The Breast and Belly of a Queen:
Elizabeth After Tilbury
Christopher Martin

In his journal entry for December 24, 1597, André Hurault, Sieur de Maisse, French ambassador to the English court, records an idle exchange with the sixty-four-year-old Queen Elizabeth. Genuinely impressed with her command of classical texts, to the point that “one can say nothing to her on which she will not make some apt comment,” the politic envoy expresses his admiration:

Having told her at some point that she was well advertised of everything that happened in the world, she replied that her hands were very long by nature and might, *an nescis longas Regibus esse manus*; whereupon she drew off her glove and showed me her hand, which is very long and more than mine by more than three broad fingers. It was formerly very beautiful, but it is now very thin, although the skin is still most fair.

Elizabeth’s literal off-hand emblematizing of her own body is at once elementary and subtle. The Latin tag she uses to explicate her gesture—*Don’t you know that kings’ hands are far-reaching?*—quotes Ovid’s *Heroides* 17, Helen’s cautionary line to her would-be seducer Paris. Deftly substantiating de Maisse’s observation of her quick-wittedness, she sets herself up simultaneously as the line’s speaker (the subject but cunning Helen) and its referent (the dominant yet beguiled Menelaus). An interesting example of the queen’s incisive cleverness, the passage also signals her ironic sensitivity to royal contingencies, even as it illustrates the ambassador’s mixed
critical reading of her aging body. The hand in question remains imposing and impressive, despite the attrition it also registers. By itself inconsequential, the anecdote helps orient us toward the more provocative and notably unglossed self-display for which the journal is best remembered, Elizabeth’s unsettling baring of her breast and stomach to de Maisse during their Privy Chamber meetings. Working from the premise summarized by Carole Levin, that “Even in her most casual, seemingly spontaneous remarks, Elizabeth was playing a role,” I want to review the spectacle that Henry IV’s emissary describes as something more purposeful than we have so far credited. Elizabeth’s self-disclosure within her court’s most guarded enclosure functions not as an effort self-indulgently to deny her aged body, but rather to profess this very time-bound physicality. In her gestures, we in fact witness an evolution or refinement (if not a deliberate recollection) of her more celebrated moment of public rhetorical display, the “heart and stomach of a king” speech that she had delivered almost ten years earlier, before her troops at Tilbury.

Elizabeth, as we know, would survive into what William Camden observes was “her Climactericall yeere, to wit, the seventyeth,” an age (he pointedly adds) “Vnto which no King of England euer attayned before.” Her capacity to endure indisputably inspired the wonder of friends and foes alike. Though she had outlived the old guard who had come to power with her, so had she witnessed the demise, as Paul Johnson notes, of “all her enemies: popes, kings, rivals, generals, conspirators,” remaining “a living memorial to momentous changes and events.” Writing in the year of her death, John Clapham closes his reminiscence of Elizabeth’s life with a catalogue of the olympian victories of a queen whose existence “had been drawn out to such a length as she outlyued two emperors of Germany, four French kings, eight bishops of Rome, surpassing in number of years all her predecessors, two only excepted, and in felicity of government excelling them all with out exception.” Yet such longevity would prove a mixed blessing, as recent assessments of the attrition that her popularity suffered amid the harsher military, political, and economic realities of the 1590s have confirmed. While the elaborated rhetoric of the king’s “two bodies” would go far to ameliorate the ideological stress posed by the queen’s conspicuous femininity to her patriarchal contexts, it was frankly easier
to think on Elizabeth’s “body natural” during her reign. Even Susan Frye, who has fruitfully explored the queen’s skill at “engendering” herself as the situation demanded, suggests that, in the 1590s, all of her tactics “could not entirely counteract the queen’s greatest liability, her own aging female body” (my emphasis). Elizabeth’s instinctual response, in Frye’s view, “was to shield herself physically and psychologically from the escalating threats while representing herself as the youthful figure at the summit of her society’s social, religious, and political hierarchies.” However intuitively reasonable, Frye’s interpretation presents a less dynamic picture of Elizabeth’s regard for her own senescence than the evidence merits. The de Maisse episode illustrates, in my reading, how age proves something altogether as negotiable for the seasoned monarch as the thorny matter of her gender had always been. In the ambassador’s journal, we discover a startling yet subtle instance of Elizabeth’s pragmatic and consequential sense of her aging body, grounded in a complicated sense of agon with—if not mastery over—the way she can challenge others to regard her constitution.

Early modern England maintained a deeply ambivalent outlook toward old age, whose inception was variably set anywhere from about forty onward: gerontocratic in its formal ideology, the society simultaneously displayed a “pessimistic” or even disdainful regard for a stage of life associated with “a wretched time of physical deterioration.” Moreover, women in this setting experienced if anything a compounded version of such conflicted attitudes. Freed from the substantial physical hazards of parturition and often from the dependencies and demands of earlier life stages, as Amy M. Froide has argued, single women of the day were perhaps “best positioned to enjoy a positive old age,” yet those who had avoided marriage altogether “faced derogatory epithets such as ‘old maid’ and ‘superannuated virgin’ that made direct reference to their advanced age.” Exploring the social impact of menopause in sixteenth-century culture, Lynn Botelho likewise refocuses the emphasis on physical appearance with which women in the era especially had to reckon: “the end of regeneration probably did not signal the beginning of old age to early modern society,” she observes, “but menopause did coincide with a host of culturally significant visual changes that resulted in women being labelled old at this stage.” Given the unquestionable centrality of “outwardly observable signifiers of...
status in early modern England,” Botelho concludes that “A woman became old when she looked old.”13 This notion takes an expressly humiliating turn in the gerontophobic, antifeminist bias informing contemporary pictorial traditions that rendered figures like Helen, Cleopatra, or even Lucretia as elderly grotesques who might never have exerted the power they did over men could they have been envisioned in their decrepitude.14 Keenly sensitive to such contexts, Elizabeth as head of state appreciated how the need to manage constructions of her appearance was a matter of political order. From early in her reign, she aimed to exert as much control over this critical domain as possible, an impulse that took on ever greater urgency amid the growing generational animosities that came to mark her regime’s later decades.15

Educated in the multiform terms of Elizabeth’s public iconography, we have yet to investigate adequately the queen’s complex sense of her own physical body as it aged. As a result, darker evaluations of the “Mask of Youth” convention so prominent toward the end of the reign have come to overdetermine modern judgments.16 As early as 1563, after all, her council had circulated a draft of a proclamation “to prohibit all manner of other persons to draw, paint, grave, or portray her majesty’s personage or visage for a time until, by some perfect pattern or example, the same may be by others followed.”17 Our readiness to read her later self-representations as governed by vanity rather than strategy in many respects invests too literally in Ben Jonson’s famous sneer that “Queen Elizabeth never saw herself after she became old in a true glass.”18 Wallace MacCaffrey’s more generous construction of the monarch’s own designs puts only a slightly more positive spin on this late “posturing”: while Elizabeth’s (failed) effort to institute a homogenous portrait had intended clearly “to display to her subjects an unchanging, ageless countenance,” he feels that such “outward manifestations are faithful reflections of a fundamental inward reality.”19 Whatever else we know about this “inward reality,” however, we cannot doubt the profound circumspection that Elizabeth brought to all her political endeavors, the formulation of a public image not least among these. We need to resist presumptions that the elder queen was so casually seduced by her own propaganda, and to be willing to recognize her discreet capacity to embrace the advanced age that her body duly registered, less as a physi-
cal liability than as an index of the experience that empowered her reign. Always protective of the way others saw fit to represent her for supportive or derogatory purposes, she knew what her subjects expected, and within reason was willing to honor their demands. Beyond this, answerable only to herself, she knew how to project her fully embodied sense of self with a disarming authenticity.

In age as in youth, Elizabeth had the common sense to discern that, however much control a public figure exercised over her own representation, she could never fully govern her audience’s response. Over the course of her long career, she grew adept at parrying the “narrative of decline” with which she increasingly had to contend. Interestingly, the first serious critical foregrounding of public discussion about her age came in response to French marriage prospects of the late 1570s, when she belatedly appeared to entertain the Duke d’Alençon, over twenty years her junior, as a serious political match. However sincerely and to whatever end Elizabeth pursued the engagement, it indisputably drew national attention specifically to the subject of her years. As far back as 1570, Alençon’s older brother, who would go on to take the throne as Henry III, had rejected any suggestion of courtship with such “an old creature.” A decade later, English subjects proved no less tactless in their own violent enmity to the subsequent venture. So respectful a minister as Ralph Sadler delivered a speech in which he boldly recalls how “The inequalyte of yeres” between the parties was such that “her majestie myght be his mother,” where John Stubbs in his Discoverie of a Gaping Gulf lodged an even more egregious protest against the unhealthiness of matching “youth with decrepit age.” But for all her public fury at such presumptuous commentary, Elizabeth in her correspondence acknowledged the age discrepancy freely. When the French king and queen mother first proposed the marriage in the summer of 1572, Elizabeth was the first to remark repeatedly on “the youngness of the years of the Duke of Alençon being compared to ours,” insisting on a personal conference before anything can proceed since “nothing can make so full a satisfaction to us for our opinion nor percase in him of us in respect of the opinion he may conceive of the excess of our years above his.” She later indulges Alençon with wry self-caricatures of “the poor old woman who honors you as much (I dare say) as any young wench whom
you ever will find” (CW, 251). Even apart from her most remarkable lyric reflection, the poem “When I was fair and young,” which likely dates to the period following the courtship, we have sufficient evidence that Elizabeth harbored no vain illusions about her perpetual youth.

Between the demise of the Alençon affair and the year of de Maise’s embassy, Elizabeth faced down an almost continuous sequence of reminders of time’s corrosive force. The stress of Mary Stuart’s increasingly desperate plots and eventual execution in 1587 clearly took a heavy toll, provoking Essex’s prediction to James VI of Scotland “that hir Majeste could not lyve above a yere or ii by reson of sum imperfeccion.” She of course weathered this event and the even grander trauma of the Armada that it helped precipitate the following year, only to witness the deaths of such long-standing ministers as Leicester, Walsingham, Mildmay, and Hatton ushering in what John Guy has termed the queen’s “second reign.” Alongside the deaths of three more trusted members of her privy council (Puckering, Hunsdon, and Knollys) in 1596, she was then forced to suffer another, more emphatic wave of commentary on her senescence as she achieved the “critical” climacteric of her sixty-third year, when an array of well-intentioned but exasperating sermons taxed her patience. Bishop Anthony Rudd, for instance, preached before her on the way Samuel “cast a right account of his yeares, who when he was become olde, made his sonnes Judges of Israell, because he was not able to beare the charge.” After offering for meditation an extended catalogue of the effects of bodily decline, he startlingly presumes to ventriloquize the queen herself in reflection upon her “long temporall life”:

“Lord, I have now put foote within the doores of that age, in the which the Almond tree flourisheth: wherein men begin to carry a Calender in their bones, the senses begin to faile, the strength to diminish, yea al the powers of the body daily to decay.” Sir John Harington reported how Elizabeth, “perceiving wherto it tended, began to be troubled with” the discourse, and rebuked the preacher that “he should have kept his arithmetick to himselfe,” but also reports how she later relented, protesting annoyance “Only, to show how the good bishop was deceaved” in his ageist presumption. John Manningham’s diary adds Elizabeth’s sardonic but composed remark to Rudd afterwards, “M[aste]r D[octo]r, you have made me a good funeral sermon; I may dye when I will.”
Cultivating the “wisdom” pose she had taken up at least since the mid-1580s, when she expressed confidently to James that “we old foxes can find shifts to save ourselves by others’ malice” (CW, 262), Elizabeth had by 1597 become inured to her role as elder stateswoman. She proudly wore her “years,” conjuring them as leverage over her junior subjects, as we find in her 1593 assurance to the MPs that “having my head by years and experience better stayed (whatsoever any shall suppose to the contrary) than that you may easily believe I will enter into any idle expenses, now must I give you all as great thanks as ever prince gave to loving subjects” (CW, 332). In July 1597 she reprimanded Essex’s impetuosity, reminding him how “Eyes of youth have strong sights, but commonly not so deep as those of elder age” (CW, 386). Her famous rebuttal to the Polish ambassador that same month likewise sniped at his master’s youth: “seeing your king is a young man and newly chosen,” she answered the emissary’s presumption in perfect Latin, “that doth not so perfectly know the course of managing affairs of this nature with other princes as his elders have observed with us, so perhaps others will observe which shall succeed in his place thereafter” (CW, 332–33). At the same time—and another extreme altogether—she would remain the subject of fetish and fantasy, in spite of if not because of her age. If she could not have known Simon Forman’s notorious erotic dream of her in age, presented by A. L. Rowse as evidence of the “erotic stimulus that the menfolk derived from having a Virgin Queen upon the throne,” she could not have ignored the very public allegation of the executed Jesuit Thomas Portmort that his persecutor Richard Topcliffe had claimed intimate familiarity with the queen’s naked features, claiming hers “the softest belly of any womankind.” She was aware, in other words, of the broadly various reactions that the sight of her body might have provoked from even so amicable and compliant a character as de Maisse.

Henry IV’s ambassador—himself only five years Elizabeth’s junior at the time, and a seasoned veteran of foreign service—was charged with discovering Elizabeth’s willingness to join his master in bringing their protracted and exhausting war with Spain to a close, something that England and France had agreed not to do independently the previous year. Elizabeth had learned the hard way of the French king’s notoriously chameleonic character: the sting of betrayal at his conversion to Catholicism in order
to secure the throne is evident in her 1593 letter’s depressed outrage. Even after relations had normalized, Elizabeth still saw fit to stress the need for openness that focuses the polite self-denigration of a 1596 missive, where she suggests that a promised visit to her court “would remove all your trust in your ministers, who have abused you, I fear, by so much praise of that which, when you shall be the ocular judge, you will not find at all to answer to the half of what they make you believe, who disgrace me in thinking thus to advance my respect” (CW, 385). Full disclosure not surprisingly sounds the keynote, therefore, in de Maisse’s negotiations, evident in the formal directives the ambassador bears “to assure and draw closer than ever the union and good intelligence which ought to exist between their Majesties, their Kingdoms, and their subjects, for their preservation and greatness” (Journal, 126).

As in most such diplomatic exchanges, the pretense of openness was in essence a thin veil for deeper suspicions with which both parties warily regarded one another, but it was one the queen was fully prepared to exploit. Elizabeth likely surmised that Henry indeed had, with an altogether typical political duplicity she may well have admired, already “resolved” to make peace in any case. Similarly distrustful of the queen’s pragmatic willingness to keep her continental neighbors locked into combat with one another, the French entered the discussion “convinced that secret negotiations were going on between Elizabeth and the Spaniards.” Fully briefed on his royal host’s imperious and idiosyncratic character, de Maisse was nonetheless ill prepared for what he encountered upon his first entry to the Privy Chamber, where he found the queen

strangely attired in a dress of . . . silver “gauze,” as they call it. . . . She kept the front of her dress open, and one could see the whole of her bosom, and passing low, and often she would open the front of this robe with her hands as if she was too hot. . . . Her bosom is somewhat wrinkled as well as [one can see for] the collar that she wears round her neck, but lower down her flesh is exceeding white and delicate, so far as one could see. (Journal, 25)

In coming weeks, Elizabeth would continue this display before the ambassador. His record of their second conversation, a week later on December
15, recounts her self-exposure even more emphatically. Now beneath her “dress of black taffeta,” Elizabeth wears a petticoat of white damask, girdled, and open in front, as was also her chemise, in such a manner that she often opened this dress and one could see all her belly, and even to her navel. . . . When she raises her head she has a trick of putting both hands on her gown and opening it insomuch that all her belly can be seen. She greeted me with very good cheer and embraced me, and then, having been some three feet from the window, she went and sat down on her chair of state and caused another to be brought to me, taking care to make me cover, which I did. (Journal, 36–37)

Progressively less startled, he describes her at the December 24 conference as “clad in a white robe of cloth of silver, cut very low and her bosom uncovered [echançée fort bas et le sein descouvert]” (Journal, 55; Prévost-Paradol, 168). By their final interview, she appears simply “attired after her accustomed manner” (Journal, 108).

For de Maisse, the affectation behind such exhibitionistic conduct was ostensibly as transparent as the aging queen’s garments. Almost immediately as he and his entourage are ushered into the Privy Chamber, Elizabeth, he relates, feigns embarrassment and “began to rebuke those of her Council who were present, saying, ‘What will these gentlemen say’—speaking of those who accompanied me—‘to see me so attired? I am much disturbed that they should see me in this state’” (Journal, 24), as if she were unaware precisely who would be admitted to her presence. The ambassador privately ascribes this disingenuousness to the vanity he had been led to expect. “She often called herself foolish and old [sotte et vieille],” he later explicitly remarks, “so that she may give occasion to commend her [afin de donner occasion de la louer]” and adds dryly, “When anyone speaks of her beauty she says that she was never beautiful, although she had that reputation thirty years ago. Nevertheless she speaks of her beauty as often as she can [Toutesfois elle ne laisse de la faire tant qu’elle peut].” At the same time, however, even the healthy cynicism of the career diplomat cannot altogether check his qualified admiration. He follows his detached observation by pointing out that “As for her natural form and proportion, she is very beautiful” (Journal, 37–38; Prévost-Paradol, 156–57),
just as he had recorded after their first meeting how “Her figure is fair and tall and graceful in whatever she does; so far as may be she keeps her dignity, yet humbly and graciously withal” (Journal, 26). And although he gives the seventy-seven-year-old Burghley’s age as eighty-two, he thinks Elizabeth no more than sixty, something that well might have amused his host.

Deeply sensitized to the notion of the queen’s body as a unique matrix of political and cultural representation, recent scholarship nonetheless seems to share de Maisse’s discomfort with the spectacle of Elizabeth’s aged torso. Well-known to students of the period since G. B. Harrison and R. A. Jones’s 1931 English translation, the journal’s peculiar account has excited rather brusque responses from even the most sympathetic biographers.36 Such abrasive judgments deny Elizabeth the sophistication these same readers elsewhere attribute, even as they betray an implicit repugnance for the aged physique so startlingly set forth. As a corrective, we need to retreat from the charges of false modesty and false vanity, and think instead about the performative value of the royal skin, and Elizabeth’s more direct inclination to emblazon her body before de Maisse as an index of both endurance and weakness. Lisa Jardine is correct to emphasize that the journal tells us as much about its author’s anxiety over the whorish illegitimacy of a female head of state as it does about his subject; but Elizabeth, anything but ingenuous, would hardly have been surprised to learn of the prejudicial cargo he carried to their meetings.37 Partially in brazen response to this, Elizabeth keeps her aged body visible and readable, and her self-exposure serves to affirm rather than suppress her physical age. The French ambassador will be allowed to witness, for the larger benefit of his younger sovereign, how her ability to maintain executive vitality cooperates with her physical subjection to time. That is, she opens herself fully to his constructions, to challenge (with whatever success she might) any preconceptions he imports.

Recent work on conceptions of the body as social boundary and the relationship between physicality and interiority available to early modern culture can help us better comprehend the self-exposure at issue in the journal.38 We know that from her youth Elizabeth had thought in terms of the body’s median position between inner and outer self. In a letter accompanying the portrait she had sent to her brother, the fifteen-year-old
princess enjoined Edward “that when you shall look on my picture you will witsafe to think that as you have but the outward shadow of the body afore you, so my inward mind wisheth that the body itself were oftner in your presence” (CW, 35). As she grew, she would remap the terrain of such conventions for a variety of purposes. In an urgent letter to her sister of August 2, 1556, for example, Elizabeth entreats an audience with the suspicious and hostile queen, pleading how “among earthly things I chiefly wish this one: that there were as good surgeons for making anatomies of hearts that might show my thoughts to your majesty as there are expert physicians of the bodies, able to express the inward griefs of their maladies to their patient” (CW, 44). As queen, she would flavor her parliamentary discourse with similar invocations of a more candid, fictional alter-ego, as she does in her 1576 profession to the assembly that “for your behoof there is no way so difficult that may touch my private, which I could not well content myself to take, and in this case as willingly to spoil myself quite of myself as if I should put off my upper garment when it wearies me, if the present state might not thereby be encumbered” (CW, 170). Discussing this instance, Stephen Cohen points out how, particularly in her recourse to clothing analogies, Elizabeth repeatedly reconfigures the artificiality of outward show as the realm of “private” persona that obscures the more essential, public sphere of unadorned inwardness. Her rhetoric “exploits the distrust of clothing as signifier not to privilege but to exteriorize and devalue the private.” By the time she confronts de Maisse, Elizabeth would collapse the registers of the Edward letter in the name of a lucid truthfulness. Lamenting the grim sensationalism of foreign rumors that she had clothed Catholics in bearskins and set dogs upon them for popular entertainment, she tells de Maisse that “She wished they could see the inside of her heart [le dedans de son cœur] in a picture and that it was at Rome, so that all could see it as it was” (Journal, 58; Prévost-Paradol, 170). While she cannot display her heart quite so literally or symbolically as she would her hand later in that same conversation, she will nonetheless permit the ambassador an unmediated glimpse of her flesh, showing forth her breast and abdomen “as it was.”

The ambiguous spectacle of the hand Elizabeth unveils when she removes her glove provides a synecdoche of sorts for the general ambiguity
of her torso, its skin slack yet “exceeding white and delicate.” As if to call further attention to the disorienting incongruity of her form, Elizabeth conspicuously abstains from the cosmetics reputedly so much a part of her public persona, something de Maisse would surely have remarked given his eye for detail. As he retails the queen’s startling nakedness, along with her bejeweled garments (computing even the relative worth of the gems she sports) and her “great reddish-coloured wig,” her face alone remains surprisingly unenhanced, a glaring antitype to the “Mask of Youth” so carefully policed in the official iconography. “As for her face,” he writes down, “it is and appears to be very aged” (Journal, 25). An even more stark and unmaskable sign of encroaching debility, Elizabeth’s poor dental condition compromises her very capacity to express herself adequately: “her teeth are very yellow and unequal, compared to what they were formerly, so they say,” de Maisse proceeds to relate. “Many of them are missing so that one cannot understand her easily when she speaks quickly” (Journal, 25–26). Their decay has even more practical consequences for the ambassador, whose initial conference with the queen is delayed by the “cold in her teeth [un catarre sur les dentes]” that she suffers (Journal, 18; Prévost-Paradol, 149). Elizabeth is self-consciously frank about the impact of this on her routine, as we see from a later entry that “She was on point of giving me audience . . . but taking a look into her mirror said that she appeared too ill and that she was unwilling for anyone to see her in that state; and so countermanded me” (Journal, 36). Despite such obvious signals of decline, however, de Maisse cannot suppress his own wonder: “It is a strange thing to see how lively she is in body and mind and nimble in everything she does” (Journal, 61). Elizabeth baffles him, a composite visage of one unmistakably worn by time and the strain of executive responsibility, yet remarkably well preserved.

The queen’s resilience amid the illness to which her age renders her susceptible contrasts her with a figure like Burghley, whose decrepitude obliges him to be carried to meetings in his chair. But the most ominous specter of mortality haunting the journal’s narrative is the dying seventy-year-old Spanish monarch, Philip II. The other implicated party in the present ambassadorial mission, he is rumored barely to be kept alive “by force” (Journal, 56), “fed with liquor blown into his throat by the Infanta”
according to a dispatch received during de Masse’s stay. The only reference to erotic passion in the journal in fact connects ironically with the political violence that it has allegedly inspired in Elizabeth’s Spanish counterpart. Recalling to the ambassador the many “attempts that had been made as much against her life as against her state” sponsored by Philip II, the queen sardonically “related that one of her treasurers of finance had told her that it was the force of love which made the King of Spain behave so, and that it was a dangerous kind of love” (Journal, 38). Though she is proud of her capacity to survive these plots, the fear of such physical threats lingers, as the common ritual that de Masse observes of attendants sampling the food to insure against poison before the queen is served recalls. Though the exposed body de Masse beholds confirms for all that she has not reached Philip’s mortal pass, the memento mori of his troubling counterpresence, in context, nonetheless intimates the inescapable limits faced even by the bodies of kings, as it draws the two aged figures into a physical parity.

The thought of Philip’s impending demise on the eve of a possible peace no doubt took Elizabeth back almost ten years earlier to the most dramatic confrontation in their long-standing enmity, when she had realized one of her grandest moments of public self-display. In the face of the Armada’s threat, she had ventured to the fortress at Tilbury to review and encourage the army stationed there under Leicester’s command. In 1588, Elizabeth was already approaching her fifty-fifth year, and the thirtieth of her reign. The speech she supposedly delivered that August day earned its notoriety mainly for the ringing configuration of the gendered yet empowered body at its core, her proclamation that “I know I have the body but of a weak and feeble woman, but I have the heart and stomach of a king and of a king of England too” (CW, 326). She entreats her army to see through her evident feminine exterior to the inner core of her being, where her determinate monarchical and national identity resides. Before arriving at this central assertion, however, she exploits a larger notion of her vulnerability amid the “armed multitudes” addressed. “I have been persuaded by some that are careful of my safety to take heed how I committed myself to armed multitudes, for fear of treachery” she begins, only to insist “Let tyrants fear: I have so behaved myself that under God I have placed my
chiefest strength and safeguard in the loyal hearts and goodwill of my subjects” (CW, 325–26). Although the precise rhetoric of her delivery remains contested, the gesture of public self-exposure and its attendant risk obtains in other accounts, as does her strategy of projecting her own ennobling interiority onto the loyal interiors of the faithful subjects she has nurtured.43 While Elizabeth does not invoke her kingly heart and stomach in Thomas Deloney’s ballads on the event, for instance, she does enjoin her army “neuer let your stomackes faile you, / For in the midst of all your troupe, / we our selues will be in place,” and desires them, “true English harts to beare: / To God, and her, and to the land, wherein you nursed were.”44 She remains beholden to the good will of those who behold her. Confirming for the troops that she indeed has (as we now say) guts, Elizabeth’s brazen display achieves her important effect on morale through physical presence itself, her very public exposure a register of her fortitude in the face of her vulnerability.

Now, a decade on, the monarch found herself almost as exhausted with the protracted Spanish conflict as was her French neighbor. Unable to provide Henry with the economic and military reinforcements he would need to sustain the war, she was equally reluctant to make a peace that “would mean abandoning the Dutch, who were as determined as ever not to be ruled by a King of Spain.”45 Nor had the immediate threat to English soil altogether lapsed: less than two months before de Maisse’s arrival, news of a second Armada had taken the court unprepared, sending the nation into a sudden panic. While bad weather would once again reduce this enemy enterprise to an abrupt anticlimax, the surprise with which the hazard had broken upon the realm and the “very near miss” it presented rattled confidences.46 As grateful as she was that circumstances did not call for a reprise of her earlier public performance, Elizabeth on reflex if not by design returned to the (now private) spectacle of her body, measuring against its glorious past an undeniably aged present that nonetheless shows her as yet unwilling to capitulate. Incidentally a badge of her virginal status, her exposed breast at once boasts the independence she had maintained from both Spanish and French matches, while affirming the attrition consequent upon this very survival.47 When she laments that “she had no longer the Council that she had formerly, for she had lost twenty or two and twenty of her Councillors,” and
de Maise observes that others had taken their places, the queen responds pointedly “that they were young, and had no experience in affairs of state” (Journal, 80). The physical fragility she owns, as precarious and enduring as the network of international relations they labor to sustain, requires the seasoned wisdom also registered upon her frame, more significant now in this wasted twilight of hostilities than ever before.

Yet, as John King also notes, the roles Elizabeth adopted seldom remained static, developing rather in response to both “political events” and her own “life history.” In the figurative “naked” intimacy of her final exchange with de Maise we simultaneously encounter a fascinating disavowal of the trust she had articulated at Tilbury. For all her express faith in her people, proclaimed famously before her army and beyond, Elizabeth had militantly announced to the ambassador “that she would not have either her body or her soul entrusted to any living creature” (Journal, 58).

When asked by de Maise prior to his departure if she had anything private to convey to the French king, Elizabeth tells the ambassador to “come nearer to her because all her Councillors were in the Chamber,” and tells him to beg Henry “to consider the position in which she was placed; that she was a woman, old and capable of nothing by herself; she had to deal with nobles of divers humours, and peoples, who, although they made great demonstration of love towards her, nevertheless were fickle and inconstant, and she had to fear everything.” If a touch of self-pity inflects her confession (whether itself yet another instance of diplomatic posturing or something more candid) she is earnest in her conviction to maintain her duty. She closes by reminding him “‘Quidquid delirant Reges plectuntur Achivi;’ as if she was not without great sorrow” (Journal, 110); the tag from Horace translates as “Whatever wrongs the kings commit, the subjects must suffer for them.” She will uphold the best interests of subjects whom she evidently hasn’t been able to inspire over the long run, as she had hoped to do at Tilbury. In her last relation to de Maise, we no longer observe the earlier dichotomy between a woman’s body and a king’s interior, now effectively collapsed. She compels him to look not through her flesh to some iconic core, but to linger on the substantial and substantiating surface. What de Maise beholds is incontestably the breast and belly of a queen: nothing more, though absolutely nothing less.
Elizabeth sends Henry’s representative back to his own duplicitous master with these “private” thoughts, along with a more detailed account of her curious sartorial openness, for his consideration and construction. As observed earlier, her 1596 letter confirming the alliance at issue for the present embassy had dismissed the misreportage of her beauty by Henry’s previous emissaries, which would not hold up before l’oculaire iuge; so now her self-display corrects even as it feeds the imagination of the French king and all those privy to de Maisse’s revelations. At the same time, we can accept at face value the counter-assertion she had made earlier to the envoy, qualifying her self-denigrating utterances. She no sooner remarks to him “that she was on the edge of the grave and ought to bethink herself of death,” than “suddenly she checked herself, saying, ‘I think not to die so soon, Master Ambassador, and am not so old as they think.’” When her interlocutor responds “that she did wrong to call herself old so often as she did, and by God’s grace her disposition was such that she had no occasion to call herself so,” she agrees, and de Maisse must concede (again privately) that “save for her face, which looks old, and her teeth, it is not possible to see a woman of so fine and vigorous disposition in both mind and in body” (Journal, 82). Elizabeth seeks to occupy the unacknowledged space between the flatterers’ reconstructions and the slanderers’ misconstructions. The impression she makes on the ambassador will help relay her capacity for self-preservation as well as her vulnerability to time’s mockery, which she will also manage to brave.

In her nakedness, Elizabeth provides de Maisse as close a view as one can perhaps gain of another. With age, she has come to know the soundness of her own physical makeup, and now regards the outward signs of the years she has told as more of a badge than a liability. She was not above turning this display to rhetorical purpose, to intimidate, unsettle, or sympathize her captive audience, though she was too aware of the unreliable efficacy of such gestures for this to be her primary aim: as de Maisse’s confused reactions suggest, the forces of prejudice and presumption—about age no less than about gender—were too substantial for even the most shocking challenges to dislodge. Rather, Elizabeth’s image serves her more particularly during the negotiations to convey to Henry’s representative her composure in the face of historical currents that she has helped shape,
but that lie ultimately beyond what monarchs can themselves direct. Just as her fortitude before impending threats of military disaster had inspired her subjects at Tilbury in 1588, so the relaxed self-confidence she now displays no less boldly might reassure her cagey ally that she will withstand whatever new challenges or successes their dealings may bring. If the multivalent image of her physique would remain impossible to read with certainty, she no less purposefully leaves it exposed to and inviting of her audience’s politic construction. At sixty-four, Elizabeth stands sensitized to her body’s capacity to deteriorate, to endure, and to impress others in its very complex of weakness and strength. She embraces her age, shifting one burden—that of reading and reacting to her unobstructed physicality—to us. She departs, in other words, upon the same question with which she had opened before de Maise’s embassy: “What will they say?”

From the year of the French embassy down to the time of her death in 1603, people of course continued to speak of the queen’s appearance and manner. Later in 1598 and 1599, one German visitor commented on the “majestic” cast of Elizabeth’s “fair, but wrinkled” visage, while another, miscalculating her to be seventy-four years old, nonetheless deemed her “very youthful in appearance, seeming no more than twenty years of age.” Only days before his own death, the elderly William Lambarde, given charge of documents at the Tower of London in early 1601, had presented his Pandecta or bibliography of the collection there on August 4 of that year. The queen “chearfullie” received the book in her Privy Chamber, we are told, remarking to Lambarde that “she would be a scholar in her age, and thought it no scorn to learn during her life, being of the mind of that philosopher, who in his last years began with the Greek alphabet.” Casting herself fittingly in the mold of Cato, the spokesperson for old age in Cicero’s De senectute, Elizabeth remained contemptuous of those who would presume to write her off prematurely: a letter to James, dated August 21, 1600, proclaims “though a king I be, yet hath my funeral been prepared (as I hear) long or I suppose their labour shall be needful . . . whereat I smile, supposing that such facts may make them reader for it than I.” In one surviving account of 1601’s “golden” speech, Elizabeth capped her formal address to Parliament with the claim that God’s aid and “our long-lived experience (though in a mean wit), shall make us able
to discern and embrace that which shall tend to the prosperity of our people” (CW, 354). The queen, who outlasted even the recorder of ages in her own archives, relished to the end the longevity that distinguished her from those predecessors who did not share her constitution or seemingly imperishable dominion. It was no wonder that James is reported to have said—no doubt in exasperation—that she would “endure as long as the sun and moon.”

Notes

1. An early version of this essay was delivered at the “Elizabeth R” conference held on the quatercentenary of Elizabeth’s death, 21–22 March 2003, at Southern Illinois University, Edwardsville. My thanks to the conference committee for the opportunity to present the thesis, and to those attending—particularly Carole Levin and Mary Ellen Lamb—for their kind responsiveness and encouragement.

2. André Hurault, Sieur de Maisse, A Journal of All That Was Accomplished, trans. and ed. G. B. Harrison and R. A. Jones (Bloomsbury: Nonesuch, 1931), 58. All further quotations from the Journal, hereafter cited in the text, refer to this translation. Since the modern manuscript copy of de Maisse’s journal from which the translators worked proved unavailable from the Bibliothèque Nationale, I rely upon Lucien Anatole Prévost-Paradol’s Élisabeth et Henri IV (1595–1598): Ambassade de Hurault de Maisse (Paris, 1855) for the French, which I cite hereafter wherever available. De Maisse describes Elizabeth’s hand as “plus grande que la mienne de trois grands diogts. Elle l’a eue fort belle, elle est maintenant fort maigre, mais le teint en est fort beau” (Prévost-Paradol, 173).


6. John Clapham, Elizabeth of England: Certain Observations Concerning the Life and Reign of Queen Elizabeth, ed. Evelyn Plummer Read and Conyers Read (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1951), 101. Elizabeth was “fortunate in her longevity” on a more practical register as well, since, as Anne Somerset reminds us, it enabled her to see policy through over time—a luxury her royal siblings, their reigns cut short, never knew: see her Elizabeth I (New York: Knopf, 1991), 571. These advantages were
not lost on the queen, whose constitutional hardiness came to form an integral part of her self-image. In a compelling recent assessment of Elizabeth’s “consciousness of herself as a survivor,” Mary Beth Rose locates the queen’s reorientation of a masculine, martial ethic of killing or dying well towards what she calls an “heroics of endurance” (Gender and Heroism in Early Modern English Literature [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002], 38, 54).


8. On this, see Marie Villeponteaux, “‘Not as women wonted be’: Spenser’s Amazon Queen,” in Dissing Elizabeth, ed. Walker, 210. See also Marie Axton’s The Queen’s Two Bodies: Drama and the Elizabethan Succession (London: Royal Historical Society, 1977). The notion significantly informs the renaissance that Elizabeth studies have enjoyed since the early 1990s. Carole Levin cogently unpacks the implications of the inevitable fact that, “for all of the use of male as well as female images, for all the doubling that occurred, Elizabeth existed in a female body” (“The Heart and Stomach of a King”: Elizabeth I and the Politics of Sex and Power [Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994], 146).


10. Ibid., 98.


15. The classic discussion of Elizabethan generational politics remains Anthony

16. On this convention see Roy Strong, *Gloriana: The Portraits of Queen Elizabeth* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1987), 147–51. As Haigh summarizes, “There appears to have been some official decision in about 1594 that Elizabeth should be pictured as eternally youthful . . . presumably to prevent fears for the future. . . . In 1596, the Privy Council ordered officials to seek out and destroy all unseemly portraits, which were said to have caused the Queen great offence: the object of the campaign seems to have been the elimination of the image of Elizabeth as an old woman, and engravings which showed her age appear to have been destroyed” (*Elizabeth I*, 153–54). Hanna Betts’s provocative argument that the crises of the 1590s “were exacerbated by indications of the queen’s growing decrepitude” as “Elizabeth’s increasingly garish attempts to simulate her former appearance . . . became the living emblem of her exhausted government” exemplifies this trend (“The Image of this Queene so quaynt': The Pornographic Blazon 1588–1603,” in *Dissing Elizabeth*, ed. Walker, 169). Strong, Walker, and Louis Adrian Montrose have delineated the propagandistic manipulation of the queen’s image along similar lines. See Strong’s *The Cult of Elizabeth: Elizabethan Portraiture and Pageantry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977); Walker’s “Bones of Contention: Posthumous Images of Elizabeth and Stuart Politics,” in her *Dissing Elizabeth*, 252–76, esp. 264; and Montrose’s “Idols of the Queen: Policy, Gender, and the Picturing of Elizabeth I,” *Representations* 68 (1999): 108–61. Michael Pincombe and Theodora Jankowski likewise discuss the manipulation of the queen’s image on stage, for instance in the works of John Lyly: see Pincombe’s *The Plays of John Lyly: Eros and Eliza* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996); and Jankowski’s “The Subversion of Flattery: The Queen’s Body in John Lyly’s *Sapho and Phao*,” in *Medieval and Renaissance Drama in England V*, ed. Leeds Barroll (New York: AMS, 1991), 69–86.


18. Ben Jonson, *Conversations with William Drummond*, in *The Complete Poems*, ed. George Parfitt (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), 470. We need to be equally skeptical of the queen’s purported credulity in her dealings with Cornelius Lannoy, a Dutch alchemist already imprisoned for his failure to transmute base metals, whose efforts to discover an “elixir of perpetual youth” she is said to have sponsored around 1570. See Carolly Erickson, *The First Elizabeth* (New York: Summit, 1983), 261.


20. For the fullest exploration of this dynamic, see Frye, *Elizabeth I*.


30. John Manningham, *The Diary of John Manningham of the Middle Temple, 1602–1603*, ed. Robert Parker Sorlien (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1976), 194. In another contemporary sermon, the elderly divine Matthew Hutton expresses abhorrence of uncertainty about the succession, going so far as to note how all looked to James. While all who knew her expected the worst, Elizabeth courteously thanked him, withholding her reprimand for later, ascribing “so much to his years, to his place, to his learning” (Harington, *Nugae Antiquae*, 2: 251).


32. “Chose que vous osteroit toute creance de voz ministres qui vous ont abusé Ie doute par tant de louange de ce que quand vous serez l’oculaire iuge vous ne trouuerez nullement respondre au demy de qui vous font a croyre qui me feront vne disgrace en cuydant m’advancer le respect” (*ACFLO*, 167).

33. R. B. Wernham, *The Return of the Armadas: The Last Years of the Elizabethan
War Against Spain, 1595–1603 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 212. "Clearly someone was fooling someone," the historian wryly goes on to observe (213).

34. "Elle avait le devant de sa robe en manteau ouvert et luy voyoit-on toute la gorge et assez bas et souvent, comme si elle eust en trop chaud, elle eslargissoit avec les mains le devant dudit manteau . . . sa gorge se montre assez ridée, autant que (la laissoit voir) le carcan qu'elle portoit au col, mais plus bas elle a encore la charnure fort blanche et fort déliée autant que l'on eust peu voir" (Prévost-Paradol, 151).

35. "Un robe dessous de damas blanc, ceinte et ouverte devant, aussy bien que sa chemise, tellement qu'elle ouvrait souvent cette robe et luy voyoit-on tout l'estomac jusques au nombril. . . elle a cette façon qu'en rehaussant la teste elle met les deux mains à sa robe et l'entrouvre, tellement qu'on luy veoit tout l'estomac" (Prévost-Paradol, 155).

36. It appears to inform, for instance, Johnson's description of the queen's allegedly slattern retirement: "Decorated like a Christmas-tree to keep up the image of regality in public, in private she often did not bother at all, and hardly concealed from her ministers that she was an old lady, still very much in control, but increasingly inclined to dwell in the past" (375). Stephany Fotanone's reading of the episode as evidence "that Elizabeth continued to attempt an alluring and captivating appeal, despite her age" represents a contrasting standard attribution of the behavior to vain dotage, as if the monarch had bought into the Petrarchan flattery that had prevailed since the 1580s: see her "My Most Seeming Virtuous Queen’: Gertrude and the Manifestation of Aging Sexuality in Early Modern England," Washington College Review 2002 (http://wc-review.wash-coll.edu/2002/stephanyfontanone.php). Carolly Erickson likewise finds "an air of the macabre" about the de Maisse meetings, imagining the queen as "a lively, clacking skeleton whose energetic jerkiness belied her wrinkled cheeks and bared gums" (The First Elizabeth [New York: Summit, 1983], 385). For Betts, the diary entries exemplify one more instance of Elizabeth's "increasingly garish attempts to simulate her former appearance," intimating "a sense in which the royal physique contained its own satire during this period" (169, 176).

37. Lisa Jardine, Reading Shakespeare Historically (London: Routledge, 1996), 21–25. In the notes to her argument, Jardine oddly looks to deny some of the spectacle altogether, ascribing our false impression of the queen’s exhibitionism to the modern translators’ purported misconstruction of de Maisse’s entries (163–64). Her assertion that “Gorge’ here surely means ‘throat’ rather than ‘bosom’” fails adequately to account for de Maisse’s startled reaction, which we cannot reasonably attribute to Catholic prudery: a point she seems to acknowledge in her qualifiers “but it is clear that de Maisse is disturbed by the gestures of revealing,” and that “one would still want to take note of Hurault de Maisse’s difficulty with the breach of decorum” (164, n. 13, 14, and 16). Prévost-Paradol himself aligns the description with Paul Hentzner’s observation of the queen’s uncovered “bosom,” cited in n. 46 below (Prévost-Paradol, 124).

38. See, for instance, Michael C. Schoenfeldt’s anatomy of inner bodily regimen and self-dominion in his Bodies and Selves in Early Modern England: Physiology and Inwardness in Spenser, Shakespeare, Herbert, and Milton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,
1999), esp. 24–33; and Elizabeth D. Harvey’s fresh reflections on the way that skin came to constitute “a more complex border between inside and outside, one that emphasizes the shifting, dynamic relation between the two” (“The Touching Organ: Allegory, Anatomy, and the Renaissance Skin Envelope,” in *Sensible Flesh: On Touch in Early Modern Culture*, ed. Elizabeth D. Harvey [Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003], 85).


40. While such decay was of course common to all ages, it became especially noteworthy in the case of the queen, if we are to judge from the comment of Paul Hentzner, the German visitor to London who in 1598 had remarked on Elizabeth’s black teeth, “a defect the English seem subject to, from their too great use of sugar” (*The Progresses and Public Processions of Queen Elizabeth*, ed. John Nichols [1823; rpt. New York: Burt Franklin, n.d.], 3: 424).


42. “Et me compta là-dessus un compte d’un sien trésorier des finances qui disoit que c’étoit la force d’amour qui faisoit faire cela au roy d’Espagne et que c’étoit un dangereux amour” (Prévost-Paradol, 123).


45. Wernham, *Return of the Armadas*, 211.

46. Ibid., 190.

47. Again, see Hentzner’s observation that in her progress Elizabeth’s “bosom was uncovered, as all the English ladies have it till they marry” (*Progresses and Public Processions*, ed. Nichols, 3: 424).


49. “Qu’elle avoit affaire à de grandes et diverses humeurs, et à des peoples, lesquels si bien faisoient grande demonstration de l’aimer, que néanmoins étoient légers et inconstants, et qu’elle devoit craindre toute chose” (Prévost-Paradol, 87).

50. “Je ne pense point mourir de sitôt, monsieur l’ambassadeur, et ne suis pas si vieille que l’on pense. . . . [E]lle se faisait tort de s’appeler si souvent de ce nom di vieille et, Dieu merci, sa disposition était telle qu’elle n’avait aucune raison de s’appeler ainsi. . . . Et à la vérité, hors le visage qui se montre vieil et les dents, il n’est possible de voir une si belle et si vigoureuse disposition, tant de l’esprit que du corps” (Prévost-Paradol, 186).


52. *Progresses and Public Processions*, ed. Nichols, 3: 552–53. Nichols remarks in closing that the old man himself survived his conversation with the queen “but a few days.”
