JUNO VERSUS DIANA: THE TREATMENT OF ELIZABETH I'S MARRIAGE IN PLAYS AND ENTERTAINMENTS, 1561–1581*

SUSAN DORAN
St Mary's University College

ABSTRACT. In the plays and entertainments performed before the queen from 1561 to 1578, the virginity of Elizabeth was not idealized but instead marriage was celebrated as a preferable state to chastity. Robert Dudley in particular commissioned such dramatic works to assist his courtship of the queen, but the earl of Sussex, and possibly others, used masques to press on her the suit of the Archduke Charles of Austria. The iconography of chastity appeared for the first time in 1578 when Elizabeth embarked on the Anjou marriage negotiations. During the queen's visit to Norwich in the summer she was offered entertainments which implicitly criticized the matrimonial project by idealizing her virginity. For the next three years, opponents of the match followed this lead and cultivated the image of the Virgin Queen as a means of sabotaging the royal marriage plans. Thereafter Elizabeth exploited the image for her own political purposes.

Elizabethan entertainments were usually masque-dramas or pageants written as offerings to the queen by poets at the behest of a courtier, city corporation or university. Performed at court or while the queen was on a progress, these allegorical pastimes were devised to delight and flatter her, and to display the inventiveness and loyalty of the patron. Their purpose was also political; as the queen was bound by the rules of hospitality to listen and participate in these offerings, the patron often used the occasion to promote both general and specific political objectives.¹

Unlike entertainments, plays were not offerings to the monarch but dramas which did not require the royal presence. Consequently, it was more important that their content was controlled, and so in May 1559 Elizabeth prohibited any discussion of religion and politics in the popular drama. In these circumstances, public productions had to be deliberately general in their

* This article grew out of a paper read to the Second Reading Literature and History Conference, 'Politics in English Culture 1520–1660', held in July 1992. It has since been read to the Early-Modern History Seminar at the Institute of Historical Research and research seminars at the Universities of Reading and Oxford. I am particularly grateful for the comments of Professor Conrad Russell, Dr Ralph Houlbrooke and Dr Cedric Brown.

subject-matter and obscure in their allusions in order to avoid governmental censorship.²

During the first two years of the reign there appears to have been no play or entertainment which touched on the question of the queen's marriage. At this time, there was little sense of urgency about the issue, as Elizabeth was pursued by a surfeit of suitors, and most observers believed that she would choose one of them when the time was right. Even though she often expressed her preference for the single life, she had taken no vow of virginity but on the contrary was prepared to admit that she might be persuaded to marry. When she responded to a parliamentary petition that she marry, she told her house of commons in February 1559 that 'it may please God to enclyne my harte to an other kynd of life', and promised its members that if she did decide to take a husband 'ye may well assure your selves my meaninge is not to do or determyne anie thinge wherwith the realme may or shall have iuste cause to be discontented'.³ Royal servants at this time, therefore, did not feel the need to pressurize the queen to wed. Most of them in fact could not decide between the various men who were seeking her hand. As the earl of Sussex explained, each candidate had his own advantages and disadvantages so that it was difficult to back any one of them:

And I confesse that some tyme the great amytie, some tyme the gret ryches that myght be gotten by forein marriages, some tyme the exampell of King Philip, some tyme the knitting with Scotland, and some tyme the dowte of the desire of domesticall persons to exalte or overthowe olde friends or fos according their affections, have drawn me diversely in opinion so as I have been much dowtefull where to settle whilst these persuasions wrought in my head.⁴

As a result, few at court came out in support of a particular suitor, and most preferred to consolidate their own political positions before a royal consort was chosen. While the rival candidates squabbled among themselves, there were no major divisions at court over the matrimonial question to disrupt political life. In these circumstances it is not surprising that neither plays nor entertainments focused on the queen's marriage.

In the early 1560s, however, the political situation changed. Robert Dudley, Elizabeth's acknowledged favourite, was freed by his wife's death in September 1560 to remarry, and he began manoeuvring to win the queen's hand even while in official mourning. His suit, much liked by Elizabeth, had only the support of some lesser figures at court, while the most important, including Secretary Cecil, Lord Keeper Bacon, the earl of Arundel and the marquis of

² David Bevington, Tudor drama and politics: a critical approach to topical meaning (Cambridge, Mass. 1968). Plays whose meaning is particularly obscure have been excluded from discussion here, e.g. Jocasta, performed in 1566. For differing critical interpretations of this play see Bevington, Tudor drama, p. 164 and Marie Axton, The Queen's two bodies: drama and the Elizabethan succession (1977), p. 39.
Northampton, strongly disliked his marital plans, for this reason, Dudley tried to obtain the political backing of Philip II of Spain, and in return for Spanish help he offered to arrange for an English representative to be sent to the Council of Trent and a papal nuncio to be received in England. Elizabeth, however, decided by the spring of 1561 that she could not risk a marriage with her favourite on these terms. Nonetheless, Dudley continued to hope that his courtship might yet be successful for his rivals were one by one melting away. The last to disappear was Eric XIV of Sweden, whose suit was unequivocably turned down in December 1561.

During this period when the Dudley match was a focal point of interest at court, two plays were written in favour of a royal marriage with the favourite: the *Play of Patient Grisell* by John Phillip and *Gorboduc* by Thomas Sackville and Thomas Norton. Little is known about the first work; it was probably written some time between late 1560 and 1561, but not performed until later, perhaps with some revisions. Its plot was the re-working of a familiar story in Chaucer and Boccaccio, but Phillip distorted his sources in order to make his political point. Unlike the original versions, he devoted only half the play to the trials of Patient Grissell, which had no topical relevance, and the other half of the story to the hero, Prince Gautier, who agreed to give up his preferred life of celibacy to marry a peasant girl, a theme which would have resonances with a contemporary audience and convey the political message that, like Gautier, Elizabeth should listen to the pleas of her people and marry to produce a much-needed heir, and in return her servants would allow her to wed Dudley, a man of relatively lowly status.

These contemporary references are clear from the text. At the beginning of the play, Gautier expressed his love of celibacy in words reminiscent of those used at times by Elizabeth.

```
My frendes full frendly, I replie, with protestacyon due
That single life prefered is, in sacred scripture true
But happie are the married sort which live in perfit love
Twice happier are the single ones, S. Paull doth plainly prove
For such as leade a virgin's life, and sinfull lust expell
In heaven above the ethrall skies with Christ ther lord shal dwell [ll. 170-5]
```

Instead of brushing aside these sentiments, his servants conceded that the

---

5 British Library Add[itional] Manuscript 48023, fos. 354v–355. I would like to thank Dr George Bernard for drawing my attention to this manuscript.
7 B. L. Royal Manuscripts 13B, fo. 68b; Calendar of State Papers Foreign 1561–1562, p. 444.
8 No year appears on its frontispiece, but internal evidence suggests that it was written before St Paul's lost its spire in 1561. It was entered into the Stationers' Register twice: in the years beginning in July 1565 and July 1568; R. B. McKerrow & W. W. Greg (eds.), The Play of Patient Grissell by John Philip (Malone Society, 1909); W. W. Greg, John Philip, notes for a bibliography, reprinted from 'The Library' 1910 (1911).
9 The political allusions in the play were first noted in Louis B. Wright, 'A political reflection in Phillip's Patient Grissell', Review of English Studies, iv (1928), 424–8. Wright, however, mistakenly thinks that the play was promoting the suit of William Pickering.
scriptures extol chastity, but they nonetheless appealed to Gautier's love of his people in requesting that he marry and produce an heir:

That after you your sead of rule, might have the dignite,
For wher ther is no ishue left the wise man saieth plaine
That every man on Lordlie state, doth covit for to raigne [ll. 179–82]

Because Gautier was a wise prince, he replied positively but insisted that he make his own choice of spouse:

Content your myndes if case I graunt, your state for to redresse:
Ye shall permit your worthie lord, in choyce to use his skill
And eke permit as reason is, to marrye whom I will. [ll. 195–7]

That agreed, Gautier selected not a lady of noble birth but Grissell, a maid of peasant stock, and much was made in the play of the disparity in rank between the two; while Gautier's lineage was from 'parents noble sanguine race', Grissell was of 'poore degree' and 'poore estate'. As a result, the Vice, Politic Persuation, disagreeing the match, tried to stir up the nobles against it, by using arguments similar to those made in the early 1560s against the Dudley marriage. Grissell and Gautier, however, both demonstrated by their words and actions that the fears expressed by the Vice were groundless. Grissell showed that she was not an ambitious upstart, a charge frequently levelled at Dudley, by urging the prince to look elsewhere for his bride. Meanwhile Gautier praised Grissell's 'Godly life', alluding perhaps to Dudley's protestant credentials as the son of Northumberland, and asserted that she will 'as dutie byndes, hir spoused mate obeye', and will also seek 'to subdue contensyon and stryfe', thereby countering the accusation that, once king, Dudley would usurp the government and provoke factional unrest at court. Thus, concluded Gautier, marriage to Grissell 'shall no whit abase my state, nor minishe my renowne', as many believed would happen were Elizabeth to marry Dudley.10

More is known about the second play, Gorboduc, or Ferrex and Porrex, which created something of a stir when it was performed during the Christmas celebrations of the Inner Temple in January 1562, first in their own hall on Twelfth Night, and then on 18 January at court.11 Gorboduc is usually portrayed as a play written to promote the Grey line of succession to the throne and to recommend that it should be legitimized by parliament.12 The tragedy, however, had little or nothing to do with the pretensions of Catherine Grey. Admittedly the problem of the succession had become more acute in 1561 with the sudden revelation of her secret marriage to the earl of Hertford and the birth of their child, whom Elizabeth insisted was a bastard; and it is also true that Catherine Grey had turned to Dudley for protection just before

10 For arguments against the Dudley match see S. Haynes, Collection of State Papers...Left by William Cecil (1740), p. 444.
her committal to the Tower, so that it is possible that he would have been prepared to take to court a play which supported her claims. Nonetheless, it is clear both from the context in which it was performed and from the text itself that Gorboduc was primarily about the royal marriage and was intended to further the suit of the Inner Templars’ patron, Robert Dudley.

Gorboduc was not written as a self-contained piece but as ‘furniture of part of the grand Christmas in the Inner Temple’, and therefore it has to be interpreted not in isolation but as part of the whole revels.13 This included not only the play which was performed in the afternoon but also the masques. The Prince of Pallaphilos and Beauty and Desire, which were played in the evening. According to Marie Axton, who has unravelled the imagery of the masque, through the myth of Pallaphilos the lawyers were presenting their Christmas Prince, Dudley, as a man of suitable rank to wed the queen by creating for him a fictitious classical genealogy, and through the wooing allegory of Desire and Lady Beauty they were trying to tempt Elizabeth into accepting Dudley as her consort.14 Gorboduc, performed the preceding afternoon, was intended to show the dire consequences for England if she rejected Dudley’s suit.

Gorboduc followed the precepts laid down in the Mirror for Magistrates (1559), that all monarchs should look into the mirrors held up through poetry and drama to learn how to behave wisely and morally. Thus the play was designed to send out a clear message to Elizabeth that should she imitate the actions of King Gorboduc, retribution would swiftly follow. Just as Gorboduc had acted against the natural order in dividing his kingdom between his two sons, so Elizabeth would be acting against nature if she refused to marry, and just as Gorboduc’s action had led to a country bereft of an obvious heir and to a consequent civil war, so would Elizabeth’s rejection of matrimony. Trouble arose for the Britain of Gorboduc:

When lo unto the prince
whom death or sudden hap of life bereaves,
No certain heir remains, such certain heir
As not all-only is the rightful heir,
But to the realm is so made known to be [ll. 246–50]

and trouble would surely occur again if Elizabeth were to die without issue and deprive the state of the most ‘certain’ and ‘rightful’ heir, a child from her own body. Similar language was used in a parliamentary petition of January 1563, which Thomas Norton is believed to have had some hand in drafting, when it called upon the queen to marry so that the country might have ‘most undowted and best heires of your crowne’.15

13 Cauthen, Gorboduc; Machyn’s Diary, pp. 273–4; Axton, Queen’s two bodys, p. 41.
No specific mention was made in *Gorboduc* of Dudley as a candidate for the queen’s hand, as this was left to the masque of Pallaphilos, but the allusion was clear both in the dumbshows and in the last act of the play, when the character Eubulus spoke out in favour of a native line of succession:

Such one; my lords let be your chosen king,
Such one so born within your native land;
Such one prefer; and in no wise admit
The heavy yoke of foreign governance. [ll. 169–72]

It is usually assumed that these lines were intended to support the claims to the succession of the English-born Catherine Grey over those of the Scot, Mary Stuart, but they can also be interpreted as statements in favour of an English rather than foreign husband for Elizabeth. Sir Thomas Smith had made the same point, at far greater length, when he had written a short book arguing for Elizabeth’s marriage to an Englishman. Any foreign husband (wrote Smith) might bring over to England his own customs and laws while any child of such a marriage would be the ruler of a foreign realm and have a natural affection for foreign ways. Smith’s work was widely circulated and Norton and Sackville may well have been echoing his sentiment rather that stating a preference for the Grey line of succession.16

Similarly, it seems most unlikely that the playwrights were making either a general political point about the role of parliament or a specific one in support of Catherine Grey whom the house of commons favoured as the legitimate heir, when they recommended that parliament should settle the succession in the final act of the drama. Rather, they were employing parliament as a suggested fall-back position if the queen failed to listen to her privy council’s advice that she marry to give birth to an heir. The destruction of Gorboduc’s dynasty and the ‘endless storms and waste of civil war’ had been caused by the king’s refusal to ‘consent/to grave advice’ and rejection of the natural order of succession, and in presenting their argument as a mirror-image of the situation in the play the authors were clearly recommending that parliament should lay down the line of succession only as a last resort if the queen seemed likely to follow the same route as Gorboduc.

At least one member of the audience (an anonymous chronicler of the mid-Tudor years) interpreted *Gorboduc* as a pro-Dudley play. For him its message, particularly in the dumbshows as reiterated by the chorus, was clear:

The shadowes were declared by the Chore firste to signyfie unytie, the 2 howe that men refused the certen and tooke the uncerten, wherby was ment that yt was better for the

---

16 Smith’s *Dialogue on the queen’s marriage* appears in various manuscript collections including B. L. Add. MS 48047, fos. 97–135. It is printed in J. Strype, *The life of the learned Sir Thomas Smith*, appendix (Oxford, 1826), pp. 184–259. M. Dewar, *Sir Thomas Smith, a Tudor intellectual in office* (1964), p. 4, describes Smith’s work as ‘one of the most widely copied tracts in Elizabethan England, read and reread as men culled arguments from it in the wearying debate on Elizabeth’s duty to marry and the problems involved in her choice’.
Quene to marye with the L[ord] R[obert] knownen then with the K[ing] of Sweden... Many thinges were handled of marriage.\textsuperscript{17}

In the second dumbshow, the king was offered an ordinary glass of wine which he refused and then a golden chalice filled with poison which he took, with predictable results. The moral of this mime was picked up in the dialogue:

\begin{quote}
Lo, thus it is poison in gold to take,
And wholesome drink in homely cup forsake. [Act II, scene ii, ll. 107–8]
\end{quote}

In the chronicler's mind the golden cup was a clear reference to the king of Sweden, because his envoy had arrived in England laden with gold, which he had ostentatiously distributed to the poor and presented as gifts to the lords at court, while the 'homely cup' was Dudley, the home suitor whose wealth was so much more modest.

Taken altogether, therefore, the Inner Temple masques and the play \textit{Gorboduc} should be seen as entertainments about the Dudley marriage. Whether Dudley himself had any hand in their writing is impossible to know, but he clearly saw their potential when he had them brought to court. Furthermore, very soon after their performance before the queen, Dudley once more made secret contact with the Spanish ambassador to request that Philip II write in support of the match.\textsuperscript{18} Whatever Dudley's precise role in the production of the pieces, is seems that they were part of his campaign to marry the queen. Given the anxieties about the succession and the absence of any other serious candidate, he decided that the time was right to try to make another, possibly last-ditch, bid to win her hand by enlisting the help of the Spaniards once again and using the medium of the masque and drama to sweep aside her doubts.

A year later, Elizabeth was still single and the succession remained unsettled, to the consternation of her subjects. In January 1563 the House of Commons petitioned the queen 'to take your self some honorable husband whom it shall pleace yow to ioyne to you in mariag; whomsoever it be that your Majestie shall choose', and a few days afterwards the house of lords beseeched her 'to dispose your self to mary, where it shall please you, with whom it shall please yow, and assone as it shall please you'.\textsuperscript{19} Elizabeth's answer was reassuring; she told the Commons that she liked their petition very well, and promised to give it serious thought.\textsuperscript{20}

Over the next year it became clear that the queen did not choose to marry Dudley and was instead looking abroad for a possible husband. In late 1563 William Cecil put out feelers to see if the Emperor was interested in a match between Elizabeth and his younger son Charles, archduke of Austria, and when the response was favourable, formal negotiations began. While envoys went back and forth between Austria and England, Elizabeth's court began to divide over the issue. By 1565 the Habsburg prince was attracting considerable support, especially among the Howard clan, but at the same time

\textsuperscript{17} B. L. Add. MS 48023, fo. 359v.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid. pp. 94–5.
Dudley, earl of Leicester since 1564, disliked the match and was trying to sabotage it by negotiating secretly with the French ambassador to put forward first the adolescent king of France, Charles IX, and then himself as a rival candidate. By 1565, disagreements at court had become so serious that on several occasions violence threatened to break out between the supporters and opponents of the Habsburg marriage project. In June 1567, however, it looked as if the former had won the argument with the queen, when the earl of Sussex, the keenest advocate of the match, was sent to Vienna with instructions to negotiate a provisional marriage-treaty.21

During this period of the Archduke Charles marriage negotiations, Elizabeth was treated to several dramatic productions which focused on the triumph of matrimony over the single life.22 In most of them the goddess Diana representing virginity was trounced by Venus or Juno, the goddess of marriage. One masque played in March 1565 before the queen at Whitehall by the Grey's Inn players presented a contest between Juno and Diana which was decided in favour of the former.23 The play, Palamon and Arcite, based on Chaucer's Knight's Tale, performed while Elizabeth was visiting Oxford in September 1566, ended in the victory of Venus when Palamon her protégé, was married to Emilia, votaress of Diana.24 A third, a masque-oration delivered at the wedding of Frances Radcliffe to Thomas Mildmay in July 1566, celebrated in verse the superiority of marriage over chastity.25 In this piece, the goddesses Venus, Pallas and Juno happily presented the bride with gifts as rewards for fulfilling her destiny of marriage, while Diana conceded their victory, admitted that her nymph, the bride ‘was borne’ for matrimony, and offered her own wedding-gift. Juno, meanwhile, proclaimed the benefits of married life over chastity, when she chided the presenter of the masque for remaining single:

perchaunce I may preferre thee well
for wedlocke I lyke best
it is the honorablest state
it passeth all the rest
my Iove, saith she, doth knowe this ioye

22 It is worth noting too that Gorboduc was printed in 1566 and Patient Grissell was licensed for printing some time between July 1565 and July 1566, although there is no record that either of these plays was performed.
23 Cal. S.P. Span. 1558-67, p. 404; A. Feuillerat, Documents relating to the office of revels in the time of Queen Elizabeth (Louvain, 1908), p. 117, Richard C. McCoy thinks that Leicester was the patron of this masque, but it is unlikely. Not only was it performed at a time when the Habsburg marriage, and not a Dudley match, was the focus of interest at court, but also Grays Inn had closer patronage links with both Cecil and Sussex than with Leicester. Richard McCoy, The rites of knighthood: the literature and politics of Elizabethan chivalry (California, 1989), p. 42.
24 John Nichols, The progresses and public processions of Queen Elizabeth, 1 (1823), 212.
this bodye is his owne
And what swee use I have of his
to men may not be known.

It could be argued that such general allusions to marriage had no topical meaning; conventions at a wedding, for example, would dictate that the bride should be flattered and the state of marriage praised.\textsuperscript{26} It is difficult to believe, however, that these productions were without political content, and that the repetition of the theme that marriage was preferable to chastity at a time when many subjects were pressing Elizabeth to wed the Archduke Charles was not intended to make a political point. Elizabeth herself was clear about the message of at least one of them; ‘This is all against me’, she told the Spanish ambassador after seeing the Gray’s Inn masque, while the audience of \textit{Palamon} and \textit{Arcite} appeared to appreciate its political meaning when they approved of Emilia’s marriage to Palamon ‘with a tremendous shout and clapping of hands’.\textsuperscript{27} The occasion and setting of the wedding-masque suggests that this too was no apolitical entertainment. Frances Radcliffe was the sister of the earl of Sussex, who had been working with William Cecil and the duke of Norfolk to promote the Archduke Charles marriage project, the wedding celebrations were held in his home at Bermondsey, and the oration was written and performed by Thomas Pound, his kinsman.\textsuperscript{28}

Many masques and plays in the 1560s, therefore, should be viewed as part of the general pressure on the queen to marry. In none of them is there any hint of the iconography of Astraea or the Virgin Queen which was to appear later in art, literature and entertainments, since in this decade it was assumed that Elizabeth’s proper destiny was marriage, and indeed most of the writers or patrons of these early works supported the suit of a particular candidate.

The queen did not appear to object to the use of masque and drama in this way. Although literary critics and historians have claimed that she was so offended by \textit{Gorboduc} that thereafter plays had to be less overtly political, there is no evidence at all for this assertion; indeed the absence of any comment to this effect by the chronicler, a well-informed observer of court life, who watched the play in the presence of the queen, suggests the contrary.\textsuperscript{29} The tone of Elizabeth’s comment to the Spanish ambassador in 1565 was not recorded, but there is no reason to suppose that she was angry rather than amused by the masques. She certainly laughed at \textit{Palamon and Arcite} and gave its author ‘very great thanks’ and ‘promises of reward’, just as she was good-humoured when she saw the pageants at Coventry in 1565, which may well have had a matrimonial theme as they were preceded by an oration begging her to marry and have children, which she also commended.\textsuperscript{30}

\textsuperscript{26} Bevington, \textit{Tudor drama}, pp. 5 and 8–9, takes this line.
\textsuperscript{28} Pincombe, ‘Two Elizabethan masque-orations’, p. 350.
After the failure of the Habsburg negotiations at the end of 1567, the royal marriage question slipped into the background of political concerns. Briefly in 1571, the queen's councillors backed a proposal that she marry Henry, duke of Anjou, but when it came to nothing few believed that a suitor could be found who would be acceptable to the queen, the court and the protestant nation. There was some talk of a marriage with Anjou's younger brother Francis, duke of Alençon, but the massacre of St. Bartholomew made such a match politically impossible in the mid-1570s. Moreover, as Elizabeth entered her forties and was approaching the menopause, interest diminished in a marriage to produce an heir.

Leicester too was single in the mid-1570s, but there is evidence that he was becoming restless with this role as an unmarried royal favourite. In 1571 he had come close to marriage with Lady Sheffield, while from 1572 onwards he urged the queen to let him leave court and lead an army in Europe on behalf of the protestant cause. It seems clear that Leicester wanted either to marry the queen and have power as her consort, or else to be given the freedom to marry another and pursue a military role abroad. In 1575 he presented Elizabeth with his choice in two allegorical entertainments written and produced under his patronage: the first at Kenilworth in July and the second at Woodstock in September.

During her summer progress in 1575 Elizabeth spent two weeks at Leicester's castle of Kenilworth, and was entertained by a number of 'happenings' designed to put forward the matrimonial suit of her host. On her arrival she was greeted first by a dumbshow, which purported to show the Arthurian pedigree of Leicester, and then by the Lady of the Lake (another Arthurian reference), who in her speech of welcome to Elizabeth hinted at a possible marriage with the earl:

Pass on, Madame, you need no longer stand;
The Lake, the Lodge, the Lord are yours for to command.

This hint was made more explicit two days later during the episode of the Savage Man, when in a poetic exchange with the nymph Echo the figure of the savage man described the gifts given to the queen at Kenilworth as 'tokens of true love' and explained their source:

And who gave all those gifts? I pray thee (Eccho) say?
Was it not he? who (but of late) this building here did lay?


Eccho Dudley
O Dudley, so me thought: he gave him selfe and all
A worthy gift to be received, and so I trust it shall.
Eccho It shall

Leicester intended the theme of this suit to be expressed more fully in the masque of the nymph Zabeta but the show had to be cancelled, ostensibly because of rain. The story of Zabeta was reminiscent of the masques of the 1560s, when the goddessess of love and marriage triumphed over Diana, goddess of chastity, but the political allusions in the Kenilworth entertainment were more obvious, specific and direct than in the earlier entertainments. The name of the nymph dedicated to chastity (Zabeta) was obviously a truncated version of Elizabeth; the ‘neere seventeene yeares past’ that the lost nymph had resisted Juno’s entreaties to marry corresponded specifically to the number of years since Elizabeth’s accession, while the speech of Iris at the end of the masque was intended as a direct appeal to the queen:

How necessarie were
for worthy Queenes to wed
That know you wel, whose life alwayes
in learning hath beene led.
The Countrey craves consent,
your vertues vaunt themselfe,
And Jove in heaven would smile to see
Diana set on shelfe

Because the performance of this masque was cancelled, another attempt was made to ensure that the queen heard Leicester’s proposal of marriage within the tale of Zabeta. As Elizabeth rode away on the last day of her stay, the author of the unperformed masque, George Gascoigne, ran alongside the departing guest and told her the story of the nymph who had ‘cruelly rejected’ all her noble and worthy suitors and metamorphosed them into the trees and rocks around. One of them, Deep Desire, he said, had been turned into a holly bush, with prickles ‘to prove the restlesse prickes of  his private thoughts’ and as the queen passed by the bush, Deep Desire delivered his own speech which told of his continuing love for the virgin Zabeta and pleaded with the queen to stay and live at Kenilworth ‘to commaunde againe’ the owner of the castle. It is clear that Zabeta was Elizabeth, Deep Desire represented Leicester, and the prickes of the holly bush symbolized his undiminished phallic desires.

At the same time as Leicester was making his elaborate proposal of marriage, he also hinted at the alternative approach of disengagement by using both the imagery of courtly love and the recurrent theme of queen as

33 Nichols, Progresses, pp. 492, 496; Cunliffe, George Gascoigne, p. 99.
34 Critics have disagreed in their interpretation of this masque and put forward a variety of reasons to explain its cancellation. Cooper, ‘Location and meaning’, p. 143; Berry, Chastity and power, pp. 98–9; E. Rosenberg, Leicester, patron of letters (New York, 1955), p. 168.
35 For a gender analysis of this sequence and that of the Lady of the Lake see King, ‘Queen Elizabeth 1’, pp. 45–6 and Berry, Chastity and power, pp. 98–100.
liberator which ran through the whole Kenilworth entertainment. The imagery of courtly love was evident in the setting of the pastimes in an imaginary world of chivalric romance, as well as in the many references to love for the ‘bel dame’, an unobtainable object of desire. Elizabeth’s power to liberate was seen most significantly when she delivered the Lady of the Lake from the thrall of the rapacious Sir Bruse sans Pitie. Through these devices, Leicester was saying that if Elizabeth chose to remain chaste and unattainable, then she should free him from her ‘thrall’ and his own desires, so that he could act as a liberator in her name in defence of the protestant cause abroad. 36

Elizabeth’s reaction to the Kenilworth offering must have convinced Leicester that their marriage was not possible, since only weeks later he prepared a second entertainment for her which conveyed the message that he accepted her rejection but desired another role in political life. In the Woodstock entertainment which was supervised by Leicester’s client, Sir Henry Lee in September 1575, the story was told of two lovers, Princess Gandina and the knight Contarenus, who were forced to part for reasons of state. Although there was not a direct parallel between their lives and those of Leicester and the queen, there were intentional allegorical references. Elizabeth had multiple roles in the masque-drama, including the princess prevented from marrying her lover and Contarenus, the passive object of Gandina’s desire, who had the strength to renounce their love. Leicester too appeared in more than one guise. His plight could be seen in the actions and words of both the princess and her knight. Like Leicester, Princess Gandina was the active and passionate lover who had refused to accept objections to an unequal match and had embarked on an adventurous quest to rescue her knight after an enchantress had spirited him away. But Leicester was also like Contarenus, a knight noble in character but ‘beneath her birth’ and consequently rejected as a suitable husband by Gandina’s father. It was through the words of Contarenus, too, that Leicester put across his message to Elizabeth at the end of the entertainment: now that he had given up his beloved for the sake of his country he pleaded that he might leave her presence and start his own quests overseas. 37

Both the Kenilworth and Woodstock entertainments, therefore, demonstrated that Leicester could come to terms with Elizabeth’s rejection of his suit if only she would allow him to leave court and fight abroad as her general on behalf of the Dutch protestants in their struggle against Spain. In this desire, however, he was also thwarted. In November 1575 Elizabeth declined to accept the sovereignty of the Netherlands which had been offered to her by the States of the provinces, and over the next two years she consistently turned down their appeals for a military alliance. 38

36 For the theme of liberation see Bergeron, Civic pageantry, p. 35. For the link with the Netherlands see Berry, Chastity and power, p. 98.
Early in 1578, however, Elizabeth had to reconsider her policy of military non-intervention in the Netherlands. On 31 January the rebels there were decisively beaten by the Spanish army at the battle of Gembloux and needed foreign military assistance to stave off total defeat. As Elizabeth was still unwilling to commit herself to direct military aid, the States turned to Francis, duke of Anjou for help. French intervention was seen by Elizabeth and nearly all the privy council as contrary to England's interests, but while some, including Leicester, argued that it could only be prevented by the queen agreeing to act as military protector of the States, Elizabeth herself wanted if possible to avoid this course of action; instead she began to think in terms of reviving marriage negotiations with Anjou in order to control his actions, and in mid-May 1578 she sent Sir Edward Stafford to France to raise the marriage project with the queen-mother, Catherine de Medici.39

It was probably in May 1578 that Philip Sidney presented his entertainment, known as *The Lady of May*, before the queen at Leicester's house in Wanstead. While no critic today would relate the entertainment to the French matrimonial project there is still disagreement over its meaning and its relevance to contemporary political issues. A few commentators deny any political significance and would agree with Roger Howell's early judgement that *The Lady of May* was 'an entertainment and little more'.40 Most critics, however, take seriously Sidney's own assertion that in choosing between the two suitors for the hand of the Lady of May, Elizabeth would be making a more important decision than might appear on the surface: 'in judging me, you judge more than me', said the Lady of May to the queen. Yet even the political meaning of the masque is not clear. Some, therefore, have interpreted the entertainment as the final stage in Leicester's courtly pursuit of the queen; whereas a few others argue that its purpose was to press for a more interventionist foreign policy on the Continent.41

A close reading of the text can in fact support both political interpretations. According to the first approach, in the contest for the hand of the Lady of May, Elizabeth is being asked to judge between Espilus, the poetic shepherd who was content to make no sexual demands on his beloved, and the virile forester Therion, a representation of Leicester. The queen's choice of Espilus marked her decisive preference for courtly over marital love and another rejection of Leicester's suit. In the epilogue Leicester showed the queen that he accepted her decision, when a schoolmaster Rombus hands over to Elizabeth some beads strung to resemble a rosary which he had confiscated from Leicester; and in explaining that the earl had used the 'papisticorum

Bedorus' to recite the name of Elizabeth, he implies that this form of worship and courtship is now over. It follows from this argument that the earl's secret marriage to Letitia Knollys, countess of Essex, just four months afterwards was the outcome of Leicester's recognition that the queen's rejection of his suit was final.42

In the second interpretation the figures of Espilus and Therion stand for different approaches to politics. The shepherd symbolizes not only the contemplative life but also a conservative and traditional, peaceful foreign policy, while the wild forester represents the active life of a military adventurer, 'a gallante sorte of activitie'. Espilus is presented as a safe but unexciting choice, as he has 'smale Desertes and no faults', while Therion is a risk since he is a man 'with manie Desertes and manie faultes'. The Lady of May, Elizabeth's alter ego, is shown being pushed and pulled by the advocates and supporters of these alternative strategies, but she is also the judge who is forced to decide between them. The consequences of Elizabeth's final decision are again demonstrated in the epilogue, but here Rombus' words and actions take on a different significance. The beads presented to the queen by Rombus are intended to suggest that her choice will result in the triumph of catholicism; while the description of Leicester as a beadsman is designed to show his emasculation at the hands of the queen, who refuses to allow him the manly role of warrior.43

The text itself, therefore, offers no solution to the critical debate about Sidney's meaning, but the context and timing of the entertainment point to the validity of the second interpretation. In May 1578 a marriage with Leicester was nowhere on the political agenda. On the other hand, the court and council were involved in a debate about foreign policy at this time, with Leicester, Sidney's uncle and patron, urging the queen to send over an emissary to the Netherlands to negotiate aid for their defence; on 11 May Sir Francis Walsingham recorded that his friend 'dothe labor greatly to be imployed in this jornay, and is not without hope to wyn the same'. The political meaning of the masque has to relate to this issue of foreign policy.44

Over the summer of 1578, Elizabeth showed little inclination to take Leicester's advice and intervene militarily in the Netherlands, but rather to his dismay, she was prepared to pursue the marriage scheme with Anjou and listened sympathetically to the two French envoys who arrived at her court towards the end of July to discuss the match.45 In August, Elizabeth went on her summer progress to Suffolk and Norfolk, accompanied by these ambassadors, and during their stay at Norwich, Thomas Churchyard devised for the queen a number of masques and pageants on behalf of the lord mayor

42 Axton, 'Tudor mask', p. 41.
44 Kervyn de Lettenhove, Relations politiques des Pays-Bas de l'Angleterre, sous le regne de Philipppe II, x (Brussels, 1888–1900), 456–7.
45 Lettenhove, p. 659.
and aldermen of the city. In several of these entertainments the godly magistrates of Norwich offered the queen advice on foreign policy and about her plans to arrange a marriage with Anjou, albeit in the most flattering of ways. As there is evidence that Leicester was involved in the planning of the progress and also had close political links with Norwich and Norfolk, it seems probable that he kept the magistrates abreast of the matrimonial scheme at court and encouraged the inclusion of the political themes in the pageants.  

On the first day of the visit, the queen was greeted by figures from the Old Testament who urged her to act as the ‘finger of the Lord’ and ‘his mighty hand’ in defending the beleaguered protestants overseas against the forces of the Antichrist. Deborah reminded her how God ‘did deliver Sisera into a Woman’s hande’, and advised her to ‘weede out the wicked route’ and ‘pull downe the prowde and stoute’, so that she could reign in rest, please God, and defend her state and subjects. Esther conveyed a similar message:

No fraude, nor force, nor foraine Foe may stand
Against the strength of thy most puysaunt hand.

During an indoor masque some days later on 21 August, the god Mars picked up the theme and offered his services to the queen, up to then ‘a Prince of Peace’:

To conquer, kill, to vanquish, and subdue,
Such fayned folke, as loves to live untrue.

To reinforce his point, he gave the queen a set of knives, blunt one side and sharp the other, with the words:

To hurt foe, and helpe your friend
These knyves are made unto that end.

At the same time, the entertainments implicitly criticized the Anjou marriage negotiations and urged Elizabeth to remain single, by laying great stress on her special status as a Virgin Queen. In the masque of the 21 August, for example, when other Roman deities besides Mars gave the queen gifts and laudations, the goddess Diana idealized her virginity in a way that suggested comparison with the Virgin Mary:

Whoever found on earth a constant friend,
That may compare with this my Virgin Queene?  
Who ever found a body and a mynde
So free from staine, so perfect to be seene.

In other devices, too, Elizabeth’s unmarried state was referred to as a supernatural quality; she was an ‘unspoused Pallas’, ‘a Virgine pure’, and ‘a sacred Queene’; although not yet portrayed as the goddess Astraea who ushered in a golden age, she was described as possessing the virtues of all the

---

Roman deities: she had the wisdom of Pallas, the grace of Venus, the eloquence of Mercury and more besides, and hence:

This Lady mayst thou goddesse call for she deserves the same
Although she will not undertake a title of such fame.

The queen's chastity was also celebrated in one of the few pageants that had a plot. In the device, Cupid's Fall from Heaven, vain Venus and blind Cupid, expelled from heaven, were forced to wander on earth where they met a Philosopher and Chastity, who tried to teach them the error of their ways. After the Philosopher had condemned them both as 'the drosse, the scumme of earth and skyes', Chastity handed over Cupid's bow and arrows to the queen, with the message that she could do with them 'what she pleased' and 'learn to shoote at whome she pleased', since she was herself impervious to carnal lusts and had chosen 'the best life' of celibacy. The political point should have been obvious to the queen and the French ambassadors in the audience: Elizabeth might send out overtures of marriage to Anjou but her true destiny was chastity. At the end of the piece, Modestie sang a song which glorified the chaste life and contrasted it favourably with a life of lewdness. 47

Churchyard's idealization of chastity was a new departure in Elizabethan entertainments; it was obviously a far cry from the celebration of marriage which provided the theme of masque and plays in the first decade of the reign, but it differed too from the imagery of love and marriage presented in the mid-1570s entertainments. Although Elizabeth was portrayed in the latter pastimes as a holder of supernatural powers, she was no Virgin Queen and marriage was still depicted as a natural state for a female monarch. At Kenilworth, the fireworks, the savage man and the holly bush all signified masculine phallic desire to which Elizabeth might (hopefully) succumb, while at the end of the Woodstock entertainment Gandina's fate was not to remain single but to marry a politically acceptable prince.

The Norwich entertainments of August 1578, therefore, were the first recorded public occasion where the appearance of the cult of the Virgin Queen can be seen. It emerged as a direct result of the negotiations for a marriage between Elizabeth and the catholic duke of Anjou, which was feared and opposed by many within the political nation. For the next three years, opposition to the match was expressed in pamphlets, sermons, poems, ballads, Latin verses, even in portraits of the queen, but not, as far as is known, in dramatic productions. 48 This is hardly surprising, for who would dare to put on a play or masque which criticized a match which the queen was known to want, especially after a man like John Stubbs with powerful friends at court

---

47 For a different interpretation of the device see King, 'Queen Elizabeth I', Renaissance Quarterly, xlix (1990), 47.
48 Doris Adler examines the negative use of 'frog' and 'toad' references in printed works as code for opposition to the Anjou match. Doris Adler, 'Imaginary toads in real gardens', English Literary Renaissance, ii, 3 (1981), 235–60, Edmund Spenser's Mother Hubberd's Tale, which may be a warning against the Anjou match, was not published until 1590–1, while his Shepheardes Calendar was published anonymously.
had been punished severely for writing a strongly worded pamphlet against it? After Stubbs' punishment, literary works which warned against the match were usually written in some form of code, or published anonymously, or not published until much later in the reign.49

As outspoken criticism of Anjou could not be expressed without incurring the anger of the queen, some opponents of the match chose to follow the lead of Churchyard in 1578, and cultivated the image of the Virgin Queen as a means of sabotaging the royal marriage plans. In the April Eclogue of the Shepheardes Calendar (1579), Edmund Spenser used the imagery associated with the Virgin Mary, when he described Elizabeth as the ‘flowre of Virgins’, ‘without spotte’, and without ‘mortall blemish’,50 John Lyly too praised Elizabeth’s virginity in his Euphues and his England (1580), a work which also alluded to the Anjou match in a negative vein.51 In a similar way, and for the first time, Elizabeth was painted as a virgin in the series of Siege portraits between 1579 and 1583.

The public outcry against the match, which was probably orchestrated by councillors such as Leicester, Walsingham and Hatton, had its effect. Elizabeth was forced to accept that marriage to Anjou would alienate her from most of her councillors and protestant subjects. In January 1580 she started to prevaricate about signing a matrimonial treaty and soon afterwards she began sounding out the French ambassador to see if the French court would accept an alliance without marriage.52 By the time that French commissioners arrived in England to arrange the marriage (April 1581), Elizabeth had decided against it and hoped instead to organize an offensive and defensive alliance against Spain.

The entertainment presented before the French commissioners at Whitsun 1581, known as the Fortress of Perfect Beauty or the Four Foster Children of Desire, was an allegorical triumph designed to put across this message to the French and publicize it to the English court. In the allegory, Elizabeth was portrayed as both an unattainable object of desire in the chivalric tradition and a neo-platonic celestial being, in order to demonstrate that she was quite out of reach of the French prince.53 The magnificence and sophistication of the triumph was intended to impress the ambassadors and show that the English queen was a worthy ally. Despite Philippa Berry’s scepticism, there can be little doubt that this production was commissioned by the queen and therefore was an official statement of policy and not merely another public relations exercise by the opponents of the match to pressurize the queen into refusing Anjou’s suit. Although a leading role in the entertainment was taken by Philip Sidney, who had worked with Leicester and Walsingham to persuade the

51 Berry, Chastity and power, p. 113; David Norbrook, Poetry and politics in the English renaissance (1984), pp. 84–5.
52 P.R.O. SP 78/3 fo. 145; SP 78/4, nos. 6, 40; MacCaffrey, Making of policy, pp. 271–2.
queen against the marriage, other participants included Philip Howard, earl of Arundel, and Lord Windsor, both erstwhile supporters of the Anjou project. Similarly, both supporters and opponents of the match co-operated in the production of the device. Parts were written by Philip Sidney and John Lyly, while both Sussex as Lord Chamberlain and Burghley as Lord Treasurer (the leading spokesmen in favour of the match) were directly involved in organizing the spectacle. It would seem that the queen wanted to show that her court was united in its desire to protect her chastity against the pretensions of Anjou. Royal sponsorship of the entertainment is also suggested by the publication of a pamphlet version of the triumph later that year and its incorporation into the 1587 edition of Holinshed's Chronicle. The Fortress of Perfect Beauty is then the first official adoption of the cult of the Virgin Queen.

In conclusion, this paper agrees with those historians and literary critics who have emphasized the political intent of Elizabethan entertainments and certain early plays. The approach here, however, is to place these works in a precise political and historical context rather than to focus on general and continuing issues such as sexual politics, questions of authority, or courtly manners. By doing so it has demonstrated that Gorboduc was a play about the Dudley marriage and not the Grey succession or the role of parliament, that the message of The Lady of May concerned the direction of foreign policy rather than the queen's marriage, and that the Norwich entertainments of 1578 were designed to demonstrate popular support for royal intervention in the Netherlands and hostility to the Anjou marriage project. Similarly, this paper takes a diachronic approach to the iconography of the Virgin Queen. Like the research of Phillippa Berry and John King, it indicates that Frances Yates' analysis of the cult of Astreae needs revision; but it also suggests that their own conclusions need some re-thinking, since both fail to appreciate the significance of the Norwich entertainments and the importance of the Anjou marriage negotiations on the development of the cult of the Virgin Queen. Finally, this paper rejects the thesis that Elizabeth herself was the creator of the iconography of chastity. The cult was not—as Marie Axton argues—'a hard-won personal triumph' nor was it—as Christopher Haigh proclaims—an image created by the queen to resolve her difficulties over the marriage issue. On the contrary it was an image imposed on her by writers, painters and their patrons during the Anjou marriage negotiations. It was only after Elizabeth recognized that the marriage could not go ahead and that in all probability she would have to remain single for the rest of her life that she regained the initiative and managed to reap political benefit from the idealization of her chastity. Here, as in many other aspects of policy, Elizabeth was not the free agent that is so often supposed, but a shrewd operator who could turn circumstances outside her control to her best advantage.