An End Which Preceded a Beginning:

A comparative study into the incorporation of allegory in a posthumous portrait of Queen Elizabeth I and Aemilia Lanyer’s dedicatory poem to Queen Anna of Denmark, ‘To the Queenes most Excellent Majestie’

CLAIRE ASHWELL

This short study attempts to examine how and why allegory was incorporated into two pieces of material culture that were created c. 1611, a pivotal moment in English history when England was still acclimatising to the end of the House of Tudor and the birth of the House of Stuart. A visit to Corsham Court provided the inspiration for this study as a most unusual posthumous portrait of Elizabeth I (1533–1603) can be seen in the State Bedroom. Unlike the images of Elizabeth painted whilst she was alive, this composition includes Time and the Skeleton of Death. In contrast the dedicatory poem to the new Queen Consort, Anna of Denmark (1574–1619), wife of James I (1566–1625), written by the poet Aemilia Lanyer (1569–1645), includes veiled figurative language which conveyed her desire to gain patronage from Queen Anna. Even though the portrait and painting shared some allegorical traits, the adaptability of this trope led to significant and varying interpretations.

The world of allegory has been embedded into material culture since classical antiquity. With its Greek roots, the word *allegoria* is made up of *allos*, meaning ‘other’, and *agoreuein*, meaning ‘to speak’, therefore, it can be defined as ‘a description of one thing under the image of another’.¹ This flexible and figurative device was incorporated into the painting *Elizabeth I in Old Age* (figure 1)² and Aemilia Lanyer’s dedicatory poem to Queen Anna of Denmark ‘To the Queenes most Excellent Majestie’.³ Both were completed in c. 1611 as a means to convey public and personal

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² Mr James Methuen Campbell from Corsham Court kindly emailed this information about the painting ‘44 1/4 by 37 3/4 inches - on wooden panel. The painting was bought by my ancestor Mr Paul Methuen for £11 0s. 6d, at the sale of the Blathwayt family, who lived at Dyrham Park, South Gloucestershire (now a National Trust property), on 21 November, 1765.’ James Methuen Campbell, *Information on Elizabeth I's allegorical portrait*, message to Claire Ashwell, 25 January 2019, via Email.
³ Aemilia Lanyer, ‘To the Queenes most Excellent Majestie’ in *Salve Deus Rex Iudæorum*. 
messages of the painter and author. Their narrative became a framework by which the allegory became a means of expression for the individual. This study attempts to unveil the messages embedded within these works and thereby gain a glimpse into the world of the artist and author via their creative output. Even though this portrait and poem shared the allegorical concepts of time and memory, together with the feminine traits of modesty and virtue, their rationale and outcomes differed. On the one hand this illustrated the inherent traits within allegory: longevity, adaptability, and multiversity. Yet on the other it highlighted the individuality of each work. It is important to bear in mind that the expressiveness of the allegory relied upon the way in which the individual artist and author placed their allegory on panel and page; this can never be constant. Additionally, it cannot be assumed that because the courtly audience were from a comparable cultural background their interpretations would be similar. Interestingly, there does not seem to be a consensus as to the way in which these allegories worked but it is acknowledged that the time taken to interpret allegory made the audience reflect upon the theme presented to them.⁴

Figure 1. Unknown artist, Elizabeth I in Old Age, c. 1610. English School, 17th century. Oil on panel, 44 1/4 × 37 3/4 inches. Corsham Court, Wiltshire. © Bridgeman Images


The spelling of ‘Aemilia’ appears to differ throughout scholarship, this study uses the spelling from this work.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

By 1611 Queen Elizabeth I (1533–1603) had been dead for eight years and, as a consequence of her childless state, the House of Tudor died with her. The fin de siècle experienced mounting anxiety within court and parliament as Elizabeth continued to avoid making any provision for her successor. This was deemed crucial for England’s stability, the monarchy’s relationship with its parliament was the fulcrum of the nation state, and any weakness could invite rebellion or invasion.5 Much scholarship has been written about the succession and how it was reflected in literature and art at the time.6 By 1611, England was still reeling from this sea change where England was under the sovereignty of a foreign male monarch who had a wife and two sons. In his favour, James had secured peace with Spain, survived a Roman Catholic plot, and sponsored his version of the English Bible. Yet he was extravagant and indulgent, showing favour towards his friends and Scottish ministers; Parliament was not impressed.7 Therefore, there emerged those who admired the new king as well as those who were beginning to look back fondly at the reign of Elizabeth I. It is plausible to suggest that the painting’s artist and Aemilia saw allegory as an ideal construct around which they could organise their creative output at this time of change.

CONTRASTING INFLUENCES; AN UNKNOWN ARTIST AND KNOWN AUTHOR

The knowledge that the artist of the portrait is unknown leaves the twenty-first century viewer with an isolated artefact. Examination is devoid of any prior knowledge of the artist’s lifestyle, influences, or motivations. The painting is a unique image, an unreal representation of the dead Queen where analysis can only be based on the viewer’s interpretation and cannot be shaped by the assumptions of others. In comparison, the life of Aemilia Lanyer has been well documented. She was a daughter of the court musician Baptista Bassano (c. 1512–76) and Margaret Johnson (unknown–1587), and therefore a member of the minor gentry. She received a humanist education within the household of Susan Bertie, Dowager Countess of Kent (1554–96). By the age of twenty she was mistress of Henry Carey, Lord Hunsdon (1526–96), the Queen’s Lord Chamberlain, and therefore received patronage from Elizabeth I. However, Susanne Woods writes that her access to court diminished upon the end of her affair and marriage to Alfonso Lanyer on 15 October 1592.8 Aemilia craved for her former courtly

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6 For further detailed scholarship see Susan Doran and Pauline Kewes, Doubtful and dangerous The question of succession in late Elizabethan England, ed. by Susan Doran and Pauline Kewes (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014).
life and it is believed that this, combined with her financial difficulties, was the motivation behind her poetry opus *Salue Deus Rex Iudeorum*. Most interestingly, and maybe most fortuitously, Aemilia witnessed the birth of the Queen Consort’s court. The sixteenth-century Elizabethan court, with its sole female sovereign, Elizabeth I, was replaced not only by James’ court at the Palace of Whitehall, but also a separate court which Anna controlled. It emerged as a flourishing force of female culture, with Anna at the centre surrounded by her entourage of noble ladies. Possibly, Aemilia seized an opportunity here where, as a female poet, she wrote specifically to secure a feminine readership. By using her literary talent, she hoped to join this esteemed female circle of courtly ladies. Therefore, the significance of the background behind these works revealed some intriguing contrasts.

ALLEGORICAL ANALYSIS OF THE PAINTING

It is valuable to note that, whilst Elizabeth was alive, the dissemination of her image commenced under the auspices of a draft proclamation, written in 1563, which stated that only an image approved by the Queen could be circulated amongst artists’ workshops. Thus, it can be inferred that a template depicting a young queen became an illustration of her motto, *Semper Eadem*, as little difference can be seen between the facial features of the queen in the Darnley portrait c.1575 (figure 2) and the Ditchley portrait c.1592 (figure 3). Yet, the portrait *Elizabeth I in Old Age* is completely different.

For forty-four years Elizabeth had been Head of the church and state, but not even England’s queen could escape her own mortality. *Elizabeth I in Old Age* is a hybrid of allegorical references, where time, memory, and purity have been interwoven to create an image of the Queen who was subject to human frailty; the image of youth has vanished. The composition consists of a weary older woman resting her head upon her right hand. Although Elizabeth is richly dressed, she exudes a tired sense of majesty. Behind her in the gloom the Skeleton of Death leers over her left shoulder, whilst Time, although seated, slumbers just behind her. Over her head two putti hold the Tudor crown and above that is an indistinct laurel wreath. Two hourglasses, one broken and the other complete, are significant attributes associated with the ghostly figures. The unbroken hourglass, next to the Skeleton of Death is indicative that nothing can stop the cycle of life, the flowing sand reflects the constant passage of time, which even Elizabeth could not avoid. Undoubtedly the English monarchy would continue but its mortal queen cannot. On the right side of the panel the hour glass is broken at the neck,

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a visual interpretation of a contraction of time and space; time is static, it is unable to move forward. This reflects Elizabeth’s dreamlike gaze and Time’s slumbering state. Elizabeth appears retrospective and absorbed within her own thoughts, Time mirrors her pose but is asleep. It is almost as if there is an invisible wall between them where the metaphorical world is on one side and on the other, the real world, yet both inhabit a place where time is irrelevant.

Recent scholarship, including the works of Roy Strong, Kaara Peterson, and Julia Walker, elucidate the allegories of chastity, melancholy, and memory which were woven into the painting’s composition. Strong plausibly suggests that the painting takes the viewer on a Petrarchan journey, from ‘Death to Fame, Time and Eternity’. Elizabeth identifies with Laura, the heroine from Francesco Petrarch’s (1304–74)

13 Strong, p. 164.
Triumphs, as they were both chaste and objects of manly desire. This demonstrates that this allegorical poem was a fundamental construct behind Elizabeth’s image. On the one hand it explained her purity and refusal to marry and on the other it signified her association with Roman triumphs and military victories. Elizabeth was seen on equal terms with any male monarch and could create a stable nation state.14 Peterson looks at the melancholic and mirror allegory imbued in the painting. Elizabeth’s pose mirrors the melancholic pose created by Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528) in his work *Melancholia*, a work with which the artists within her court including Nicholas Hilliard (1547–1619) were familiar.15 Elizabeth appears intellectually exhausted as the prayer book slips from her hand, she comes to terms with her own corporeal limitations and that she can do no more for her country.16 Peterson goes on to suggest that Sir Henry Lee (1553–1611) was the portrait’s patron and the model for Time. By mirroring the Queen’s pose, he was paying her the sincerest form of flattery. This was not an unusual trope from a courtier who sought patronage from his monarch. It is possible that as Lee mourned his Queen he was taking part in his own allegorical self-representation.17 Walker writes that the painting was a parody of the Armada portrait (figure 4). By using the allegory of memory, it can be suggested that the painting’s objective was to galvanise support for James and to eradicate any anti-Spanish feeling. So, the sea scenes and symbols of imperial power were replaced by Time and Death. The viewer can see that despite Elizabeth’s great victory over Spain in 1588, even she is part of a bygone era.18

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14 Heather Campbell, ‘And in their midst a sun’: Petrarch’s Triumphs and the Elizabethan icon’ in Goddess and Queens: The iconography of Elizabeth I, eds. Annaliese Connolly & Lisa Hopkins (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 83-100, p. 83.
15 Peterson, p. 6.
16 Peterson, p. 13.
17 Peterson, p. 18.
ALLEGORICAL ANALYSIS OF THE POEM

One inherent quality of allegory is its intertextuality. Aemilia used this multivalent construct to create her own rhetorical sphere, a place where she felt secure enough to display her female poetic authority.\(^\text{19}\) Her intention was to demonstrate that she was worthy of receiving patronage and modern scholarship has revealed the diverse use of allegory she used to secure this. Barbara Lewalski stated that Aemilia was aiming to write a book about virtuous women from Eve to Queen Anna.\(^\text{20}\) She invited her readers to share fond memories of the past by imbuing her narrative with her own allegorical interpretations of Time and Memory. Firstly, from a personal point of view she wrote affectionately of her youth at the court of the most virtuous lady her readership may have known, Elizabeth I, whom Aemilia called a ‘great Ladie whom I love and honour’.\(^\text{21}\) From the cultural mnemotechnical angle, Aemilia invited her readers to remember Elizabeth I’s motto, *Semper Eadem*, as she wove it into the line ‘Still to remaine the same’.\(^\text{22}\) Aemilia created a platform for Elizabethan nostalgia which could bring her feminine readers together. She wrote about ‘shining Cynthia’ which referred to Sir Walter Raleigh’s (1551–1618) poem ‘The Ocean to Cynthia’ and Edward Spenser’s (1552–99) *Fairie Queene*.\(^\text{23}\) Her poem featured women including Juno, Pallas, and Venus as well as the Muses, the daughters of Zeus and Mnemosyne, the goddess of memory. Aemilia hoped that by celebrating the virtues of mythical goddesses she would empower her female readers. Kate Chedgzoy described this as Aemilia’s ‘attempt to manipulate patronage relations with a series of elite women’.\(^\text{24}\) It can be suggested that Aemilia hoped to create an area of feminine virtuous learning where she was seen as knowledgeable and worthy of high regard and patronage.

Aemilia also kept up with popular literary fashion by incorporating a mirror allegory within her poem as figurative language which became increasingly popular between 1550–1650.\(^\text{25}\) As Herbert Grabes described, the mirror can either reflect things as they are, show the way things should or should not be, what will be, or what exists in

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\(^{21}\) Lanyer, l. 115.

\(^{22}\) Lanyer, l. 118.


the writer’s mind. Yet, first and foremost the mirror was a piece of material culture often owned by women of high status. It was attributed to both physical and spiritual self-improvement. Aemilia explored these complementary qualities to define humility within her poem, she writes of Anna’s many virtues, ‘Looke in this Mirrour of a worthy Mind, |Where some of your faire Virtues will appeare’. In the same verse she stated that her mirror was made of ‘dym steele’, thus clearly emphasising her modesty as she is unworthy of a mirror of glass. Aemilia also wrote that if Queen Anna read her book, her mirror would be as ‘a glorious Skie’ reflecting the absolute truth of her joyous world. Additionally, the poem becomes a mirror in itself, reflecting the qualities of Queen Anna as well as Aemilia’s hopes for the future. Intriguingly, further analysis revealed that Aemilia inserted elements of subversion within this poem. McBride purports she changed the way in which patron-client relationships were supposed to have functioned and achieved this by overriding the courtly sphere with a religious one. By doing this Aemilia revealed that she could be seen as superior to her Queen, as in the first stanza she described her writing as almost holy, it was one of the ‘divinest things’, whilst Anna was only the reader. Also, having ‘prepared my Paschal Lambe’, Aemilia takes on the role of the host, the priest who conducts the holy meal, and therefore identifies herself with Christ, whilst Anna is just the guest. Additionally, Aemilia wove a certain amount of audacity into her poem. Although Aemilia talks of the virtues Anna shares with the classical goddesses, Juno, Pallas, and Venus, the concluding couplet of the stanza could be interpreted as a rhetorical question or the simple truth, ‘How much are we to honor those that springs From such rare beauty’. Aemilia also reminded her Queen that Christ crowns ‘all Kings’, and that Anna is subservient to a higher authority. The core issue here is interpretation.

CONCLUSION

Elizabeth I in Old Age and Aemilia’s poem reflected the material culture created at the time of England’s adjustment to the new Stuart monarchy. This brief study illustrates how both works incorporated allegory into their respective composition and narrative. Both works included similar allegorical tropes which conveyed more obvious messages

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26 Grabes, p. 39.
27 Lanyer, l. 37.
28 Lanyer, l. 41.
29 Lanyer, l. 97.
31 Lanyer, l. 4.
32 Lanyer, l. 84.
33 Lanyer, l. 17.
34 Lanyer, l. 49.
35 McBride, p. 70.
as well as a hidden agenda. The portrait of Elizabeth depicted the Queen in her own *memento mori*, which could be seen to either praise or parody her reign. In the first instance it appeared to take a melancholic view as the curtain fell over the Tudor dynasty; however, it could be read as looking forward to the Stuart era. In contrast, Aemilia’s desire for a courtly life and secure financial future were evident within her multi-layered poem. Indeed, she has been acknowledged as the first Englishwoman to pen original verse in a professional capacity.\(^{36}\) Not only did she celebrate Queen Anna, but she also attempted to find support within her female readership by evoking cultural memory, and possibly intertwined a subversive thread into her work. The fascination of allegory is that it is an extremely interesting agency which invites many interpretations. In 1611 it accommodated an end interwoven into a beginning and a beginning which was intertwined with moments of the past. So much so that this short study begs for continuation. Delving behind the veils of allegory imbued within these works together with additional early seventeenth-century cultural material would make an intriguing pathway for further study.

**LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS**

Figure 1: Unknown artist, *Queen Elizabeth I in Old Age*, circa 1610, oil on panel, English School, 17th century, 44 1/4 × 37 3/4 inches, (Corsham Court, Wiltshire). © Bridgeman Images


Figure 3: Marcus Gheeraerts the Younger, *Queen Elizabeth I, The Ditchley Portrait*, oil on canvas, 2413 mm × 1524 mm (London, National Portrait Gallery, circa 1592). © National Portrait Gallery, London.

Figure 4: Attributed to George Gower, *The Armada Portrait*, oil on oak panel, 1125 mm × 1270 mm; (National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, circa 1588). © National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London.
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