

'Ripeness is all': the death of Elizabeth in drama

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Citation:

HOPKINS, Lisa (2000). 'Ripeness is all': the death of Elizabeth in drama.
Renaissance forum, 4 (2). [Article]

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Renaissance Forum: Volume 4, Number 2, 2000: 'Ripeness is all': The Death of Elizabeth in
Drama

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In an important article in *Shakespeare Quarterly*, Steven Mullaney suggested that '[f]rom 1600 to 1607 – from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* ... to Middleton's *The Revenger's Tragedy* – the various bodies of the queen go a progress...in the popular theater' (Mullaney 1994, 145). It seems to me that Mullaney is undoubtedly right in identifying the death of Elizabeth and the succession to the throne as important *topoi* in Renaissance drama, but I think he unnecessarily narrows down the dating of these concerns. The end of the Elizabethan era finds widespread representation on the stage right up until the 1630s, and it is often associated with a motif of ripeness or rawness.

As the life of Elizabeth I began to wane, rumours repeatedly circulated that her possible successor, James VI of Scotland, would not wait peacefully until her death, but intended to seize the English throne forthwith. In late 1598, John Petit, writing from London, told his friend that if James 'can get money from abroad, he will not wait till the fruit be ready to fall'. In the spring of the next year, Petit reported from Antwerp that 'the King intends to gather grapes before they are ripe'; the next month he affirmed again – this time from Liège – that James 'would attempt to gather fruit before it is ripe' (Kurland 1994, 285). Petit's language is interesting because it touches on a strain repeatedly found in a number of Shakespearean tragedies: the issue of ripeness, the demarcation between the edible and the raw. Food imagery is indeed pervasive throughout the Shakespearean canon: Anthony J. Lewis suggests that 'Shakespeare found such imagery an especially effective way of delineating character and of

clarifying issues in his more mature plays' (Lewis 1988, 149). But the idea of the ripe fruit which is ready to fall is a particularly insistent one, often accentuated by a contrast with imagery of the raw, the repellent or the inedible, and it is repeatedly found in conjunction with motifs associated with the passing of Elizabeth and the accession of James. Moreover, the pattern is not confined to Shakespeare alone, but recurs elsewhere in Renaissance drama in plays focused on the issue of succession.

There are, I think, many possible reasons for this common cultural imaging. Loss of Catholicism, and the attendant regulation of food consumption by the patterns of feast and fast, had brought with it also the depleted nourishment of sacramental bread and wine without transubstantiation; the intermittent association of Elizabeth's own imagery with that of the Virgin Mary made this particularly pertinent. Moreover, Elizabeth's last years had been shadowed by war with Ireland, and the very different patterns of food preparation and consumption found in this and other colonies laid open to debate the constitutive elements of civilisation, and allowed for an early, quasi-anthropological awareness of the roles of food taboos therein.

In some ways, the image of Elizabeth as ripe fruit is a comforting one, drawn from the natural progression of the seasons: if she falls, ripe and mature, the transition to a new young king is similarly seen as part of the natural order. In other ways, though, it is strange, violent, and disruptive, for there were persistent rumours that Elizabeth did not fall naturally and ripely but wasted away, starving herself to death because of her grief over Essex, as Webster's Leonora recalls in *The Devil's Law-Case*:

let me die

In the distraction of that worthy princess

Who loathed food, and sleep, and ceremony,
For thought of losing that brave gentleman
She would fain have saved, had not a false conveyance
Expressed him stubborn-hearted.

(3.3.270-5)

Essex himself, who was heavily involved in negotiations to secure the Scottish succession, thus becomes in turn another significant factor in the series of succession plays, and representations of him often figure in the complex of food / starving women / new king motifs; indeed, as Louis Montrose points out, Sir Robert Naunton wrote '[o]f the earl of Essex's insatiable thirst for royal offices and honors ... that "my Lord...drew in too fast, like a childe sucking on an over-uberous Nurse"' (Montrose 1992, 11).

Finally, the pattern is further inflected by the imaging and imagery of James I himself, who walked into his hortus paradisus with the bitter quip that of Essex's enemy Raleigh he had heard 'but rawly' (Lacey 1973, 282). Concern about a Scottish succession was widespread. It can be detected in Greene's play *The Scottish History of James IV*, with its suggestive subtitle *Cross the Foe Before He Have Betrayed You*. James, and above all his Scottish followers, were often seen as hungry, coming from a lean land of starving people to plunder richer England. Scotland itself is frequently imaged as the Sparta to England's Arcadia, drawing on the fact that hunger and privation featured prominently in the popular images of both Scotland and Sparta, and the idea of Sparta/Scotland as troublesome near neighbour of Arcadia/England; this can be clearly seen in Chapman's *The Widow's Tears*, written shortly after James's accession, which makes ongoing fun of its party of visiting Spartans by characterising them as Scots. Chapman's Eudora is sought in marriage by Rebus, who, as James was to Elizabeth, is cousin to the ruler of the country, and of whom we are told that 'the venerean disease, to which they say he has been long

wedded, shall I hope first rot him ere she endure the savor of his sulphurous breath' (I.ii.31-34). Rebus is accused of poverty, a common jibe against James I's Scottish followers (I.ii.54-6), while Tharsalio dismisses the Spartans outright as 'Whoreson bagpipe lords!' (I.ii.109), and Lycus assumes that Eudora's melancholy is caused by 'the sight of her Spartan wooer' (II.iii.37). Most suggestively, Lysander, disguised as a soldier to court his own wife, who has locked herself without food in his supposed tomb, adjures her, 'Die not for a hunger, like a Spartan lady' (IV.ii.106), which both maintains the joke about Scots poverty and also introduces the starving woman motif so significant in dramatic representations of the succession.

The polarities, however, are not so simple as might at first appear, for if James is associated with hunger, Elizabeth, though sometimes imaged as a nursing mother, ultimately starves. It was, indeed, by no means obvious that virtue correlated with the ability to nurture, or was even compatible with it. The cultural obsession with starving, saint-like women had as the other side of the coin a distinct fear of the woman who was associated with food: Deborah Willis points to the emphasis placed on the witch's teat, and suggests that '[f]or Shakespeare, typically, the witch or witch-like woman is one who can make the adult male feel he has been turned back into a child again, vulnerable to a mother's malevolent power' (Willis 1995, 10). Dramatic representations of the queen, as Steven Mullaney suggests by the very title of his 'Mourning and Misogyny', have some particularly difficult negotiations to perform in the area of representing mothers and nurturers.

Representation of the mortality of Elizabeth was widespread. The story of Richard II prefigured it, as the Queen herself was the first to acknowledge, and it did so in ways which were particularly powerful because Richard, like herself, was childless, thus breaking the direct line of the succession, while the rumour that he had been starved to death eerily prefigured the tales

told of her own ending (Matheson 1995, 195). At the death of John of Gaunt, who has declared that 'Within me grief hath kept a tedious fast' (2.1.75) and made such macabre puns on his own name, Richard declares 'The ripest fruit first falls, and so doth he' (2.1.153), and this metaphorical marriage of ripeness and its opposite prefigures the occurrence of the motif within the king's actual marriage, as the queen fears that 'some unborn sorrow ripe in Fortune's womb / Is coming towards me' (2.2.10-11), shortly before the Gardeners supply her with an object lesson in the proper cultivation of fruit (3.4.28-66).

Richard II, moreover, is interesting not only in itself but, doubly, in its reception: the political use made of it at Essex's behest may be glanced at in the pointedly politicised play-within-the-play in *Hamlet*, which is often read as both an Essex play and a succession play, and whose Danish context made it resonant in many ways of succession controversies, not least because in 1599, a year before the probable composition of the play, it was rumoured that Elizabeth's brother Edward VI had been smuggled to Denmark, 'where he married the queen and "now is king there"' (Levin 1986, 56) – a suggestion which, however untrue, certainly adds piquancy to the staging in *Hamlet* of a fratricide designed to secure the succession, and to the image of a Danish prince sailing to England.

Hamlet encodes other elements of the ripeness patterning, not least when it is read not only in the context of Essex but also of the arena which proved most crucial to the fortunes of the earl, Ireland. Ireland is in one sense a peculiarly apt arena for imagery of ripeness, for its women were considered to 'ripen' exceptionally early – Camden remarked in 1586 that '[w]hen their daughters arrive at the age of ten or twelve, they marry them as ripe and capable', and Luke Gernon in 1620 asserted that Irish women were 'soone ripe, soone rotten' (Laurence 1985, 66). It has long been recognised that when Shakespeare wrote *Henry V* he appears to have been

thinking much about Ireland, but it is much less often noticed that his interest in them had been by no means exhausted by the time he turned to *Hamlet*. The presence in *Henry V* of a direct allusion to the Earl of Essex's Irish campaign means that the play can be dated with unusual precision to between January and June 1599; *Hamlet* is notoriously much more difficult to date, but the Arden editor is certain that 'a date between the middle of 1599 and the end of 1601 appears ... beyond dispute' (1). It is, then, not entirely surprising that Shakespeare should carry forward with him an interest in Irish affairs in a play which must have followed *Henry V* quite closely.

Hamlet's most direct engagement with Ireland comes early. When Horatio tells Hamlet that there is no offence, Denmark's prince assures his friend, 'Yes by Saint Patrick but there is, Horatio' (I.V.42). The Arden editor notes 'the very great fame of St Patrick's purgatory, in an Irish cave, much visited by pilgrims'; but however great its fame it is still a surprising oath to hear on the lips of a Danish prince. However, St Patrick was also famous for expelling snakes from Ireland, as *Richard II* recalls, so he is a peculiarly appropriate and poignant figure to invoke in connection with a king who is rumoured to have died when 'sleeping in my orchard, / A serpent stung me' (I.V.35-6).

This is merely one amongst many recollections of Ireland in the play. Sir D. Plunket Barton, an early chronicler of links between Shakespeare and Ireland, dismissed the idea that Old Hamlet's death recalls that of Walter Devereux, first Earl of Essex, in Dublin, and his widow's subsequent remarriage to the Earl of Leicester (Plunket Barton 1919, 180), but he did believe in the influence of the second Earl of Essex on the play (199). He noted that 'several writers have suggested that what attracted Shakespeare to the theme of Julius Caesar was a resemblance between the conspiracy of Brutus and that of Essex' (200), and that conspiracy is directly

recalled in *Hamlet* when Polonius remembers that 'I did enact Julius Caesar. I was killed i'th'Capitol' (III.II.102) and Horatio refers to 'A little ere the mightiest Julius fell' (I.I.117). Essex before his fall had been intriguing for the succession of James VI to the English throne, and James had been involved in negotiations with Tyrone, leading to rumours that he would use Irish troops, in conjunction with others supplied by his Danish brother-in-law, to seize the throne – a suggestion which does indeed, as Stuart Kurland argues, bring us very close to the world of *Hamlet*.

Smaller details of the play can also be linked to Ireland. Martin Holmes suggests that the name 'Ophelia' may also encode an Irish reference, since it is sometimes used as an alternative form of the Irish district of Offaly (Holmes 1964, 43) (Fynes Moryson calls it 'Ophalia') (Harrington 1991, 94), and Plunket Barton notes that Ophelia's mad song 'Bonny sweet Robin' is an Irish tune (212) and that the word 'o'ercrows', used by the dying Hamlet, can be traced to a similar expression in the description of Ireland by Richard Stanyhurst (204), which was written under the influence of the Jesuit Edmund Campion who, recent research suggests, may perhaps have been a crucially formative figure in the life of the young Shakespeare. (Stanyhurst also wrote at length about St Patrick and his Purgatory) (Lennon 1981, 63). Malone thought that Hamlet's injunction to his friends to swear on their swords might be imitating Irish custom (Plunket Barton 1919, 205), and Plunket Barton suggests that Shakespeare may have picked up some of the local colour of the play from John Dowland, the Irish composer, who was court lutenist to Christian of Denmark (213).

What, then, might the reasons and effects of the play's references to Ireland be? To some extent, *Hamlet* simply is a play with a wide variety of references to other cultures and other countries; it is, in a sense, Shakespeare's geography play. Nevertheless, the extent and nature of the

allusions to Ireland seem to me to be particularly systematic, and to point directly to a crucial area of interest in the text. I think it is reasonable to suppose that Shakespeare was, indeed, still affected by the aftermath of the Essex affair during the composition of *Hamlet*. It is not even necessary to posit a personal connection here with Shakespeare's own notoriously problematic biography, for the Essex Rebellion was quite simply the major political event of its time, and it would have been far odder for it not to have found any echo in Shakespeare's works than for it to appear there. The discontented earl surely is, to some extent at least, an influence on the discontented prince, and this play which is so centrally concerned with modes of succession may well be seen as encoding the shadow of Essex's intrigues for the accession of James VI.

But other concerns than the Essex Rebellion, and issues other than purely political ones, can also be negotiated through the evocation of Irishness. *Hamlet* mentions St Patrick in direct response to Horatio's assurance that 'There's no offence, my lord' (I.V.141), and he then cries 'Yes by Saint Patrick but there is, Horatio, / And much offence too' (I.V.142-3). Lisa Jardine has recently argued that the question of whether 'offence' has been caused to anyone is crucial to the early modern reception of irregular marriages, and thus to the interpretation of *Hamlet*; she sees the prince as not merely revolted by the incestuous remarriage of his mother but as materially harmed by it, and thus as 'offended' in a sense which is primarily legal rather than emotional (Jardine 1996, 39-42). The apparent irregularity of Irish marriage practices, and especially their alleged toleration of incest, was one of the primary causes of English 'offence' at Irishness, and it was also the prevalence of intermarriage between English settlers and native Irish which Spenser in particular saw as primarily responsible for their acculturation and, in his eyes, degeneration (Highley 1990, 97): David Cairns and Shaun Richards argue that 'the particular threat that the Native Irish posed for the New English, as the arrival of the late

fifteenth and sixteenth centuries (such as Spenser) were known, was that of cultural pollution' (Cairns and Richards 1988, 5).

From bad marriages comes bad breeding, and in particular bad mothers, or bad surrogate mothers. Resentment against both his mother and her remarriage are keynotes of Hamlet's emotional state, and in Elizabethan England discourses about marriage and mothering practices in Ireland offered both the most combustible fuel for such concerns and the most vivid language in which to express them. Christopher Highley refers to the specific anxieties aroused by Celtic, and especially Irish, women. A particularly well-documented anxiety concerned their role as wet nurses to the children of Old English settlers. Like many of the English, Spenser believed that in taking the nurse's milk, the child internalized her 'nature and disposition', thus subverting its potential to achieve a civilized English identity (Highley 1990, 103).

Highley also cites, as further evidence of the demonisation of the breastfeeding or milk-giving Irish woman, Sir Richard Bingham's condemnation of Grania O'Malley as 'nurse to all rebellions', and Humphrey Gilbert's advocacy of slaughtering the women who milked the rebels' herds as "'the way to kill the men of war by famine'" (104), while Philip Edwards cites Spenser in *A View of the Present State of Ireland* accusing the Old English of 'bit[ing] off her dug from which they sucked life' (Edwards 1979, 79). Such discourse is so pervasive that it even spreads out to the queen herself: the Irish figured Elizabeth not as a nurturing mother, as so much laudatory English propaganda did, but, in at least one instance, as a 'calliagh' (old hag) 'denying milk to the needy laborer' (Highley 1998, 67). The entire complex of imagery surrounding disordered feeding of humans also chimes with the general figuring of Ireland as site of blighted pastorality, where the people were even reduced to eating raw food, and in particular of that bugbear of English commentators, the practice of transhumance, which never

fails to arouse in the eyes of English Elizabethans a horror which seems quite disproportioned to what it actually involves.

Aberrant feeding and aberrant pasture are also repeatedly imaged in *Hamlet*. Fortinbras has 'Shark'd up a list of lawless resolute / For food and diet to some enterprise / That hath a stomach in't' (I.i.101-3), which images him as himself preying on those whom he has hired to prey; for his Danish counterpart, the world is 'an unweeded garden / That grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature / Possess it merely' (I.II.135-7), and he interestingly couples disgust with a failure ever to achieve full nourishment when he speaks of his mother's behaviour as being 'As if increase of appetite had grown / By what it fed on' (I.ii.144-5). He shudders to think of Claudius taking 'my father grossly, full of bread' (III.iii.80) and sneers at the reuse of the 'funeral bak'd meats' (I.ii.180), while Horatio images himself and his companions almost as foodstuffs for the Ghost, who is, after all, 'confin'd to fast in fires' (I.v.11): they were 'distill'd / Almost to jelly with the act of fear' (I.ii.204-5). 'Fruit' becomes a term particularly laden with irony in the play: Polonius offers his theory of Hamlet's erotomania as 'the fruit to that great feast' (II.ii.52), and says after that Ophelia 'took the fruits of my advice' (II.ii.145) Hamlet 'Fell ... into a fast' (II.ii.147). Hamlet recalls that his favourite play proved culturally indigestible, 'caviare to the general' (II.ii.433); even though it was 'well digested in the scenes', there were 'no sallets in the lines to make the matter savoury' (II.ii.435-8). He himself 'should ha' fatted all the region kites / With this slave's offal' (I.ii.575-6), but instead of thus controlling food supply he has been demoted to a mere 'scullion' (II.ii.583) who eats, insubstantially, of nothing but 'the chameleon's dish' (II.ii.93) in a court of confectioners who 'sugar o'er / The devil himself' (II.i.48-9) and with 'candied tongue lick absurd pomp' (III.ii.60).

Most of all, they eat people. Polonius is butchered as 'a calf' (III.ii.104), Guildenstern speaks to the king of 'those many many bodies ... / That live and feed upon your majesty' (III.iii.9-10), while Hamlet tells his mother to 'leave to feed' upon Claudius 'the mildew'd ear' (III.iv. 66, 64) and imagines the whole court as being effectively devoured by 'That monster, custom, who all sense doth eat / Of habits evil' (III.iv.163-4). Hamlet himself feeds Polonius to worms; Laertes, 'like the kind life-rendering pelican' (IV.v.146), will offer himself as food for others, until Hamlet challenges him to 'drink up eisel, eat a crocodile' (V.i.271). Also suggestive is the motif of ripeness. To the Player King, half-way through the play, Purpose 'now, the fruit unripe, sticks on the tree, / But fall unshaken when they mellow be' (III.ii.183-6). The real King plots 'an exploit, now ripe in my device' (IV.viii.63), and the potential King, Hamlet, who is increasingly identified as such towards the end of the play, does eventually feel that he himself is ready, like fruit, to fall and pass.

In many places the bad food is, as in the incident of Ophelia's unkindness allegedly driving Hamlet into a fast, linked with the feminine. The Player Queen begs to starve if she is untrue (III.iii.211), while in a grand entanglement of the twinned motifs of religion and pastoral, Hamlet adjures his mother:

Confess yourself to heaven,
Repent what's past, avoid what is to come;
And do not spread the compost on the weeds
To make them ranker.

(III.IV.151-4)

He associates his mother not merely with bad gardening, but with bad nurturing. When the Player Queen vows that 'None wed the second but who kill'd the first' (III.II.175), Hamlet comments aside, 'That's wormwood' (III.II.176). Since wormwood was the substance applied to

the nipple to force weaning, it is worth noticing that two lines previously, the Player Queen has protested 'Such love must needs be treason in my breast' (III.II.173). Treason in the breast is precisely how the application of wormwood must seem to the child, and Hamlet has not forgotten it. Now he is getting his revenge by applying wormwood to his mother in turn, and later he will again refer to the breast with scorn when he calls Osric one that 'did comply with his dug before a sucked it' (V.II.184-5) – an appropriate note to strike at the end of a tragedy which began when a king was fed a poison that did 'posset / And curd, like eager droppings into milk, / The thin and wholesome blood' (I.v.68-70). Given the extent to which this play dwells on images of tainted milk, blighted pasture, the struggle for political power, and the passing of monarchs, it is hardly surprising that it should be so suggestively steeped in images of Irishness, which represented the most troubling of all the mirrors held up to the Elizabethan sense of English nature.

Other Shakespearean plays, and others of the great tragedies in particular, also find in the idea of the ripe and the raw a master trope for the imaging of political and social disorder. However, the most sustained revisiting of the idea in the context of the death of Elizabeth comes, surprisingly enough, in the plays of a much later dramatist, John Ford. To some extent, Ford's interest may have been due to the family connections and political affiliations of his youth. There are, for instance, possible links between him and Robert Basset, a landowner from Ford's own county of Devonshire who attached himself to the cause of the Earl of Essex and was probably the 'Ro. Ba.' who in 1599 wrote a new biography of Sir Thomas More, into whose family Basset had married. In 1600, Basset was mentioned in a letter from William Pole of Shute to his uncle, Sir John Popham; Pole was Basset's brother-in-law, and since Popham was also John Ford's great-uncle, on the mother's side, this brings the two men very much within the same orbit. Moreover, 'Ro. Ba.' had clearly had access to the unpublished biography of More

written by Nicholas Harpsfield, who had also discussed the affairs of the South Welsh Stradling family, of which Popham's mother had been a member. It is, therefore, suggestive to read of how Basset 'had begun to speculate on the political opportunities which would be created by the death of Queen Elizabeth', speculations which eventually led him to a wild scheme 'to seize Lundy Island ... [and] stake his own claim as a pretender to the Crown', claiming that he had royal (albeit illegitimate) descent through the female line, as a descendant of Arthur Plantagenet, Lord Lisle, bastard son of Edward IV (Trevor-Roper 1987, 21 and 36).

In an influential article in 1988 Verna Ann Foster and Stephen Foster argued that close parallels between the situation in John Ford's play *The Broken Heart* and the political history of the later years of Elizabeth I made Ford's Sparta a thinly veiled representation of Elizabethan England (Foster and Foster 1988). In particular, they pointed, as others have done before, to similarities between the tragic love-stories of Ithocles and Calantha and Orgilus and Penthea, and the real-life histories of the Earl of Essex, his sister Penelope Devereux, and the Queen herself; this, they suggested, is essentially the 'truth' to which Ford refers in his prologue to the play. I agree with the Fosters' interpretation; *The Broken Heart* can, indeed, be read as a culmination of the long line of succession plays, and the clear relationship of Ford's plays to Heywood's further invites us retrospectively to insert the starving Anne Frankford of *A Woman Killed with Kindness* into the more obviously allusive mould of Ford's Penthea. Ending with the transfer of power from queen to king, *The Broken Heart* also directly recalls not only *Hamlet*, but other Shakespearean plays as well: its persistent concern with colonisation, for instance, echoes that in *Henry V*, a play also very closely concerned with Essex. Most centrally, it has one heroine, Penthea, who starves herself to death, and another, Calantha, whose death has been seen as a direct echo of that of Elizabeth's Maid of Honour Anne Ratcliffe, which was brought on by sorrow at the death of her brother in Ireland. I think, moreover, that if *The Broken Heart* is

centrally concerned with the death of Elizabeth, then *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* is its companion piece: it remembers her birth, and it does so, moreover, in ways which further illuminate the nature and significance of her presence in *Hamlet*.

Many aspects of *'Tis Pity* are clearly rooted in the past: indeed, Florio's question 'Must I be haunted still with such unrest / As not to eat or sleep in peace at home?' (I.II.25-6) specifically evokes the genre of the history play, since it so directly echoes *Henry IV* and the opening line of *Perkin Warbeck*, while the motif of the Nero-like ripping out of the heart / womb of Annabella directly echoes the Bastard's 'You bloody Neroes, ripping up the womb / Of your dear mother England' in *King John*. Some of *Tis Pity's* affiliations with the past seem clearly linked to the Sidney / Essex circles whose history, according to the Fosters' analysis, lies at the core of *The Broken Heart*: Giovanni cutting out his sister's heart harks back to the *Urania* of Lady Mary Wroth, Sir Philip Sidney's niece and the Earl of Pembroke's mistress, in which Pamphilus' breast is cut open and Pamphilia's name seen written on his heart; the incestuous affair may be seen as echoing the gossip which Aubrey records about the relationship between Sir Philip and his sister Mary that 'they lay together, and it was thought the first Philip Earle of Pembroke was begot by him, but he inherited not the witt of either brother or sister' (Forker 1990, 152).

Giovanni's cruelty to his own child may well be influenced by a story told about a member of Ford's own family, but that story in turn echoes the slanderous rumours that Elizabeth I had had a child by Dudley which was burned alive. Other aspects of the narrative, too, seem to allude to or resonate with the early history of Elizabeth. When Henry VIII first asked for a divorce from Catherine of Aragon, Pope Clement was in Bologna; and in one version of the story Anne Boleyn allegedly used marmalade, the gift of Philotis to Bergetto, in her seduction of Mark Smeaton. It was also rumoured that after Anne was found guilty of serial adultery, including incest with her brother George, their father died of grief, just as Florio does in Ford's play, all of

which makes Soranzo's terming of her 'Excellent quean!' (IV.iii.25) seem to resonate significantly.

The alleged incest of Anne and George Boleyn was only one of the many instances of incestuous liaisons to be found in the early history of Elizabeth I; indeed Charles R. Forker speaks of 'how centrally the question of incest had dominated the reign of Henry VIII' (Forker 1990, 154). Henry VIII had seriously contemplated marrying his illegitimate son by his mistress Bessie Blount, Henry Fitzroy, to his legitimate daughter Mary, amalgamating the boy's masculine gender with the girl's legal claim to the crown to produce a satisfactory succession; moreover, his own marriage to Anne Boleyn was technically incestuous, since he had had an affair with her sister (and according to some Catholic propagandists, with her mother too). However little he might balk at incest in these cases, Henry had, nevertheless, cited it as the reason why his marriage to his brother's widow Catherine of Aragon should be dissolved, and a precisely parallel instance of an incestuous marriage close to the throne occurs in *Hamlet*, when Claudius marries Gertrude for reasons which are at least partly political. *Hamlet*, too, is a play recalled in *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*: it exerts clear influence on the Friar's description of Hell, and when Hamlet vows not to imitate Nero we recall that Giovanni's actions in investigating the place of birth do precisely echo Nero's, while in *'Tis Pity*, too, repulsion at food is widespread. When, therefore, Florio exclaims that 'Justice is fled to Heaven and comes no nearer' (III.ix.64), we may well remember the well-established myth of Elizabeth as Astraea, and when Giovanni tells his sister that even when no longer a virgin she is 'still the same' (II.i.12), we may hear behind his words Elizabeth's own motto of 'Semper Eadem', always the same. Thus encapsulating Elizabeth's entire career, Ford's two plays, therefore, form a fitting coda to a cultural concern which does indeed seem to have been, for thirty years, always the same.

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