

III

Unica Semper Avis:

The role of emblems in Elizabethan culture, using the Phoenix as a case study in

Nicholas Hilliard's *Phoenix portrait* and in the *Chequers ring*.

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The iconic image of Queen Elizabeth I was an essential part of her authority. The myth of the Virgin Queen was deliberately created to divert the attention from her body natural and sustain such authority as she aged. This article explores the role of emblems in Elizabethan culture and, more specifically, in the creation of the royal image, using the Phoenix as a case study. It analyses the influence of Nicholas Hilliard's Phoenix portrait in the re-fashioning of the Queen's image in the 1570s, and the relationship between emblem, context and meaning by comparing it to the enigmatic Chequers ring.

On 15 January 1558, after being crowned 'with all accustomed ceremonies' by Bishop Oglethorpe at Westminster Abbey, Elizabeth carried the sceptre and orb to Westminster Hall 'with a most smiling countenance for everyone, giving them all a thousand greetings'.¹ Ambassadors from the Spanish Empire, the Holy Roman Empire, the Baltics and Scotland had come to advance suits of marriage on behalf of their respective monarchs, for everyone at the English Court took for granted that the queen should take a husband.² After decades of failed heirs, phantom pregnancies and disputed successions, the young queen's youthful 'body natural' promised dynastic continuity and national security.³ Just four days after Mary I's death, Gomes Suarez de Figueroa, Count

¹ 'Venice: January 1559, 16-31', in *Calendar of State Papers Relating To English Affairs in the Archives of Venice, Volume 7, 1558-1580*, ed. Rawdon Brown and G Cavendish Bentinck (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1890), pp.10-24 (p.17).

² Sarah M. Gawronski, 'I neither omit aught, nor have I omitted aught: Embodying a Sovereign - the Resident Ambassador in the Elizabethan Court, 1558-1560' (Master's thesis, Utah State University, 2011).

³ Kevin Sharpe, *Selling the Tudor monarchy: authority and image in sixteenth-century England* (London: Yale University Press, 2009), p.75.

of Feria, had written to Philip II: ‘the more I think over this business, the more certain I am that everything depends upon the husband this woman may take’.⁴ The idea that Elizabeth might remain unmarried was unthinkable for the Spanish ambassador.

In the 1570s Elizabeth’s advisors, notably Lord Burghley, still pressed her to marry and settle the succession.⁵ Her ambivalence about marriage and her unwillingness to name a successor stood as public signs of the fragility of the Tudor dynasty. Indeed, Elizabeth’s unique position as an unmarried Protestant ruler in a male-dominated Catholic world had been responsible for the greatest threats and political tensions of her reign. In 1572, the Ridolfi Plot to murder the Queen of England renewed concerns about the succession and the queen’s mortality, and stressed the need for a new emblematic style of royal representation that diverted attention from the queen’s aging body and sustained her authority in the face of animadversion.⁶

This article examines the role of emblems in Elizabethan culture, and more specifically of the Phoenix emblem, in the re-fashioning of Elizabeth’s royal image in the 1570s. Through the analysis of Nicholas Hilliard’s *Phoenix portrait* and the *Chequers ring*, it will explore the circumstances and contexts in which the phoenix was used to represent Elizabeth, and whether the interpretation of its rich symbolism contributed to the construction of the myth of the Virgin Queen.

Emblem books flourished in the Renaissance and were particularly popular in France and Italy in the 1530s, but it was not until the first decade of Elizabeth’s reign that they came to be published in and introduced to England from the Continent. Books such as Claude Paradin’s *Devises heroïques*, first published in 1551, exercised an enormous influence on literature and the visual arts across Europe.⁷ Combining a motto (*inscriptio*), picture (*pictura*) and a brief poem (*subscriptio*), emblems communicated abstract moral, political or religious values in ways that had to be decoded by the viewer.⁸ The fashion for heraldry and emblem books in the late sixteenth-century fostered a rarefied, educated audience able to read visual symbols as encodings of values and virtues, privilege and power.⁹

The phoenix was an emblem rich in symbolic meanings applicable to Elizabeth. The sacred bird had long been associated with mythical power, as the ancient Egyptians had considered it a manifestation of the sun god. According to legend, at the end of its long life the phoenix built a funeral pyre of spice-wood in the desert. After igniting it by fanning its wings in the heat of the sun, it plunged

⁴ ‘Simancas: November 1558’, in *Calendar of State Papers, Spain (Simancas), Volume 1, 1558-1567*, ed. by Martin A. S. Hume (London: Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1892), pp.1-6 (p.3).

⁵ John Guy, *Elizabeth: the Forgotten Years*, (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 2017), Kindle edition, Location 373-74.

⁶ Sharpe, p.47.

⁷ In 1559, six impresa shields illustrated in a College of Arms manuscript used devices copied from the 1556 edition of Giovio’s *Dialogo delle imprese*, and the 1557 edition of Paradin’s *Devises Heroïques*. In Michael Bath, *Speaking pictures: English emblem books and Renaissance culture* (London: Longman, 1994), p. 22.

⁸ Bath, pp.10-20.

⁹ Sharpe, p.370.

into the fire and was burned to ashes, only to be born again.¹⁰ A phoenix device [Figure 1] first appears as one of the 118 published in Paradin's *Devises Heroïques*, with the classic combination of woodcut figure and the motto 'Unica Revivisco' ('I alone come back to life').¹¹ The 1557 edition of the same title also depicts the same *pictura*, yet praises the bird's uniqueness with the motto 'Unica Semper Avis' ('Only one Phoenix in the world at a time'), and the *subscriptio* 'As the Phoenix is the single solitary Bird in the world of its own species. As such are the best marvelous unique, and sparse, things'.¹²

Yet for all its rarity, the Phoenix emblem was not just Elizabeth's. In the 1557 edition of his *Devises*, Paradin attributes it to Eleanor of Austria, sister of Emperor Charles V, and wife of King François I.¹³ A phoenix had also been the *impresa* of Mary of Guise, French Catholic regent and mother of Mary, Queen of Scots, who paired it with the motto 'En Ma Fin Git Ma Commencement' ('In my End Is my Beginning').¹⁴ People who were thought to be extraordinary, like Philip Sidney, were often called 'a phoenix', and so were survivors of destructive experiences or religious persecution.¹⁵ Furthermore, the phoenix also became a symbol of resurrection and immortality in the Christian tradition. In his 1580 book of emblems *Icones* [Figure 2], religious leader Théodore de Bèze responded to the persecution of Protestants by using the phoenix to represent those who had survived the threat of public burnings: 'for, if they speak true, death itself remakes the phoenix with the effect that one fire [funeral pyre] is life and death for this bird. Go, O executioners, burn the holy bodies of the Saints. To those whom you want to destroy, the flame gives life'.¹⁶ Such close association of the phoenix with the Protestant faith favored Elizabeth, who had herself survived the dangers of Mary I's reign.

In Elizabethan England, the phoenix was essentially female, an element of unique rarity, beauty and distinction.¹⁷ The rebirth of the phoenix came to be associated with chastity, the only virtue which

¹⁰ Jean Chevalier and Alain Gheerbrant, *A dictionary of symbols* (London: Penguin, 1996), pp.752-3.

¹¹ Claude Paradin, 'Devises Heroïques', (Lions, 1551) <<http://www.emblems.arts.gla.ac.uk/french/emblem.php?id=FPAb056>> [Accessed 22 Feb 2017].

¹² 'Comme le Phenix est à jamais seul et unique Oiseau au monde de son espèce. Aussi sont les très bonnes choses de merveilleuse rareté', in Claude Paradin, 'Devises Heroïques', (Lyons, 1557) <<http://www.emblems.arts.gla.ac.uk/french/emblem.php?id=FPAb056>> [accessed 22 Feb 2017].

¹³ Eleanor of Austria was already a widow when she married again in France, so this second chance might explain her choice of a phoenix as her device.

¹⁴ Janet Arnold, *Queen Elizabeth's wardrobe unlock'd: the inventories of the Wardrobe of Robes prepared in July 1600*, (Leeds: Maney, 1988), pp.84-5.

¹⁵ *Elizabeth: the Exhibition at the National Maritime Museum*, ed. by David Starkey and Susan Doran, (London: Chatto & Windus, in association with the National Maritime Museum, 2003), pp.199-200.

¹⁶ Théodore de Bèze, 'Icones, id est verae imagines virorum doctrina simul et pietate illustrium [...] quibus adiectae sunt nonnullae picturae quas Emblemata vocant VI', (Geneva: Jean de Laon, 1580) <<http://www.emblems.arts.gla.ac.uk/french/emblem.php?id=FBEd006>> [accessed 03 April 2017].

¹⁷ Dora Thornton, 'Her Majesty's Picture': circulating a likeness of Elizabeth I', *British Museum Blog*, (London: The Trustees of the British Museum, 2017), <<https://blog.britishmuseum.org/her-majestys-picture-circulating-a-likeness-of-elizabeth-i/>>, [accessed 10 March 2017].

it was thought a woman could truly attain. This is key to understanding the appropriation by Elizabeth of a symbol that was in fact one of the most common of all Renaissance emblems. As Dora Thornton argues, Elizabeth's unique position as a single, female ruler in a man's world, allowed her to make a strength out of what was then considered a weakness, her gender.¹⁸ In association with her, the Phoenix emblem attained its fullest significance. There could only be one Queen of England, as there could only be one phoenix: unique, eternally youthful, celibate yet ever regenerating its dynasty.¹⁹ Its oneness represented Elizabeth as a ruler, triumphant over death, a political survivor who had lived through a papal excommunication, a life-threatening attack of smallpox, a rising in the North and a Catholic conspiracy to assassinate her.²⁰ In *Britannia*, William Camden records that Elizabeth took for her motto, *Semper Eadem* ('Always the same'), 'to hold an even course in her life and all her actions'.²¹ Thus the phoenix further emblemized the queen's steadfastness and constructed the myth that, against all odds, hers was an unchanging regime.²²

Tudor portraiture was a highly mediated art form, in which the paintings revealed the image that the sitter wanted to convey.²³ From the mid 1570s, Elizabeth's portraits purposely became emblematic, drawing attention away from her body natural to an eloquent symbolism expressed through jewel and dress, for both had the ability to construct her external, hence internal, frame.²⁴ Nicholas Hilliard's *Phoenix portrait* [Figure 3], named after the jewel in the form of a phoenix that Elizabeth wears on her breast, is the earliest portrait of the queen to indicate any kind of personal iconography.²⁵ It is an exercise of 'Renaissance self-fashioning', where emblematic details have been deliberately included to represent Elizabeth and her rule.²⁶ Indeed, the phoenix emblem is both literally and figuratively at the heart of the portrait. The face pattern is very similar to Hilliard's earliest miniature of the queen (1572), which indicates that his remarkable skills as a miniaturist clearly influenced his work on oil portraiture. Hilliard deliberately avoided painting the reality of Elizabeth's face, and rejuvenated her features by reducing them to a few delicate lines, with no shadows.²⁷ The portrait effaces the queen's body natural

¹⁸ Thornton, 'Her Majesty's Picture'.

¹⁹ Karen Hearn, *Dynasties: painting in Tudor and Jacobean England 1530-1630* (London: Tate Gallery, 1995), p.80.

²⁰ Pope Pius V issued a bull in 1570, titled *Regnans in Excelsis*, which declared Elizabeth to be excommunicated and a heretic, releasing all her subjects from any allegiance to her, in Patrick McGrath, *Papists and Puritans under Elizabeth I*, (London: Blandford Press, 1967), p.70.

²¹ Cited in Roy Strong, *Gloriana: the portraits of Queen Elizabeth I*, (London: Pimlico, 2003), pp.82-3.

²² David Howarth, *Images of rule: art and politics in the English Renaissance, 1485-1649* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997), p.104.

²³ Tarnya Cooper and Antonia Fraser, *A guide to Tudor & Jacobean portraits*, (London: National Portrait Gallery in association with the National Trust, 2008), p.4.

²⁴ Natasha Aways-Dean, *Bejewelled: Men and Jewellery in Tudor and Jacobean England*, (London: The Trustees of the British Museum, 2017), p.33.

²⁵ With the matching *Pelican portrait*, which was painted at the same workshop. Strong, *Gloriana*, p.81.

²⁶ Sharpe, p.370.

²⁷ Nicholas Hilliard, *A Treatise Concerning the arte of limning*, ed. by T.G.S. Cain, R.K.R. Thornton, and E. Norgate, (Ashington: Carcanet Press, Mid Northumberland Arts Group, 1992), p.15.



Figure 1. Claude Paradin, *Devises Heroïques*, 1551

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Figure 2. Théodore de Bèze, *Îcones*, 1580

© University of Glasgow, Glasgow.

and diverts all attention to her symbolic, full-blown costume and jewels, majestic in every detail.²⁸ The aim is to stress the idea, incorporated into the painting, fixing in the mind's eye the nature of the queen's virtues.²⁹ Such virtues are expressed by the phoenix pendant [Figure 4] and the abundance of pearls on her dress and jewels, signifying ideas of purity and virginity.³⁰ The Tudor dynasty is represented by the red rose on the queen's hand and by the heavy collar of jewels of the type seen in portraits of Henry VIII over her shoulders.³¹ In early modern England, Crown Jewels had a political function that went beyond their value, so the collar effectively contributes to Elizabeth's aura of sovereignty and reinforces her position as Henry VIII's legitimate heir.³² Thus, in the *Phoenix portrait* the emblem acts



Figure 3. Nicholas Hilliard, *Phoenix portrait*, Queen Elizabeth I, c. 1575, oil on panel, 780 x 610 mm.

© National Portrait Gallery, London.

²⁸ Roy Strong, *The English icon: Elizabethan & Jacobean portraiture* (London: New York: Paul Mellon Foundation for British Art, in association with Routledge & K. Paul, Pantheon Books, 1969) pp.13-4.

²⁹ Howarth, *Images of rule*, pp.106-7.

³⁰ Steven Olderr, *Symbolism: a comprehensive dictionary* (Jefferson, N.C: McFarland, 1986), p.100.

³¹ Janet Arnold, *Queen Elizabeth's wardrobe unlock'd: the inventories of the Wardrobe of Robes prepared in July 1600* (Leeds: Maney, 1988), p.23.

³² Victoria and Albert Museum, *Princely Magnificence: Court Jewels of the Renaissance, 1500-1630* (London: Debrett's Peerage in association with the Victoria and Albert Museum, 1980), p.9.



Figure 4. Nicholas Hilliard, *Phoenix portrait* (detail), Queen Elizabeth I, c. 1575, oil on panel.

© National Portrait Gallery, London.

as a vehicle rich in dynastic mysticism, praising Elizabeth's uniqueness and chastity while asserting the perpetuity of hereditary kingship and royal dignity, without commitment to marriage.³³

The same message of dynastic continuity is promoted by the *Phoenix Jewel* [Figure 5]. The queen's profile is silhouetted in a cut-out construction, chased in the gold to pick out every detail of the queen's pearls, jewels and dress.³⁴ On the reverse, the golden phoenix becomes an exact embodiment of the monarch, fluttering out of the flames under the crowned monogram. A garland of enamelled tudor roses and royal eglantine surrounds her like a laurel wreath, a classical symbol of power and victory.³⁵

The *Phoenix Badge* [Figure 6] depicts a similar phoenix and profile, with a Latin verse by the Master of Requests, Walter Haddon. However, in the medal the emblem is used to express grief over the queen's celibacy. Unlike coins, which were a strict royal prerogative, medals were not a genre entirely under control, and private subjects could commission them not to flatter Elizabeth but to

³³ Strong, *Gloriana*, p.82.

³⁴ This jewel was individually tooled, engraved and chased, and probably designed to be worn as a token of loyalty. *Princely Magnificence*, pp.58-9.

³⁵ Roy Strong, *The cult of Elizabeth: Elizabethan portraiture and pageantry* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1977), pp.68-73.



Figure 5. Unknown, *Phoenix Jewel*, c. 1570-1580, gold and enamel, 60 x 44mm (with loop)

© Trustees of the British Museum, London.



Figure 6. Unknown, *Phoenix Badge*, c. 1574, cast oval silver medal, 47 x 41mm

© Trustees of the British Museum, London.

counsel her. The Latin inscription surrounding the medal laments that the queen's beauty and virtue 'should not uninjured enjoy perpetual life' and bewails the fate of the 'wretched English whose only Phoenix becomes, unhappy fate, the last', thus subverting the idea of eternity that the emblem was

meant to signify.³⁶ As Kevin Sharpe argues, ‘how images were received and treated, and by whom, both responded to and transformed their performance of meaning’, and emblems were no different.³⁷ Therefore, by presenting herself as a phoenix Elizabeth also made herself available to interpretation by those critics of her decisions.³⁸ Depending on context, the same emblems employed to construct and stage the queen’s image could be also used to subvert it.³⁹

Rosemary Freeman argues how persistent and how deep-rooted was the Elizabethan love for emblems and for allegory in all its forms. Allegory was an essential part of life, and its basis was social.⁴⁰ The queen’s very clothes and jewelry were symbolic, and, at the time she ascended to the English throne, not only the royal family but also her courtiers shared the Tudor love for magnificence. In 1559, a Venetian ambassador at the state entry for Elizabeth’s coronation in London wrote that her court ‘so sparkled with jewels and gold collars that they cleared the air, though it snowed a little’.⁴¹ And few jewels symbolized kingship and majesty more than rings.⁴² In Anglo-Saxon England, a king could be described by the epithet ‘giver of rings’, and make ‘his distribution of rings at a feast in a hall, and the recipient drank to him’.⁴³ In 1515, at an audience on St George’s Day, the Venetian ambassador was surprised by Henry VIII’s fingers which were ‘one mass of jeweled rings’, since in Italy it was thought bad taste to display so many.⁴⁴ Elizabeth shared with her father a remarkable fondness for finger-rings, as they drew attention to her long slender fingers, of which she was proud, and were said to make ‘a display’.⁴⁵ Paul Hentzner, in his ‘Journey into England,’ 1598, relates how the queen, after pulling off her glove, gave a Bohemian baron ‘her right hand to kiss, sparkling with rings and jewels, a mark of particular favour’.⁴⁶ This magnificence was a vital aspect of Elizabeth’s authority, and something that she deployed very effectively as a tool of governance and power.

Diana Scarisbrick observes that no other personal adornment carried such weight of symbolism as rings.⁴⁷ If finger-rings were ‘universal objects supercharged with meaning’, the *Chequers ring* [Figure

³⁶ Cited in *Elizabeth: The Exhibition*, p.200.

³⁷ Sharpe, p.25.

³⁸ Sharpe, p.18.

³⁹ Rob Content, ‘Anti-Elizabethan composite portraiture’, in *Dissing Elizabeth: negative representations of Gloriana*, ed. by Julia M. Walker (Durham, N.C.; London: Duke University Press, 1998), pp.237-44.

⁴⁰ Rosemary Freeman, *English emblem books* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1948), pp.1-2.

⁴¹ ‘Venice: January 1559, 16-31’, p.12.

⁴² *Princely Magnificence*, p.8.

⁴³ *Princely Magnificence*, p. 10.

⁴⁴ Scarisbrick, *Tudor and Jacobean jewellery* (London: Tate Publishing, 1995), p. 90.

⁴⁵ Susan Doran, *The Tudor Chronicles* (London: Quercus, 2008) p. 265.

⁴⁶ Paul Hentzner, *Paul Hentzner's travels in England, during the reign of Queen Elizabeth, translated by Horace, late Earl of Orford, and first printed by him at Strawberry Hill: to which is now added, Sir Robert Naunton's Fragmenta regalia; ... with portraits and views* (London: printed for Edward Jeffery, 1797), p. 50.

⁴⁷ Diana Scarisbrick, *Rings: symbols of wealth, power and affection* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1999), pp. 6-8.

7] is supercharged with symbols of the Virgin Queen.⁴⁸ Firstly, rings were proof of identity and symbols of power. Designed as a locket, the ring contains the enamelled busts both of the queen (in profile) and supposedly of her mother, Anne Boleyn.⁴⁹ Both are shown wearing brooches, the former's of ruby, the latter's diamond. Elizabeth's profile portrait acts as a reminder of her sovereignty, since coining was seen to be a prerogative intrinsic to the crown.⁵⁰ It also suggests a date of manufacture circa 1575, the same as the *Phoenix Portrait*.⁵¹ Miniatures worn as jewels were mounted in precious frames, which affirmed their value and made an additional statement about the person portrayed.⁵² The bezel bears the monogram ER (Elizabeth Regina) in relief, the E made of expensive table-cut diamonds and the R of blue enamel. On each side, along the shank of the ring, there is a line of rubies set in gold. The white and red of the diamonds and the rubies, the most prestigious gems, are those of the Tudor rose and thus symbolize dynastic power.⁵³

But, rings were believed to have many 'virtues' beyond their beauty and value. Diamonds protected their wearers against 'enemies, wild beasts, venomous beasts and cruel men'. So, given the dangers faced by Elizabeth, it comes as no surprise that nearly one third of her collection was set with these stones.⁵⁴ An inventory in the Secret Jewel-house at the Tower of London in 1550 described a ring with a ruby belonging to Henry VIII as 'a Rubie that the kinge wore at the heling of pore people'.⁵⁵

Renaissance rings were also a powerful visual marker of betrothal or marriage.⁵⁶ The luminescent whiteness of both the mother-of-pearl body of the *Chequers ring* and its single pearl represent femininity and purity (along with power and rank). Their round shape and opalescent coloring evoke the image of the moon and create a connection with Diana, the goddess of chastity.⁵⁷ Indeed, the exquisite materials in the *Chequers Ring*, coupled with the rich symbolism of the ring itself, contribute to the identification of Elizabeth as the Virgin Queen. Thus, by choosing these stones and pairing them

⁴⁸ Diana Scarisbrick, *Rings: jewelry of power, love and loyalty* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2007), p. 7.

⁴⁹ If the ring was, indeed, an homage to the queen from Edward Seymour, the miniature could be Elizabeth's portrait as princess. In both *The Family of Henry* and *Elizabeth as Princess* the similarities of the face pattern with that of the miniature in the *Chequers* ring are remarkable, and they still were in the royal collection by 1975.

⁵⁰ Sharpe, p. 155.

⁵¹ The dress and jewels worn by Elizabeth's portrait in the ring are very similar to those depicted in the *Phoenix Jewel* and the *Phoenix Medal: Princely Magnificence*, p. 60.

⁵² Diana Scarisbrick, *Portrait jewels: opulence and intimacy from the Medici to the Romanovs* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2011), p. 6.

⁵³ Scarisbrick, *Tudor and Jacobean Jewellery*, p. 92.

⁵⁴ Scarisbrick, *Tudor and Jacobean Jewellery*, p. 90; *Princely Magnificence*, p. 4.

⁵⁵ *Princely Magnificence*, p. 33-4.

⁵⁶ Aways-Dean, *Bejewelled*, p. 77.

⁵⁷ Karen Raber, 'Chains of Pearls: Gender, Property, Identity', in *Ornamentalism: the art of Renaissance accessories* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011), pp. 159-160 in Mirabella, M.B. *Ornamentalism: the art of Renaissance accessories* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011), ProQuest Ebook Central, <<https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/oxford/detail.action?docID=3415037>> [accessed 07 March 2017].



Figure 7. Unknown, *Chequers Ring*, c. 1575, mother-of-pearl locket-ring, diam. 175mm.
Courtesy of the Chequers Trust.



Figure 8. Unknown, *Chequers Ring* (detail), c. 1575, mother-of-pearl locket-ring, diam.175mm.
Courtesy of The Chequers Trust.

with a single pearl, *The Chequers Ring* might also represent Elizabeth's love for her people and her symbolic marriage to England.⁵⁸

Within the ring, there is a small oval plate of gold, ornamented with a translucent red and green enamel, representing a phoenix rising in flames from an earl's coronet [Figure 8].⁵⁹ Unlike the *Phoenix portrait*, the phoenix in the *Chequers Ring* is not Elizabeth's symbol but the badge of the Seymour family, granted by Henry VIII to Jane Seymour, his third wife and mother of his only son, after their marriage in 1536.⁶⁰ The epitaph inscribed on her royal tomb at Windsor also used the phoenix to create an immediate connection between the birth of Prince Edward and the death of his mother thirteen days later, as only one phoenix could exist at a time.⁶¹ The location of the emblem beneath the bezel suggests that the ring might have been presented by Edward Seymour, son of the Duke of Somerset, as a token of loyalty to Elizabeth. According to Peter Burke, gifts in the Tudor court were 'a kind of democracy, a way in which the relatively powerless could exert pressure on the powerful', as the gift was always followed by the request of a favor.⁶² Seymour had lost the queen's favor in 1560 after his secret marriage to Lady Katherine Grey, so the phoenix in the ring – his badge – could act as a reminder of the donor and his good wishes.⁶³ The ring could even have been a New Year's gift, as Seymour was sufficiently forgiven by 1576 to carry the sword of State before Elizabeth at the St. George's day procession through Whitehall.⁶⁴

A contemporary signet ring with the arms of Sir Richard Lee [Figures 9 and 10] also reveals a concealed emblem in green enamel beneath the bezel - a grasshopper, the badge of London merchant, Sir Thomas Gresham.⁶⁵ According to Scarisbrick, signet rings 'served as their owner's signature or as a sign of allegiance'.⁶⁶ Thus, it is likely that Gresham gave such rings as presents to business associates or to those who had done him some service.⁶⁷ This suggests that the phoenix in the *Chequers Ring* could also be a message of allegiance to Protestantism, as the phoenix also represented Edward VI.

⁵⁸ Jim M. Hall, 'Elizabeth's Symbolic Marriage to England: A History of Lasting Union', *Early English Studies*, 1 (2008), pp. 12-13.

⁵⁹ Scarisbrick, *Tudor and Jacobean Jewellery*, p. 90.

⁶⁰ Howard de Walden, Thomas Evelyn Scott, Joseph Foster and Thomas Willement, *Banners, standards and badges from a Tudor manuscript in the College of Arms* (London: The De Walden Library, 1904), p. 19.

⁶¹ Richard L. Demolen, 'The birth of Edward VI and the death of Queen Jane: the arguments for and against Caesarean section', *Renaissance Studies*, 4 (1990), 359-91.

⁶² *Princely Magnificence*, p. 11.

⁶³ New Year's gifts from to Elizabeth's favorite the Earl of Leicester often incorporated his badge of a bear and ragged stag. *Princely Magnificence*, pp. 38-40.

⁶⁴ Strong, *The cult of Elizabeth*, pp. 168-72.

⁶⁵ Aways-Dean, *Bejewelled*, p. 105.

⁶⁶ Scarisbrick, *Rings, Symbols of Wealth, Power and Affection*, p. 30.

⁶⁷ Scarisbrick, *Rings, Symbols of Wealth, Power and Affection*, pp. 101-105.



Figure 9. Unknown, *The Lee ring* (reverse), c. 1544-75, enameled gold and chalcedony, diam. 260mm © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.



Figure 10. Unknown, *The Lee ring* (obverse), c. 1544-75, enameled gold and chalcedony, diam. 260mm © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

This article has examined the circumstances that fostered an essentially emblematic style of royal representation, and how emblems, and more specifically the rich symbolism of the Phoenix emblem, contributed to make Queen Elizabeth's image the essence of her authority in tumultuous times. The effacement of her body natural in favor of symbolism was a crucial step towards a new royal image, in which an ageless Elizabeth was, conveniently, no longer threatened by death. In the *Phoenix Portrait*, Nicholas Hilliard's unique skills as miniaturist and goldsmith create a symbiosis between the sitter and the emblem, and so Elizabeth becomes the Phoenix. Roy Strong argues that the two-dimensional style and awkward pose render the queen a 'wooden stylized icon of clothes and jewellery'.⁶⁸ However, the portrait might appear iconic and flat precisely because it acts like a personal device that depends on the viewer's ability to read its symbolic images.⁶⁹

Because of the multiple messages that the emblems could convey, the decoding of their meanings depended on both their context and audience. The high-status of both the *Phoenix Portrait* and the *Chequers Ring* suggest that they were intended to be seen and consumed by an educated elite. In the *Chequer's Ring*, the supercharged symbolism of finger-rings paired with the phoenix makes such decoding more complex, and unravels different directions as to the artifact's significance. If in the *Phoenix Portrait* Elizabeth becomes the jewel, in the *Chequers Ring* she is the jewel. Although the limits to our knowledge about the ownership of the ring should be acknowledged, its carefully selected materials and exquisite craftsmanship make it an object with profound connections to the Virgin Queen.

⁶⁸ Strong, *Gloriana*, p. 80.

⁶⁹ Michale Leslie, 'The Dialogue between Bodies and Souls: Pictures and Poesie in the English Renaissance', *Word and Image*, 1 (1985), 16-30.

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