

The Face of an Empire: Cosmetics and Whiteness in Imperial Portraits of Queen Elizabeth I

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When Queen Elizabeth I entered her fifties, she grew reluctant to sit for any more portraits. The final three portraits that she sat for—the *Armada Portrait*, *The Ditchley Portrait*, and the *Oliver Miniature*—painted between the mid-1580s and her death in 1602, portray the queen with a smooth, white face and bright coral lips and cheeks. The style of painting the queen’s face as seen in these last portraits was canonized as a pattern for future artists to follow when painting the queen during and after the last years of her reign.¹ In the Elizabethan era, the English government often attempted to control how the queen was depicted in artwork; in 1596 the English Privy Council drafted a proclamation that required portraits of the queen to depict her as “beutyfull [*sic*] and magnanimous” as “God hath blessed her.”² In both art-historical scholarship and popular culture, the queen’s whitened skin and rouged lips and cheeks in her official portraiture are often cited as evidence of her vanity and waning looks. However, as I explore in this essay, the use of cosmetics in the early modern era was associated not only with narcissism but with England’s colonial efforts. By considering discourses about her status as a symbol of natural beauty and the racist associations with makeup application, I argue that the legibility of makeup on the queen’s face in imperial portraits and preservation of this motif as a pattern can be read as a symbol of her imperial and racial domination in the Americas and in England.

The importation of foreign goods is inextricably linked to Queen Elizabeth I’s attempts to establish colonies in the Americas—when English merchants and travelers returned from their trips overseas, they brought cosmetics products



Figure 1 Unknown Artist (formerly attributed to George Gower), Elizabeth I—The Armada Portrait, c. 1588. Milton Keynes, Woburn Abbey. Image courtesy of Wiki Commons, accessed November 27, 2019.

with them. In the Elizabethan era, critics linked the application of cosmetics with ethnic stereotypes and a prejudiced disdain for foreign products and peoples.³ In his 1596 account of an expedition to Venezuela, Sir Walter Raleigh, a favorite of the queen and an early agent of colonization, writes about finding a variety of berries in Trinidad that produced a pleasing color when applied to the skin.⁴ In the same year, the queen sent an open letter to the mayor of London calling for the deportation of every Black individual in England—an unprecedented grouping of individuals based on their skin color rather than geographic origin.⁵ The queen's belief that only people with light skin belonged in England complicates readings of her application of white face powder and imported cosmetics as merely a reflection of her vanity. Because depictions of the queen were based on the face patterns employed in the *Armada Portrait* and *The Ditchley Portrait*, whose creation coincides with Britain's attempts to permanently colonize America, it is worthwhile to consider how the legibility of makeup in her portraits serves as a symbol of imperial domination.



Figure 2 Marcus Gheeraerts the Younger, Queen Elizabeth I—The Ditchley Portrait, c. 1592. National Portrait Gallery, London. Image courtesy of National Portrait Gallery, accessed November 27, 2019.

This essay begins by examining how Roy Strong's treatment of the queen's cosmetic use and his idea of the Mask of Youth came to define how scholars continue to interpret her face as the result of her vanity. I then analyze early portraits of the queen that were painted while she was still of childbearing age, and compare them with later portraits that intentionally desexualized her body in order to prohibit readings of her body as feminine. I examine the presence of cosmetic application in portraits of the queen at different points in her life to argue that, although she wore makeup throughout her reign, it appears particularly artificial due to the stylization of her face in the *Armada Portrait* and *The Ditchley Portrait*. I then discuss how recent scholarship in the field of English literature addresses the queen's face as a site of potential symbolism and consider how these readings reflect the propagandistic nature of royal portraiture in the Tudor period. Finally, I turn to Kim F. Hall's analysis of the connection between race and cosmetic application in the early modern period and suggest that tracing a material history of Elizabethan cosmetics can help inform readings of the queen's cosmetic use in her later imperial portraiture.

In 1588 the queen sat for the *Armada Portrait*, which reimagined her victory over the Spanish Armada as a luxurious tableau. She sits with her right hand resting



Figure 3 Isaac Oliver, Elizabeth I of England—The Oliver Miniature, 1592. Unknown collection. Image courtesy of Wiki Commons, accessed November 19, 2019.

over the American continent on a globe while, behind her, Spanish ships are stranded in a desert and lost at sea (Fig. 1). Marcus Gheeraerts the Younger's 1592 portrait of the queen, known as *The Ditchley Portrait*, depicts her standing on top of England on a globe—the earth's curvature is visible next to the massive skirt of her jewel-encrusted gown. She is stylized as a cosmic entity who controls both the land beneath her feet and the celestial skies surrounding her (Fig. 2). The *Oliver Miniature*, an unfinished portrait made in 1592 by Isaac Oliver, an artist working in Nicholas Hilliard's studio, functions as a face pattern: only the queen's facial features and hair color are shaded in over an opaque blue background, and her clothing is lightly sketched in and left uncolored (Fig. 3).⁶ When compared with the *Oliver Miniature*, the queen's face as it appears in the *Armada Portrait* and *The Ditchley Portrait* is highly stylized and mask-like. These two large-scale portraits include symbolic images of her imperial domination and function as testaments to the queen's military strength. Another difference between the large portraits and the *Oliver Miniature* is the legible presence of makeup in the former works: her lips and cheeks are rendered in bright coral color while the rest of the skin on her face is uniform in its pallor. Queen Elizabeth I was considered an icon of beauty throughout her youth, and, as time passed, gossip of her using cosmetics to hide her changing face emerged among her critics and peers.⁷ Nevertheless, while portraits of Queen Elizabeth I have served as a rich site of inquiry for art historians to analyze how her gender, religion, and self-fashioning manifested in



Figure 4 Attributed to William Scrots, Elizabeth I when a Princess, c. 1546. Windsor Castle, Royal Collection Trust. Image courtesy of Royal Collection Trust, accessed November 17, 2019.

art, images of her face have often been overlooked as potential sites of symbolism.

Discourses about the queen's face often conflate how her face actually looked while she was alive with how her face was depicted in her portraiture. The presence of this conceit in recent scholarship can be attributed to the influence of the most widely cited source on portraits of the queen, Strong's *Gloriana: The Portraits of Queen Elizabeth I*, originally published in 1963 and republished in 1987.⁸ In the introduction to his landmark catalog, Strong compares *Elizabeth I when a Princess*, an early portrait completed in 1546–47 of Elizabeth at about thirteen years old (Fig. 4), to *The Ditchley Portrait*, painted when the queen was in her early sixties. He notes that, in the younger portrait, “the pallor of [Elizabeth's] complexion is relieved only by her fair auburn hair and her eyes, which still possess a childlike innocence.”⁹ In *The Ditchley Portrait*, however,

[t]he cheeks once filled with the bloom of youth have become sunken and rouged; the eyes have the penetration of one for whom life has been an unceasing battle of wits; the lips are thin and mean; the face wrinkled, almost haggard, in appearance; in

short the young girl has become the great Queen whose genius has guided victoriously the destinies of a people for over thirty years.¹⁰

When Strong writes that the queen's cheeks have been rouged in *The Ditchley Portrait*, he refers not only to the color of the paint on the canvas but to the application of red makeup, known as rouge, to her cheeks. He claims that the representational shift in tone between these portraits demonstrates how the image of the queen became more stylized and less representative; as her influence spread, she was increasingly depicted as a symbol of England's power rather than an individual woman.¹¹ There is a fundamental issue, however, in his reading the presence of red cheeks in the queen's later portraits as evidence of her applying rouge to her actual face; in the same chapter in which Strong highlights how her late portraiture was stylized, he uses said portraiture to make assumptions about her real-life appearance.

Strong's comprehensive iconographic analysis of the most prominent portraits of the queen set a precedent as to how images of the queen are viewed and written about today. He claims that Hilliard's studio was commissioned by the British government sometime in the 1590s to create an official face pattern for the queen that "totally ignored reality and instead gave visual expression to the final cadences of her cult in which the poets celebrated her seemingly eternal youth and beauty."¹² Strong thus states that *The Ditchley Portrait* became the "official face-pattern" for portraits of the queen, although in portraits that followed this pattern "the features are considerably rejuvenated and softened, indicating a response to the obligatory Mask of Youth face-pattern which was soon to be imposed by the government."¹³ Strong then explains that "sometime about 1594 a government decision was taken that the official image of the Queen in her final years was to be of a legendary beauty, ageless and unfading."¹⁴ While there is certainly visual evidence that the faces in these late portraits were used as patterns by artists, Strong does not provide any more clarification about the 1594 governmental mandate that definitively called for the creation of a Mask of Youth—nor does he expand on what it entails.¹⁵ While the debate surrounding the circulation of images of the queen began in 1563, when the government first discussed trying to control the production and dissemination of her image, there is later evidence of the queen and her government policing the appearance of her portraits more generally, as seen in the Privy Council of England minutes from 1596:

A warrant for her Majesty's Serjeant Painter and to all publicke officers to yelde him their assistance touching the abuse

committed by divers unskillfull artizans in unseemly and improperly paintings, gravinge and printing of her Majesty's person and vysage, to her Majesty's great offence and disgrace of that beautyfull and magnanimous Majesty wherwith God hath blessed her, requiring them to cause all suche to be defaced and none to be allowed but suche as her Majesty's Serjant Paynter shall first have sight of.¹⁶

Louis A. Montrose observes that the strong wording of the 1596 act compared with earlier, more vague drafts “may be due at least in part to the growing disjunction between the political ideal of the Queen's beauty which was abstract and timeless—and an artistic project of ‘natural representation’ that more sharply observed the realm of the senses.”¹⁷ Regardless of the exact nature of the English government's attempts to police images of the queen, Strong's poetic treatment of her face and his idea that the queen used cosmetics as tools to disguise her aged face and create a Mask of Youth have continued to dominate popular and academic narratives regarding her use of makeup.¹⁸ There is room for new interpretations of the queen's cosmetic application as representative of themes beyond vanity and aging.

In her early portraits, the queen's skin is matte and blends naturally from one part of her face to the other. In the *Armada Portrait* and *The Ditchley Portrait*, the queen's skin is divided into reflective planes that mask any texture that may be present beneath them. While Strong reads this mask as the result of government mandates outlawing any reference to her aging face, there remains telling evidence of aging in the deep indents under her eyes and prominent nasolabial folds—the cosmetics on her face do not completely succeed in masking her mortality.¹⁹ In *Elizabeth I when a Princess*, the skin of Elizabeth's face and lips are a pale, uniform color that matches the skin of her neck and hands. The young princess holds a book in her hand and stands in front of another before large red curtains; she is situated within an entirely plausible interior setting. In images after Elizabeth's coronation, her eyebrows are plucked, as is her hairline, to create the illusion of a larger forehead. Her skin is smooth and white; her lips are small and pursed. In the *Darnley* portrait from 1575, the queen holds peacock feathers in one hand, her lips bright red and her cheeks flushed with color (Fig. 5). In Hilliard's *Phoenix Portrait* from the same year, Elizabeth's face is completely smooth, and her lips are a pale coral red (Fig. 6). In these two portraits, wherein Elizabeth can be read as wearing makeup, shadow lends dimension to the sides of her face.



Figure 5 Unknown artist, Queen Elizabeth I – the ‘Darnley’ Portrait, c. 1575. London, National Portrait Gallery. Image courtesy of National Portrait Gallery, accessed November 20, 2019.

In the 1585 *Ermine* portrait by William Segar, artificial blue veins are painted onto her hands to highlight her whiteness,²⁰ yet her face is depicted more naturally—the contours of her face are subject to a shadow that outlines her cheekbones and jawline (Fig. 7). However, there is no evidence of real skin texture or naturalistic shading in the final two large-scale portraits that the queen sat for: the *Armada Portrait* and *The Ditchley Portrait*.

While scholarship on the queen’s dual role as monarch and woman has established new ways to think about depictions of her face and body, the specific racial implications of her cosmetic use in her later portraits have not yet been addressed. In the *Armada Portrait*, her skin is as white and smooth as porcelain—her under-eye area consists of a glowing plane of white that extends to her temples. Her skin is devoid of texture, ensuring that only the color added by makeup (red lips, red cheeks, white skin, forehead veins) remains. In *The Ditchley Portrait*, the queen’s face is entirely devoid of color except for her cheeks and lips; her skin is so white that it appears gray and corpse-like next to her cream-colored dress. English literature scholars have recently begun to address the lack of existing studies on the queen’s cosmetic use and facial appearance by analyzing contemporary early modern texts. In her pioneering study of the queen’s face and



Figure 6 Associated with Nicholas Hilliard, I, c. 1575. London, National Portrait Gallery. Image courtesy of National Portrait Gallery, accessed November 20, 2019.

Elizabethan beauty standards, Anna Riehl notes that “among the numerous explorations of Elizabeth’s monarchical body . . . there have been no studies focused on the queen’s face.”²¹ She challenges the “pervasive notion in scholarship that the Elizabethans viewed portraiture as a means to assert various aspects of the sitter’s identity mainly through the setting, leaving the face essentially outside the system of signification” by referencing early modern texts that highlight the face as a site of legibility about an individual’s interior state.²² Riehl cites John Davies’s 1599 “To Her Picture,” a poem that bemoans how the artist of a portrait of the queen fails to capture her beauty, as an example of how Elizabethans may have viewed the queen’s face as more of a symbol of her rule rather than a faithful representation of her lived appearance.²³ Riehl argues that, because texts that described the queen’s appearance were likely written to appease her by hyperbolizing her beauty, or perhaps satirizing it, they cannot be used as evidence of her actual appearance.²⁴ Riehl has also noted that scholars tend to use textual and visual depictions of the queen as heavily made-up as evidence of her copious application of cosmetics, yet Riehl uses the lack of unbiased evidence about this alleged cosmetic use to argue that the queen may have never worn makeup at all.²⁵ While Riehl goes on to analyze portraits of the queen in tandem with descriptions of her face in order to posit what the queen may have actually looked



Figure 7 William Segar, The Ermine Portrait, c. 1585. Hatfield Hertfordshire, Hatfield House. Image courtesy of Wikipedia, accessed November 20, 2019.

like in real life, I consider how the clear inclusion of makeup in these portraits, regardless of whether it was worn in real life, serves a symbolic function in the imperial portraits.

In the early sixteenth century, the House of Tudor, the ruling family of England and Ireland, adopted the continental European method of using royal portraiture to reaffirm the power of the monarchy. These images provided “compelling visual evidence for the consolidation of the powers of the dynastic state, and for the highly personalized nature of the political process.”²⁶ In the wake of the Protestant Reformation in the 1530s and the splitting of the Church of England from the Roman Catholic Church in 1534, Henry VIII, head of the House of Tudor and the orchestrator of the split, used royal portraiture as a key method to refashion himself as both a king and a spiritual leader.²⁷ Throughout the reign of the next three Tudor monarchs—Edward VI, Mary I, and Elizabeth I—the throne attempted to control the public perception of the royal family by disseminating portraits that bordered on propaganda. For Elizabeth I, the reassertion of monarchical power through portraiture not only established her legitimacy as an unmarried Tudor monarch but also reinforced her control over the popular narratives surrounding her reign. Although Queen Elizabeth I ruled from 1558 until



Figure 8 After Hans Holbein, Portrait of Henry VIII, c. 1536-7. Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool. Image courtesy of Wikipedia, accessed December 1, 2019.

her death in 1603, she never married and produced no heirs; her virginity came to represent her ability to rule England without being hindered by her gender.

While her makeup application, as seen in her late portraits, conforms to traditional beauty routines of the day, and often her beauty is written about as a model to emulate, Elizabeth was often credited as the inspiration for cosmetic trends rather than an adherent. Riehl notes that there are few texts from the Elizabethan era that explicitly refer to the queen's makeup use—her beauty is said to be natural.²⁸ This is due partly to the conflation of the body of the head of the kingdom (“the natural body”) with the kingdom itself (“the body politic”). For example, when the queen came down with smallpox in 1562, she was said to be free of any scarring. She herself propagated this myth, as she was keenly aware of the duality she served as both masculine ruler and feminine body: as Riehl says, “[The queen] figures both as an object of scrutiny and representation, but an object whose privileged position of power lends her the awareness of the masculine values according to which her face is being regarded and figured.”²⁹ In the *Armada Portrait*, however, the plausibility of her natural coloring comes into question. Andrew Belsey and Catherine Belsey note how, in this portrait that “presents the



Figure 9 Marcus Gheeraerts the Younger, *Ellen Maurice*, 1597. New York, *The Metropolitan Museum of Art*. Image courtesy of *The Metropolitan Museum of Art*, accessed December 5, 2019.

Queen as an emblem of majesty,” her “face is pale and perhaps slightly unearthly.”³⁰ They note how the inclusion of rich clothing and a symbolic setting is comparable to Hans Holbein’s propagandistic portrait of Henry VIII (Fig. 8).³¹ A crucial difference in portraits of Elizabeth in comparison to her predecessors is the complete stylization of her body in an attempt to assert her masculinity as ruler. In the 1570s, once the queen was in her forties, her virginity became canonized and incorporated into her official image. In the *Armada Portrait* and *The Ditchley Portrait*, the natural body of the queen is manipulated to the point of caricature—her waist is long and small, her shoulders inhumanly wide. The Belseys argue that the manipulation of her body in these two works may be a reaction to how, in the sixteenth century, the female body was considered weak and submissive; because Elizabeth ruled the British Empire as a Virgin Queen who took on the image of the man, her earthly body had to be subdued:

The “Armada” portrait proclaims the sovereignty and the right to rule: the splendour of her appearance, her vision and her



Figure 10 Marcus Gheeraerts the Younger, Anne of Denmark, 1611-14. Milton Keynes, Woburn Abbey. Image courtesy of Wiki commons, accessed December 4, 2019.

self-control are evidence of the majesty and the authority which (sic) inhere in the person of the Queen. But the painting also declares the magnificence of her realm: England's wealth and maritime prowess are evidence of its authority in the world, of national sovereignty divinely indorsed.³²

The queen's right to rule is thus correlated with the subduing of her sexuality and the enhancement of her surrounding accoutrements. Strong and the Belseys analyze this symbolism in the background, objects, and clothing in the *Armada Portrait* and *The Ditchley Portrait* to argue that they represent a period of imperialist propaganda. Continuing in this vein, the cosmetics legible on the queen's face can likewise be read as symbols of imperialism due to the queen's colonial project and the racial connotations of cosmetic use in the early modern period.

Early modern beauty standards in western Europe called for high foreheads, smooth white faces, blushed cheeks, and small red lips. Books on cosmetic use by women in the Elizabethan era make continuous reference to the expectation for every woman to mimic the appearance—and especially the fairness—of the queen.³³ The queen was famous for her natural white skin, which is commonly thought to have been enhanced through the use of white paints, such as Venetian

ceruse, as she aged. Aileen Ribeiro explains that, while cosmetics alluded to serums crafted from natural ingredients like plants and herbs, paint referred to “the mineral substances, often poisonous, which were applied to the skin and which could dramatically change the appearance of those wearing them.”³⁴ However, while there is no shortage of writing by men in the Elizabethan era about the falseness of face painting, any reference to the queen’s own use remains strictly in the realm of cosmetics, not paint. This distinction is important, as Ribeiro says: “Most writers dealing with women’s beauty (and even critics of female appearance) made a clear distinction between cosmetics, which were usually approved of, and paint, which was condemned.”³⁵ This refusal to imply that the queen’s appearance was the result of paint is seen in this popular recipe for cosmetic water, a sort of lotion, that she was said to use:

A “*cosmetick* water” or cleansing lotion used by Elizabeth had its ingredients in two new laid eggs with their shells, burnt alum, powdered sugar, borax, poppy seeds beaten up very finely with a “pint of water that runs from under the wheel of a mill.” Once made, the preparation would keep for a year: “it is a very *good cosmetick*; it whitens, smooths and softens the skin: use it, like that Queen, but 3 times a week.”³⁶

The recipe is clear that this solution is a cosmetic, not a paint—the queen does not mask her face, she enhances it. However, this discourse stands in stark opposition to readings of the queen’s later portraits showcasing cosmetic use. Her beauty, which other women were expected to emulate, was not without problematic connotations. As Romana Sammern notes, the feminine ideal of white skin, red lips, and red cheeks was understood since the Ovidian era; however, writers only began to acknowledge women painting their faces to conform with these beauty standards in England in the mid-sixteenth century.³⁷ Critics of women appearing artificial or acting against God by applying cosmetics rarely extended this critique to the queen herself due to governmental pressure; yet, as Frances E. Dolan states: “In associating [cosmetics] with prostitutes and servants, polemicists . . . delicately refrain from censuring women at the top of the social scale, although those women—especially Queen Elizabeth—may have initiated the use of cosmetics and made it fashionable.”³⁸ The trend of women applying white ceruse to the face and neck, rouge to the lips, and red powder to the cheeks—as well as the critique of this practice—was thus popularized during the Elizabethan era.

Cosmetics and paints were criticized for more than their assumed association with female vanity, however. In her 1995 book *Things of Darkness: Economies of Race and Gender in Early Modern England*, Kim F. Hall states that discourses surrounding the luxury of beauty and, in particular, fairness, reveal how the application of cosmetics became tied up with racial discourse in and after the Elizabethan era.³⁹ She notes that by the mid-seventeenth century, dark skin and the application of “paint” became conflated; this was partly due to the foreign origin of many beauty products: “Male writers continually accuse women of hiding their ‘blackness’ under the fair disguise of cosmetics and worry that female vanity will feed the market for foreign ornaments.”⁴⁰ Dark skin became associated with both the foreign other and the unattractive woman—as something to hide, to cover with makeup. While Hall explores the racial connotations of cosmetics application that occurred in English discourse shortly after the queen’s death, she does not explicitly discuss how the material history of imported cosmetics factors into discussions of the queen’s projected whiteness during her reign. In a later article on teaching race and gender in Shakespeare at the college level, Hall discusses how the tension between light and dark in portraits of Queen Elizabeth I reinforces her, and thus England’s, whiteness. Hall links the visibility of the queen’s use of cosmetics in *The Ditchley Portrait* not with their status as imported materials but with the symbolism of her clothing: “The whiteness of her bejeweled dress and ‘cosmetically enhanced’ features combine in the Ditchley portrait to evoke virgin purity and Christian grace and thus associate Elizabeth with ‘the good.’”⁴¹ According to Hall, because of the symbolic function of imperial portraiture, it is the values associated with the queen’s white skin and ornate clothing that are indicative of those of the nation she presides over. However, as the use of cosmetics and paint to lighten the skin in Elizabethan England was criticized for being unnatural and deceitful, cosmetically enhanced skin would not have had the same associations with purity and Christianity as unenhanced skin. While the artificial whiteness of her skin as it appears in her portraits is evinced by its resemblance to popular makeup styles of the day, the foreign origin of its materials reveals a more tangible connection between depictions of the queen’s cosmetic application and her imperial mission. The best ceruse, a white lead-based pigment, came from Venice; blusher was colored with red brazilwood from the Americas; and cochineal, a new source for red rouge, was brought to England from Mexico via Spanish trade routes in the mid-sixteenth century.⁴² Traces of these foreign goods, obtained through colonial trade routes that were often forged by the British government, are visible on the queen’s face in her later portraits that make explicit her role as colonizer.

While the queen's "natural" beauty served as an inspiration for these cosmetic trends, she escaped accusations of face painting during her lifetime. Her face in later portraits was symbolic of her own rule and power; even though her corseted waist and luxurious fashion in *The Ditchley Portrait* was re-created by Gheeraerts in portraits of other Elizabethan court ladies and royals, the texture and coloring of the sitters' skin is still visible despite the presence of their bright red makeup (Figs. 8–9). The queen's mask-like white face was unique to her own portraiture, and, although other women may have mimicked her beauty at the time, their faces were not stylized to the same degree as hers was. While cosmetic use by Elizabethan women under the influence of the queen has been discussed at length, the colonial politics associated with applying white face powder has often been applied to women in general rather than the queen herself. In early modern England, the legible application of white face powder and red on the cheeks and lips reflected the spoils of colonial missions and the exploitation of enslaved labor. Elizabeth's face in the *Armada Portrait* and *The Ditchley Portrait* exists alongside a clear and established message of imperial domination; as the monarch, her portraits were not subject to the same early modern narrative regarding vanity that was applied to portraits of court ladies. When discussing the implications of cosmetic use in her portraiture—especially her alleged use of whitening paints—her official policies about appearances and skin color must also be considered.

Queen Elizabeth I actively sought to control the Americas and beat the Spanish by being the first European nation to establish a permanent colony; John Dee, the queen's adviser, is credited with creating the term *The British Empire* and advocating for colonization in the Americas. The first English colony in America was established in 1584, and although this first settlement was abandoned by 1590, it was a precursor for the founding of Virginia only decades later by Queen Elizabeth's successor, James I of England.⁴³ The *Armada Portrait* celebrates both the queen's dominion over continental European powers and the Americas—a theme reinforced in *The Ditchley Portrait* four years later.⁴⁴ *The Ditchley Portrait* was painted as a gift to the queen's champion, Henry Lee of Ditchley, in a chiaroscuro style—a new aesthetic for portraits of the queen that favored stylized forms over realistic representation. While the *Armada Portrait* is notable for its landscape orientation, *The Ditchley Portrait* is notable for its size; it is the largest portrait of the queen painted during her lifetime.⁴⁵ The poem inscribed on the right side is largely illegible due to overpainting. The Belseys note the imperial symbolism that pervades the composition, seen in the celestial sphere pendant by her left ear, and claims that she is represented as ruler not only of Britain upon which she stands but of the cosmos as a whole.⁴⁶ Evidently, the masking of the queen's face that

occurs near the end of her reign coincides with her stylization as a symbol of imperial England.

Beyond serving as visual commemorations of the queen's role as head of the kingdom, the events following the completion of the *Armada Portrait* and *The Ditchley Portrait* reveal how the queen saw Blackness as a threat to English whiteness. From 1596 to 1601, the queen sent a series of letters to the mayor of London calling for every Black individual in the country to be banished:

WHEREAS the Queen's majesty, tendering the good and welfare of her own natural subjects, greatly distressed in these hard times of dearth, is highly discontented to understand the great number of Negroes and blackamoors which (as she is informed) are carried into this realm since the troubles between her highness and the King of Spain. . . . These shall therefore be to will and require you and every of you to aid and assist the said Casper van Senden or his assignees to taking such Negroes and blackamoors to be transported as aforesaid as he shall find within the realm of England; and if there shall be any person or persons which be possessed of any such blackamoors that refuse to deliver them in sort aforesaid, then we require you to call them before you and to advise and persuade them by all good means to satisfy her majesty's pleasure therein.⁴⁷

The war between England and Spain, and the defeat of the Spanish Armada by the British in 1588, as seen in the *Armada Portrait*, saw an increased number of people of African descent hired to work as privateers.⁴⁸ Her statement reveals how England's involvement in wars with Spain to fight for control of the Americas and subsequent colonization attempts affected the ways in which individuals of African descent and their skin color were seen by the population at large. The distinct language used by the queen exemplifies how she grouped individuals together based not on geographic location but on skin color—a move Emily C. Bartels notes was an “attempt to put into place a race-based cultural barrier of a sort England had not seen since the expulsion of the Jews at the end of the thirteenth century.”⁴⁹ While this call for deportation was entrenched in the political and economic issues of the day, as the group she refers to initially included enslaved individuals that the English had captured from a Spanish colony in the Americas, Elizabeth's statement posits individuals of African descent as inferior to those of European descent.⁵⁰ Ironically, this whiteness was enhanced through

the application of pigments acquired through foreign trade and the early colonization of the Americas.

Elizabeth's statement conflates two different groups based on the color of their skin—a political move that must be considered alongside popular contemporaneous discourses regarding race and visibility. As Hall notes, in Elizabethan England, people from different backgrounds were not typically thought of as belonging to the same racial group based on skin color alone; narratives about geographic origin and class permeated these discussions.⁵¹ This statement thus serves as an outlier; according to Hall, Elizabeth's failed policy to expel individuals based on their skin color highlights how the white queen could not attempt to remove Black individuals from a kingdom they already inhabited: "The attempted banishment of difference and the maintenance of England's borders through figurations of Elizabeth as the pure and fair national body only helped to produce a void of English whiteness that her successor, himself a foreign other, could not fill."⁵² At the same time that she was trying to expel people from England based on the color of their skin, Elizabeth's subjects were traveling to the Americas and returning with materials that were used to alter her own.

In her 2011 article "Inventing Whiteness: Cosmetics, Race, and Women in Early Modern England," Kimberly Poitevin argues that women who applied white makeup to their faces in early modern England performed their race in what she calls the act of whiteface: "Since a number of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century theories explicitly linked cosmetic practices to racial difference and since many of the products women applied to their skins were foreign products, women who used make-up also encoded anxieties about race-mingling and cross-cultural contact in their complexions."⁵³ While Poitevin calls attention to how the mixture of foreign materials in English cosmetics was a heated topic in early modern debates over whiteness and beauty, she does not consider how the queen's own makeup application and enhanced whiteness may have factored into these discussions.⁵⁴ Poitevin only briefly refers to queen's cosmetic use as it relates to aging despite later making important connections between racism and Elizabethan cosmetic culture: "Certainly Queen Elizabeth's use of cosmetics was legendary in her time—it is believed she began using them most heavily after a bout with smallpox in 1562—and as she aged, they helped her create the iconic mask-like image she is known for today."⁵⁵ Nonetheless, Poitevin's ideas regarding discourses about whiteness and the inclusion of foreign materials in cosmetic products are crucial in understanding how, if we read the queen's face in her late portraits as sporting cosmetics, this use signified more than just an aversion to displaying old age—it also displayed the material results of her colonial efforts.

Although the queen and her government attempted, in vain, to control the dissemination of images of the monarch from 1563 until her death, unofficial reproductions of her face remained widespread and popular.⁵⁶ Individual studios would keep fabric face patterns based off miniatures for small-scale works and *The Ditchley Portrait* for larger images in order to create mass amounts of portraits of the queen in order to comply with her government's strict regulations about the preservation of her beauty and power.⁵⁷ However, as I outlined here, the final face type that was copied in works of the queen after her death held important racial implications. The scope of the present essay only scratches the surface of the symbolism of cosmetics in royal portraiture. There is certainly more work to be done on the topic of the queen's makeup in portraiture in the field of art history that can build on the scholarship already published by scholars of English literature. I hope that, by distinguishing between the makeup application of the real woman as she existed and the symbolic queen of her later imperial portraiture, I have provided new insight into how the legibility of cosmetics on Queen Elizabeth I's face in the *Armada Portrait* and *The Ditchley Portrait* can be interpreted as being symbolic of England's colonial projects.

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Notes

¹ Roy Strong, *Gloriana: The Portraits of Queen Elizabeth I* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1987), 140.

² Louis A. Montrose, "Idols of the Queen: Policy, Gender, and the Picturing of Elizabeth I," *Representations*, no. 69 (Autumn 1999): 149n4, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2902957>.

³ Kimberly Poitevin, “Inventing Whiteness: Cosmetics, Race, and Women in Early Modern England,” *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 11, no. 1 (2011): 75, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jem.2011.0009>. Poitevin cites Frances E. Dolan, Kim F. Hall, and Farah Karim-Cooper as having previously discussed this phenomenon.

⁴ “Sir Walter Raleigh [*sic*] found ‘divers berries, that die a most perfect crimson and Carnation’ in Trinidad, remarking that ‘for painting, all France, Italy, or the east Indies, yield none such: For the more the skyn is washed, the fayrer the cullour appeareth.’” For more discussion of the links between imported cosmetics and early English colonization efforts, see Poitevin, “Inventing Whiteness,” 75.

⁵ Emily C. Bartels, “Too Many Blackamoors: Deportation, Discrimination, and Elizabeth I,” *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900* 46, no. 2 (2006): 306, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3844644>. I use the term *Black* in this essay to refer to individuals of African descent whose geographic displacement and heritage has been lost or ignored by surviving sources. I engage with the term as defined by Kim F. Hall in the introduction to *Things of Darkness*: “‘Black’ encompasses the peoples of the African diaspora without having to make attributions of nationality and culture that have been erased from historical records or do not obtain in the early period. . . . Rather than negotiate such tangled thickets in this space, I adopt the simple, albeit problematic, nomenclature: ‘black’” (*Things of Darkness: Economies of Race and Gender in Early Modern England* [Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995], 8).

⁶ Strong, *Gloriana*, 16.

⁷ Aileen Ribeiro, *Facing Beauty: Painted Women and Cosmetic Art* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011), 82.

⁸ Strong, *Gloriana*, 10. Strong’s catalog builds on Freeman O’Donoghue’s 1894 book *A Descriptive and Classified Catalogue of Portraits of Queen Elizabeth*, which groups paintings by their shared iconography rather than their chronology.

⁹ Strong, *Gloriana*, 10.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹² *Ibid.*, 147.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 140.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 20.

¹⁵ For a comprehensive list of portraits that incorporate the *Armanda Portrait* and *The Ditchley Portrait* as face patterns, see Strong, *Gloriana*, 132–41.

¹⁶ Montrose, “Idols of the Queen,” 149n4.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ For examples of scholars who mention Strong's Mask of Youth as evidence of the queen's vanity in her old age, see Anna Riehl, *The Face of Queenship: Early Modern Representations of Elizabeth I* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 62; S. P. Cerasano and Marion Wynne-Davies, "From Myself, My Other Self I Turned?: An Introduction," in *Gloriana's Face: Women, Public and Private, in the English Renaissance*, ed. S. P. Cerasano and Marion Wynne-Davies (Hertfordshire, UK: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992), 14; Patricia Berrahou Phillippy, *Painting Women: Cosmetics, Canvases, and Early Modern Culture* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 135; and Romana Sammern, "Red, White, and Black: Colors of Beauty, Tints of Health, and Cosmetic Materials in Early Modern English Art Writing," *Early Science and Medicine* 20, nos. 4–6 (2015): 400, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15733823-02046p05>.

¹⁹ Farah Karim-Cooper, *Cosmetics in Shakespearean and Renaissance Drama* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 62.

²⁰ Carroll Camden, *The Elizabethan Woman: A Panorama of English Womanhood, 1540 to 1640* (London: Cleaver-Hume, 1952), 176.

²¹ Anna Riehl, *The Face of Queenship: Early Modern Representations of Elizabeth I* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 9n30. Riehl notes that while Queen Elizabeth I's cosmetic use is mentioned in books on early cosmetic culture by other scholars of English literature, it is not discussed in-depth.

²² Riehl, *Face of Queenship*, 124.

²³ *Ibid.*, 125. The poem she cites reads as follows: "But here are colours red and white, / Each lyne, and each proportion right; / These Lynes, this red and whitenesse, / Have wanting yet a life and light, / A Majestie, and brightnesse."

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 59.

²⁶ Montrose, "Idols of the Queen," 108.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Riehl, *Face of Queenship*, 62.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.

³⁰ Andrew Belsey and Catherine Belsey, "Icons of Divinity: Portraits of Elizabeth I," in *Renaissance Bodies: The Human Figure in English Culture c. 1540–1660*, edited by Lucy Gent and Nigel Llewellyn (London: Reaktion Books, 1990), 12.

³¹ Belsey and Belsey, "Icons of Divinity," 14. The original work by Holbein was lost in a fire; a reproduction is cited.

³² *Ibid.*

- ³³ Sammern, “Red, White and Black,” 398. For further examples of how women applied makeup at Elizabeth’s court, see Ribeiro, *Facing Beauty*, 76–101.
- ³⁴ Ribeiro, *Facing Beauty*, 78.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*
- ³⁶ Neville Williams, *Powder and Paint: A History of the Englishwoman’s Toilet, Elizabeth I–Elizabeth II* (London: Longmans, Green, 1957), 28. Williams quotes an Elizabethan era recipe for “Queen Elizabeth’s cosmetick water.”
- ³⁷ Sammern, “Red, White, and Black,” 400.
- ³⁸ Frances E. Dolan, “Taking the Pencil out of God’s Hand: Art, Nature, and the Face-Painting Debate in Early Modern England,” *PMLA* 108, no. 2 (1993): 231, <https://doi.org/10.2307/462594>.
- ³⁹ Hall, *Things of Darkness*, 85.
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 90. This rise in discourse about skin color and foreign cosmetics occurred in the decades after Queen Elizabeth I’s death, when posthumous portraits of the queen were being produced and England’s colonial efforts increased.
- ⁴¹ Kim F. Hall, “Beauty and the Beast of Whiteness: Teaching Race and Gender,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 47, no. 4 (1996): 463.
- ⁴² Ribeiro, *Facing Beauty*, 85.
- ⁴³ Strong, *Gloriana*, 133. Strong mistakenly claims that the colony of Virginia had been founded by 1588, when in fact the colonies established by Sir Walter Raleigh in the Americas in 1584 disappeared by 1590. It was only in 1607, four years after Queen Elizabeth I’s death, that the first permanent colony was established in Jamestown by her successor. For a timeline of Virginia’s early settlement, see Karen Ordahl Kupperman, *Roanoke: The Abandoned Colony* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman & Allanheld, 1984), 132.
- ⁴⁴ Strong, *Gloriana*, 135.
- ⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 137.
- ⁴⁶ Belsey and Belsey, “Icons of Divinity,” 23.
- ⁴⁷ Bartels, “Too Many Blackamoors,” 316. An undated Privy Council minute of 1596–1601.
- ⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 306.
- ⁴⁹ *Ibid.*
- ⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 319.
- ⁵¹ Hall, *Things of Darkness*, 89.
- ⁵² *Ibid.*, 176.
- ⁵³ Poitevin, “Inventing Whiteness,” 59.

⁵⁴ On discussions surrounding race and beauty in the Elizabethan era, see Hall, *Things of Darkness*, 126.

⁵⁵ Poitevin, "Inventing Whiteness," 62.

⁵⁶ Belsey and Belsey, "Icons of Divinity," 21.

⁵⁷ Strong, *Gloriana*, 147.