteen for a boy, although it was recommended that the couple be older. At the wedding ceremony the bride wore a white dress, a small cap and gloves, and provided "all her friends with two-penny gloves." 16 The dowry she brought to her marriage was at the complete disposal of her husband. In cases of very wealthy brides, this dowry might amount to as much as a million dollars by today's standards. No wonder the groom furnished the wedding celebration at his home! 17

The conduct books delineate the responsibilities of husband and wife, who is, of course, governed by her husband. She must "come when he calls... take reproofs meekly and acknowledge her inferiority." 18 Fortunately, she does receive one small compensation; the conduct books specify that the husband is to furnish the money for his family (which the wife must use prudently), and the wife is to be granted authority for the running of the home, in which the husband is not to interfere. But being permitted to run the household without interference is not an unmixed blessing; the books instruct her to work hard so that she might be an example to her maids, she has the responsibility for the health of her household, the supervision of

17. Ibid., pp. 98-99.
18. Ibid., p. 120.
the garden, orchard, dairy, making of cloth, and sewing household clothing, and she personally did fine needlework to adorn her home and the clothing of her family. In addition to these duties, she often had the burden of managing her husband's entire estate in his absence, which, under circumstances of national emergencies or service to his sovereign, could amount to several years. Miss Gagen says many of the women became "shrewd investors and speculators. For a time the projecting of patents and monopolies was a favorite pursuit of fashionable people of both sexes." Certainly the Elizabethan woman led an active home life, even if she were relieved by servants who did the coarse manual labor; she was literally and heavily loaded down with the keys of her household, if she followed the advice of Lyly in his *Euphues and His England*:

In governing thy household, use thine owne eye, and hir hands, for humwifery consisteth as much in seeing things as setting things, and yet in that goe not above thy latchet, for Cookes are not to be taught in the Kitchen, nor Painters in their shoppes nor huswifes in their houses. Let all the keyes hang at hir girdel, but the purse at thine, so shalt thou knowe what thou dist spend, and how she can spare.

Undoubtedly, the management of her own household implied an improvement in her condition from that she enjoyed as the daughter of the house. This was particularly true if she married a kind man and they came to love each other after marriage. But, under some circumstances, marriage could mask sadistic cruelties that women's lack of legal rights could not redress. Miss Gagen presents the sorry picture of the plight of too many wives:

If a woman was married to a generous, good natured husband, she might not be conscious of anything irksome in their

relationship. If, however, she found herself married to a tyrant or a bully, she could be reduced to virtual slavery and find no succor in the laws of the land. Legally a woman was almost submerged in her husband. The two became one, and the one was the husband. She could not own property or make a will, and any goods or riches which she possessed before marriage passed autocratically and automatically into her husband’s control. Though a prenuptial contract might guarantee a wife a private income from her property, there were innumerable ways, as Mary Astell forcefully pointed out in her Reflections on Marriage (1694), for an unscrupulous husband to wrest even this security from his wife. If she happened to work, he could claim her wages. If he assaulted her, she could not give evidence against him in court. She could not question his right to do with her fortune or even her personal property what he liked. If he wished, he could even take her children away from her, place them in undesirable hands, and refuse to let her see them. After 1697 it was possible, though extremely expensive, for an injured husband to secure a divorce. For the injured wife, however, there was no recourse except legal separation from bed and board, without, of course, permission ever to remarry.21

In spite of the hazards, the Elizabethan woman realized that marriage was better than most alternatives. There were few occupations open to the girl of high birth; she might act as governess, but, here, again, she would come under supervision in the home of someone else. Frequently, the lower class woman actually had more freedom than her upper class counterpart. One writer, speaking of the opportunities of the middle class woman says:

Some were virtual or actual partners with their husbands, or maintained businesses of their own. There are records of women booksellers and printers, usurers, upholisters, mantua and millinery makers, bakers, butchers, and brewers. Some of these skills naturally grew out of the required household training for girls. But many of them would have demanded a period of apprenticeship if the woman had not fallen heir to the trade through the death of her husband.22


Some women had occupations bordering on the bizarre; they were fortune tellers, astrologers, and medical quacks, but many more worked as servants in the wealthy families. These latter positions were often the choicest, for, more often than not, the servants remained with one family for life, becoming almost members of the family, receiving intimate confidences of the master or mistress, and being lovingly taken care of in their old age. This type of servant usually worked inside the house, but there were also quite good jobs for girls outside in agricultural pursuits. The duties of the agricultural workers were described in conduct books which were written to tell the manor owner how to run both his acreage and his workers. One such book, called Fleta, edited in 1647 by John Selden, among other instructions, prescribes the duties of the dairy maid. I include this portion of the book to indicate the way of life of the Elizabethan girl who had to earn her way on a farm:

The Dairymaid should be chaste and honest, faithful and laborious in her dairy-work, wise and neat-handed, not lavish, but of a saving temper; for she shall suffer neither man nor woman to come to her dairy and bear aught away which might disparage that for which she must make account... Her office is to take the milk by tally, to make cheese and butter according to the tale of the gallons, and to care for the poultry yard. For these outgoings and incomings she must give frequent account to the B'-liff and the Reeve; and note that some auditors of accounts will not suffer the dairy to allow less than twelvepence yearly for the profit of a goose, and fourpence for a hen. Moreover, it is her duty to winnow and to make packages, to cover the fire, and to do such-like small works wherunto her leisure may extend.

That the conduct books relating to servants' duties appear to be more concerned with the ideal than the reality seems borne out by the story of a duchess who "is said to have replied to a friend who besought her to procure a chef answering to a long list of transcendental qualities: 'My dear, if I could ever find a man like that, I would marry him!""26

We have searched for the Elizabethan woman in the more serious aspects of her life: her education, legal rights, her marriage and its attendant responsibilities, and her employment opportunities; perhaps, we should now consider her in her more frivolous life: ideals of beauty, fashions, and entertainment. The ideal of beauty was centered in the colors white and red, as anyone might suspect who has read even moderately the love poems of the time. The "Elizabethan period was one of violent contrasts; and it was no exaggeration to say that the fairest women are 'as white as snow and as red as blood.'"27 The beauty should have white skin, red lips, a swan-like neck, small, white hands, long, straight fingers, with red nails. Her bodily frame should be small and straight, her waist slender, her hips large, her feet small, and her hair should be yellow and curly.28

In a country ruled by a blond queen, whose major vice was vanity, beauty was more an occupation than a pastime for the Elizabethan women who strove to reach her ideal of feminine beauty. They dyed their hair yellow or wore wigs to cover darker hair, which they dressed in elaborate hair styles, wound with fine gold or silver wire, with ribbons and combs placed strategically among the confusion of other ornamentation.

26. Ibid.
28. Ibid.
Since the complexion was a matter of great concern, much attention was given to whitening it, and many of the preparations which temporarily whitened the skin led to permanent disfigurement instead. Among the preparations used were ceruse or white lead mixed with vinegar; borax and sulphur were also used for this purpose. The white lead dried the skin terribly, and many other preparations made the small pox lesions and prevailing acne much worse. In an attempt to counteract this effect, the ladies used bleaches and skin-peelers. They sometimes wore masks to protect their faces or to add an air of mystery to their persons or to cover the defects due to nature or the use of the strong cosmetics. To make the red needed for their lips, they frequently mixed cochineal with the white of hard-boiled eggs.

In addition to the use of these strange beauty preparations, the women took medicines to improve beauty and used preparations to whiten their extremely poor teeth. In spite of all these actions, the poor ladies faded early and were generally left with abominable complexions.29 The drama of the day is full of references to women’s attempts to effect beauty artificially, and, if we are to judge the men of the times from the speeches the characters make in these plays, we must assume that men in those days were pretty much like those of today—some resigned to the custom, some futilely fighting it.

Another custom or fashion of the day defies categorization; one does not know whether to consider it an aid to hygiene or an aid to beauty. This was the extensive use of perfume. It seemed to be a necessity in an

29. Ibid., pp. 178-183.
age which shunned the bath and yet insisted upon fastening the body up in almost unending successive layers of clothing.

Queen Elizabeth, who set the fashion, loved the flamboyant, and she did not restrain that love when she chose her clothing. Some of her gowns cost the equivalent of three thousand dollars. When we consider that the gown was only the top layer of expensive underlayers, the upkeep of an upper class Elizabethan lady who sought to emulate her queen could be expensive. A description of the clothing worn then reveals many items which are unfamiliar to us today, and likely to remain so, for the Elizabethan woman did not dress primarily for comfort.

Both men and women wore a kind of clothing shirt next to the skin. Over this, the woman wore a corset and a farthingale (a device to hold out her skirts), a petticoat, a kirtle (outside dress, separate bodice and skirt) or a half-kirtle, and sometimes wore doublets almost like the men's. The kirtle was open in front, extending from head to foot, the bodice opening "being partly filled by a stomacher, and the triangular skirt opening being filled by a decorated accessory called the forepart. The stomacher is detachable and made over a pasteboard foundation." The gown went over all these underlayers and, reaching from the shoulders to the ground, was open in front. This description of clothing is given by Camden, who also describes the outer accoutrements of the upper class Elizabethan lady:

Around her waist she wears a girdle or belt, attached to which, by means of ribbons or chains of precious metal, are her fan, her pomander ball, her muff, and her mirror. The fan is made of feathers or decorated cloth and is used chiefly for coquetting, tapping gentlemen on the wrist... A woman may own several fans and change them several times a day. A pomander is a perfumed ball used to temper noxious odors and to ward off diseases; it usually contains a mixture
of dried aromatic herbs which have been further treated to increase their perfume and some fixative, such as civet.... The mirror is made of metal or glass.

The Elizabethan lady sometimes used her handkerchiefs and gloves as love tokens. In our search for the Elizabethan woman, we may think such items as fashion and cosmetics are minor, but clothing has always affected the conduct of those who wear it. Ladies in hobble skirts do not usually run hurdle races; yet the Elizabethan ladies, in spite of their clothing, were quite active physically; they liked to dance, and frequently, from necessity, rode horseback (side-saddle).

The amusements of the Elizabethan lady, were then, as now, close to her personal interests and those of her husband. Some hunted and engaged in falconry, but for the less active, there were card games--the Elizabethans loved to gamble--story telling, gossiping, visiting, music, and rather extravagant entertainments called masques, some of which cost as much as $150,000.00 to produce31 and occupied the time of some of England's greatest poet-dramatists, such as Milton, Jonson, and Beaumont, and of famous designers of stage machinery, such as Inigo Jones. These lavish entertainments were frequently used to entertain the Queen on her "progresses" through the kingdom, at which times lords, ladies, and even royalty often participated in the colorful pageants.

It was such extravagancies that drew criticism from the Puritan clergy, who often charged Elizabethan women in general for the excesses originating from their Queen. But there were also men in high places who expressed their love and admiration for the women in their lives, and many who defended

30. Ibid., pp. 220-231.
women's rights to education and other privileges. Among these was William Austin, who argued in his Haec Homo (1637) that the only real differences between men and women are physical. Daniel Tuvil in Asylum Veneris; Or a Sanctuary for the Ladies (1616) also defended the equality of the sexes. And Sir Philip Sidney was extremely proud of his beautiful and talented sister, the Countess of Pembroke, for whom he wrote his Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia. In a letter to her, he said he wrote the book because "you desired me to do it, and your desire to my heart is an absolute commandment."

That the Elizabethan man both approved and criticized the women in his life is borne out by the drama of the day, which many consider to be the best source of information concerning the philosophy and attitudes of the people. Certainly the playwrights give us a picture of how the Elizabethan woman was considered within her culture. It is from the dramatists that we learn the concept of the word "honor" is different when applied to women than when applied to men. This is significant in evaluating the moral tone of the period.

According to the drama, the Elizabethan man had a high regard for the preservation of his honor, and if a man's wife were unchaste his honor suffered. But a woman's personal honor was only affected by her chastity; otherwise, it was only a reflection of her husband's or father's honor.

32. Jean Elisabeth Gagen, The New Woman, p. 11.


Among men, honor was a curious attribute, capable of being interpreted in various ways. It was sometimes related to personal integrity and sometimes only to reputation. The men seemed to be able to manipulate its meaning to suit their own needs and the expedience of the moment. Under this flexible system, a woman’s honor might be sacrificed by her male relatives in order to save theirs. Examples of plays in which men were willing to sacrifice their wives’ integrity for material gain are Volpone, A Woman Killed with Kindness, Maid of Tragedy, and others. In each of these plays the men expected to retain their honor because they did not expect their reputations to suffer. While many of these situations seem melodramatic or exaggerated by today’s standards, perhaps they were not too far-fetched in an era in which women had virtually no defenses against this sort of aggression.

Some of the playwrights—Jonson for one—frequently present another picture of women, showing them almost as caricatures of real women. A common way of disparaging women was to show them as pedantic busybodies who did not understand all they knew, so to speak, and thought they were expert on every subject. The best known example of this type of woman is Lady Would-Be in Volpone, vain, opinionated, peremptory, jealous, full of every petty vice known to her sex, so hilariously funny that if Jonson’s intention were purely malicious, the malice is partly lost in the humor. The prevalence of this type of woman in drama has to be a reflection of the feelings of some of the men of the times toward the educated women of the times; and we have the feeling that perhaps the portrait is not always too exaggerated.

But not all the women were portrayed in the dramas as obnoxious blue-stockings, or even as bad influences on men. The seemingly cynical Jonson created the lovely Celia in the same play he placed the overdrawn Lady
Would-Be, and other playwrights give their women characters qualities of warmth, self-sacrifice, and great courage, as John Webster did for his Duchess of Malfi.

Most writers who consider women's characters in relation to the way they are depicted in Elizabethan drama, consider Shakespearean heroines to be the best-rounded and, in general, quite true to the concept of women held by men in his day. Virginia Woolf says Shakespeare presented these life-like women because he possessed an "androgynous mind," which enabled him to understand women as well as he understood men. Actresses who have played roles in Shakespearean plays also believe that he created his female characters with great understanding. Helena Faucit (Lady Martin), who portrayed Juliet, Ophelia, and Desdemona, says "women are deeply in debt to Shakespeare for all the lovely noble things he has put into his women's hearts and mouths." And Anna Jameson attributes his great range of understanding of women's nature to the fact that he sees women as those who "either love or have loved, or are capable of loving."

It is evident from much of the drama that the artist was beginning to see women as women and not entirely as chattels, but it must not be forgotten that this was also a cruel and violent age, and the headsman's axe that could take the life of the gentle Lady Jane Grey, when she was only a pawn in someone else's political ambition, would not spare any other woman whose husband or father or brother made the wrong political


move. This philosophy was also reflected in the drama. Not everyone agrees with Rebecca West's analysis of Hamlet, in which she interprets Ophelia as only a pawn of her father and of Hamlet; but her point of view reveals this facet of women's life in the time of Elizabeth. In discussing a scene between Polonius and Ophelia, she compares Polonius with Pandarus and says of Ophelia:

The girl is not to be kept out of harm's way. She is a card that can be played to take several sorts of tricks. She might be Hamlet's mistress; but she might be more honored for resistance. And if Hamlet was himself an enemy of the King, and an entanglement with him had ceased to be a means of winning favor, then she can give spy's report on him to Claudius. Surely Ophelia is one of the few authentic portraits of that army of not virgin martyrs, the poor little girls who were sacrificed to family ambition in the days when a court was a cat's cradle of conspiracies. Man's persuasion that his honor depends on the chastity of his womenfolk has always been liable to waste away and perish within sight of a throne. Particularly where monarchy had grown from a yeasty mass of feudalism, few families found themselves able to resist the temptation to hawk any young beauty in their brood, if it seemed likely that she might catch the eye of the king or any man close to the king. Unfortunately the king's true favorite was usually not a woman but an ideology. If rosy approval was withdrawn from the religious or political faith held by the family which had hawked the girl, she was as apt to suffer fatality as any of her kinsmen. The axe has never known chivalry. 38

In our search for the Elizabethan woman against the splendor of her background and in the vitality of her age, we must admit that we enjoy most the glimpses we catch of her within the drama of her contemporaries. Here we think we see her most truly in all her strengths and weaknesses because we see modern counterparts in the characters created by the

Elizabethan playwrights. We know women of character, intelligence, and ingenuity who are very like Portia; we know clubwomen like Lady Would-Be, and shrews like Katherine. We must conclude that the nature of woman herself does not really change even though the physical world and mores of her culture differ greatly from age to age, but we still wish the Elizabethan woman had communicated more directly with her posterity.

She lived in such exciting times! How did she view those times? How we long to know!
BIBLIOGRAPHY


