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

Mary Villeponteaux
(London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

Review by: Valerie Schutte

The Queen's Mercy: Gender and Judgment in Representations of Elizabeth I. By Mary Villeponteaux. London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. ISBN 978-1-137-37174-4. 227 pp. £57.50.

The twenty-fifth installment in Palgrave Macmillan's *Queenship and Power* series is the first full-length study of the contradictory nature of the early modern concept of queenly mercy. In *The Queen's Mercy*, Mary Villeponteaux explores "the tension between veneration and suspicion of monarchical mercy, particularly a queen's mercy," in the case of Queen Elizabeth I (2). One of the most important attributes of a Christian king was mercy, but mercy could also be understood as a signal of weakness, especially when given by a woman, as women were thought to be ruled by their own passions. At the outset of her reign, Elizabeth adopted an image of mercy, emphasizing the mutual love between her and her subjects so as to command their obedience. This clement image allowed her to distance herself from sometimes brutal political realities and from the reign of her half-sister, Mary. Yet, within a decade she was chastised for her mercy and for not giving swift justice against religious opposition, especially Catholics. This juxtaposition of Elizabeth as a righteously clement queen versus Elizabeth as a weak-willed woman ruled by emotions is what Villeponteaux analyzes.

Pulling together literature, history, and gender, Villeponteaux explicates literary representations of Elizabeth's mercy and how those literary representations shaped the image of a merciful queen. Villeponteaux does not have introductory or concluding chapters, but six chapters that each tackle an aspect of Elizabeth's mercy, the first of which explores monarchical mercy in historical context and how Elizabeth chose an image of mercy over an image of monstrosity. The remaining five chapters delve into the heart of Villeponteaux's study: how eight influential writers in the period treated mercy in complex and contradictory ways.

In chapter two, she analyzes Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* and how Spenser ultimately concludes that mercy leads to vulnerability, shows effeminate weakness, and is abhorred by Protestants who want less clemency in areas of religion. Although mercy was a chief attribute of Queen Elizabeth, Spenser consistently juxtaposes moments of clemency with danger and destruction. For Spenser, as for other authors, Villeponteaux suggests that his dislike of mercy was a direct result of his culture's distrust of feminine weakness in politics and religion. As an idea, mercy was praised, but in actuality, mercy was condemned.

In chapter three, Villeponteaux explores the sonnets of Philip Sidney, Samuel Daniel, and Edmund Spenser. She argues that their poetry can be best understood when read in the historical context of Elizabeth's reign and

the controversy of mercy. In reading Elizabethan love poetry through a historical lens, a lover's plea can be interpreted as an actual cry for preferment, but at the same time a warning against the dangers of mercy; a poet would ask for mercy for himself while condemning mercy given to others. Sidney, Daniel, and Spenser all advised Elizabeth of the dangers of pity. Elizabeth was their ideal reader, and all of them desired her mercy and preferment, yet warned her that the detrimental consequences of mercy made "her, her realm, and her religion vulnerable" (106).

Chapters four and five turn to William Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* and *Measure for Measure*. For Villeponteaux, the character of Portia in *The Merchant of Venice* is "Shakespeare's most complete and complex representation of the mercy paradox: the conflicted fantasy that the queen should stand for mercy, yet enact rigorous punishment" (108). Villeponteaux does not believe that *Merchant* depicts one specific historical incident, but engages in the discussion of Elizabeth's clement actions during crises in her reign. Villeponteaux also describes the case of Roderigo Lopez, a Spanish *converso* who was Elizabeth's personal physician, and how he was found guilty of plotting to murder Elizabeth. He may have been the inspiration for Shylock. As for *Measure for Measure*, Villeponteaux describes this play as embodying conflicting opinions of mercy in the transition of monarchy from Elizabeth to James, whereas previously this play has been understood as only critical of James. She suggests that *Measure* engages in how each monarch dispensed mercy differently, both embodied in the character of the Duke. The older, private version of the Duke (Elizabeth) allows his kingdom to engage in unbridled passions and unruly behavior, while in the final act of the play the newer Duke (James) exercises mercy in public in a masculine and powerful way.

The final chapter engages three plays written soon after Elizabeth's death which were meant to be allegories of the queen: Thomas Heywood's *If You Know Not Me You Know Nobody*, Parts I and II, and Thomas Dekker's *The Whore of Babylon*. Both authors celebrated the masculine authority of James, while reducing Elizabeth's agency in her own reign because of her sex. In doing so, these plays depict her as traditionally feminine and surrounded by strong male councilors. Heywood and Dekker present Elizabeth in the same way she was chose to be imagined at the outset of her reign: a merciful champion of Protestantism, diametrically opposed to her sister, Mary. Even after her death, mercy was an important aspect of Elizabeth's image. During her lifetime her mercy was both comforting and problematic and came to be viewed as feminine weakness. Dramatists portrayed her mercy as ambivalent, but often with poor outcomes. Posthumously, Heywood and Dekker rehabilitated Elizabeth's mercy as a sign of her religious purpose. Ironically, after her

death Elizabeth's mercy was praised by the Protestant men who censured it during her lifetime.

Elizabeth had an image of mercy, but her society both accepted and rejected that image. Villeponteaux is the first scholar to offer a book-length study on how that image came to be shaped within literature and to historicize the critiques made by the authors. She offers many historical examples, for instance, explaining how much of the authorial criticism made about Elizabeth's mercy came from the time period in which Elizabeth had Mary, Queen of Scots, captured and eventually executed. Although Villeponteaux has no separate introduction or conclusion, her study is not lacking. She frequently ties her chapters together, explaining her themes and interpretations and how they relate to the historical reality of Elizabeth's reign. Villeponteaux thoroughly engages in historiography by acknowledging previous interpretations and explicitly explaining how her own analyses do and do not align with them. She succinctly pulls all of her material together and her study should be read by specialists and Elizabeth enthusiasts alike.

VALERIE SCHUTTE

Pittsburgh