

Centering Elizabeth: *Imagining Elizabeth Boyle in Art and Literature*

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Although there are several paintings, drawings or engravings said to be of Edmund Spenser, there are no known images of his second wife, Elizabeth Boyle, whom he married in June 1594.¹ She married twice after Spenser's death, first in 1600 to Roger Seckerstone. In May of 1606 Sir Richard Boyle gave her the property of Kilcoran for 61 years. After Seckerstone's death, on March 3, 1612/13, "Mrs. Elizabeth Boyl *als.* Seckerston, widdow" was married for the third time to Captain Robert Tynte. The ceremony occurred in the Youghal study of her kinsman Sir Richard Boyle and was performed by another relative, Richard Boyle, dean of Waterford.² In 1636, the now Sir Robert Tynte built a church at Kilcredan, three miles east of Castlemartyr, Co. Cork. Elizabeth Tynte died in 1622 and was buried in that church; her will mentioned sons Peregrine Spenser (Spenser's second son) and Richard Seckerstone. She and Spenser may have had another child who died in the fire at Kilcolman.³ After Sir Robert's death in 1643, a stone tomb was erected in the same church that depicts the body of Sir Robert clad in armor flanked at his head and feet by the grieving figures of his two wives, Philippa Harris and Elizabeth Boyle

¹ Elizabeth may have been a widow when she married Spenser, see Dorothy F. Atkinson, *Edmund Spenser: A Bibliographical Supplement* (New York: Haskell House Publishers Ltd., 1937), p. 33, no. 7.

² Notes and Queries, *Journal of the Cork Historical & Archaeological Society* (Cork Historical & Archaeological Society, 1895), Vol. I, Second Series, 131-133.

³ Leland, Mary, *The lie of the land: journeys through literary Cork* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1999, p. 16).

[Figures 1 and 2].⁴ While this stone effigy of Elizabeth Boyle might have given some indication of her appearance, it is now missing its head, hands and upper torso.⁵ What, then, might Elizabeth Boyle have looked like?

Spenser makes several references to her appearance in his sonnet sequence about their courtship, *Amoretti* (1595). In Sonnet XV, he catalogs her physical appearance:

For loe my love doth in her selfe containe
 All this worlds riches that may farre be found:
 If Saphyres, loe her eies be Saphyres plaine;
 If rubies, loe hir lips be Rubies sound;
 If Pearles, hir teeth be pearles both pure and round;
 If Yuorie, her forehead yuory weene;
 If Gold, her locks are finest gold on ground;
 If siluer, her faire hands are siluer sheene.
 But that which fairest is but few behold,
 Her mind adornd with vertues manifold.

Similarly, Sonnet XXXVII records her blonde hair:

What guyle is this, that those her golden tresses,
 She doth attyre under a net of gold:
 And with sly skill so cunningly them dresses,
 That which is gold or heare, may scarce be told?

which is also described directly in *Epithalamion*, the wedding poem that follows *Amoretti* in the same volume:

Her long loose yellow locks lyke golden wyre,
 Sprinckled with perle, and perling flowres a tweene,
 Doe lyke a golden mantle her attire,
 And being crowned with girland greene,
 Seeme lyke some mayden Queene.

It comes as no surprise that Elizabeth, like many English women, had blonde hair and blue eyes.

While these are stereotypical ideal characteristics readily found in much Petrarchan love-poetry,

⁴ For more on the tomb, see Harris, A.L. "The Tynte Monument, Kilcredan, Co. Cork: A Reappraisal." *Journal of the Cork Historical and Archaeological Society* 104 (1999): 137-44.

⁵ For images <http://irishantiquities.bravehost.com/cork/kilcredan/kilcredaneffigies.html> (accessed 12/11/2013)

it is unlikely that Spenser intentionally mis-describes the real features of Elizabeth in his poetry, if indeed he intended his poems to woo her to his castle and cause.

Good portraiture not only captures physical appearance, it conveys the inner character of the sitter. Some indication of Elizabeth's personality is found in Spenser's poetry. In Sonnet LXXIX, he asserts that her spirit is as attractive as her appearance:

Men call you fayre, and yo doe credit it,
For that your selfe ye dayly such doe see:
But the trew fayre, that is the gentle wit
And vertuous mind, is much more praysd of me.

Sonnet XIII describes Elizabeth's demeanor as, "Myld humblesse mixt with awfull majesty," thus comparing her to Queen Elizabeth I. In Sonnet LVIX he portrays her steadfastness and self-confidence:

Thrise happie she, that is so well assured
Unto her selfe and settled so in hart:
That nether will for better be allured,
Ne feard with worse to any chaunce to start:
But like a stedy ship doth strongly part
The raging waves and keeps her course aright:
Ne ought for tempest doth from it depart,
Ne ought for fayrer weathers false delight.
Such selfe assurance need not feare the spight
Of grudging foes, ne favour seek of friends:
But in the stay of her owne stedfast might,
Nether to one her self nor other bends.
Most happy she that most assured doth rest,
But he most happy who such one loves best.

In keeping with this image, W.H. Whelpley remarks on the bold decisive hand in which Elizabeth Tynte wrote a letter to Sir Richard Boyle, in which she rejoices: "As for health I thanke God, I am much better than I was, and have found better contentment than ever I have found befor."

Whelply concludes that Elizabeth Boyle was “a generous, eager-hearted woman, quickly responsive to kindness and well educated.”⁶ One wonders if Elizabeth was happy with Spenser at Kilcolman. Did she, like he, feel the threat of pooks or dislike the "th'unpleasant Quayre of Frogs still croking" (see “Epithalamion”)? What was it like for her to lose everything, even perhaps an infant child, to fire and violence?

The next consideration when attempting to fabricate a portrait of Elizabeth Boyle was one of artistic style. The predominant style used for many Tudor and Elizabethan portraits was quite different stylistically from the Renaissance style developing in countries such as Italy. England had a strong tradition of miniature watercolor portraits, such as those by Nicholas Hilliard, court painter and author of a *Treatise on the Arte of Limning* (written c. 1600). Their style was influenced by the work of the German painter Hans Holbein the Younger, court painter to Henry VIII, whose influential portraits incorporated Northern European realism and attention to detail. Other continental painters who became influential in England included French miniaturist Isaac Oliver, a student of Hilliard, and Flemish artists Lucas Horenbout, Lucas de Heere, Levina Teerlinc, and Marcus Gheeraerts the Elder and the Younger.

The first version of Elizabeth Boyle's fabricated portrait for the website combined elements from five Tudor portraits: a portrait of Anne Boleyn [oil on canvas reproduction of the Hever Castle, Kent, 18th-century portrait of “Anna Bolina” by an anonymous painter, itself based on a late 16th-century copy by an unknown artist (now at the National Portrait Gallery, London) of a lost c. 1534 portrait of Anne Boleyn]; a portrait of Katherine Parr (late 16th-century oil on panel, English Sixteenth Century School, possibly William Bryant); and an oil on

⁶ In the Lismore Papers, quoted by W.H. Welply, “Edmund Spenser: Being an Account of Some Recent Researches into his Life and Lineage, with some Notice of his Family and Descendants,” *Notes and Queries* (London: Oxford University Press), 1932, CLXII(mar12), 182-187, p. 183; doi: 10.1093/nq/CLXII.mar12.182

panel portrait of Princess Mary Tudor (Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris, painted by unknown artist, “The Master of Queen Mary Tudor”) (Figure 1). These portraits were selected because the figures were positioned in a similar way and they were close in size, making it easier to combine elements together. The first two are stylistically similar, although their coloration is quite different. The brushwork of the French portrait of Mary Tudor is much softer and less defined.



Figure 1: *Royal portraits*

The three images were copied as layers into a Photoshop file, then manipulated and combined. The blonde hair from Katherine Parr was copied, replicated, rotated, resized, skewed, distorted, etc. to replace the brunette hair of Anne Boleyn. Details from the dress of Mary Tudor replaced the bare shoulders and jewels of Boleyn. Pearls were removed to make a less opulent display of clothing and wealth, more in keeping with Spenser's social status and income, and the headdress was combined with one from a painting after Holbein, removing jewels and adding a more controlled and austere quality.

The face was manipulated to create a new, mostly imaginary image. The portrait of Mary Tudor provided a quite different mouth and nose shape from Anne Boleyn, but its softer and less

defined brush strokes prevented a simple use of the clone stamp to transfer it to the other figure. Instead, the plumper lip shape was used as a starting point and new lips developed by painting with the brush tool and then using the clone stamp, much as one would paint directly with a brush. Blue eyes from the Catherine Parr portrait replaced the brown eyes of Boleyn. Nose and eyebrows were reshaped with the clone stamp and brush tool. The most difficult challenge was to combine the pink hues of Catherine Parr (similar to the “carnation” coloring of miniature painters) with the yellowish hues of the other two portraits through color adjustments, clone stamping, and painting.



Figure 2: *Royal portraits cont.*

To lighten the image, a white fabric headband from a late-17th-century oil-on-panel portrait of an unknown woman (formerly known as Catherine Howard, National Portrait Gallery) after Hans Holbein the Younger was used to replace the black fabric of Ann Boleyn's headpiece, and part of a necklace from a c. 1590s oil-on-oak panel portrait of Lady Jane Grey Dudley (National Portrait Gallery) simplified the necklace (Figure 2).

The resulting invented “portrait” has qualities that are consistent with the appearance and inner character of Elizabeth Boyle as described in the writing about her. Its style is conservative and little influenced by Italian Renaissance painting, more in keeping with the English style of Hilliard.



Figure 3: *First version of invented portrait of “Elizabeth Boyle” for Centering Spenser website*

However, the credibility of this version was questioned by archaeologist John Bradley, who asked, "Why is she wearing Tudor clothes?"

More research produced portraits from the Elizabethan era as a basis for clothing and hair fashions (Figure 4). Since Elizabeth's face seemed quite successful, a c. 1585-1590 oil-on-wood panel portrait of Mary Rogers, Lady Harington (formerly called *Elizabeth I when a princess*; private collection) by English school, was chosen as a base for the figure; its pose and coloration were similar to the first invented portrait, making it easier to combine the two, and the ruff was

fairly simple, in keeping with Spenser's more modest status and income. The hairstyle was changed to one swept up from the forehead and face as though over Elizabethan hair rats. To complement the simple ruff, the black velvet cap and jewel of the headdress were replaced by a simple lace *atifet* (headdress) based on one worn by the older daughter in the oil on canvas portrait of Anne, Lady Pope with her children painted in 1596 by Marcus Gheeraerts the Younger (National Portrait Gallery on loan from a private collection); the cap was manipulated to create points on both the left and right sides of the head. The coloration of the gown was changed to suggest less sumptuous fabrics and linen braid instead of gold embellishments, which made the costume recede into the background. The date in the background was changed to the date of Spenser's marriage to Elizabeth.



Figure 4: *New base portrait and second version of fabricated Elizabeth Spenser portrait*

Version two of Elizabeth's fabricated portrait brought other objections from project director Thomas Herron, who thought it was too somber and requested a white costume. A subsequent

search produced a base portrait in the oil on panel painting of an Unknown Lady in a White Ruff (Figure 5), painted c. 1595-1600 by a follower of George Gower (The Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge).



Figure 5: *Base portrait and third version of the fabricated portrait of Elizabeth Spenser*

Once again, the invented face of Elizabeth was retained. The jewelry was simplified to be less opulent. The primary challenge here was to bring the coloration of Elizabeth's invented face and torso into line with that of the other portrait, which was done using various tools plus image adjustments to alter color on the neck and chest area; the hair was also deepened to match the ruddier facial color. However, Herron thought the "fryssed" hairdo was frivolous, and the portrait was redone to incorporate the smoother hairstyle of version two of the invented portrait.

A final addition requested by Thomas Herron was to color the oak leaves in the background green to fit symbolically with the more optimistic strains of Spenser's poetry. The final version of the portrait of Elizabeth Spenser is shown in Figure 6.



Figure 6: *Final version of the fabricated wedding portrait of Elizabeth Spenser*

It is perhaps regrettable that no real portrait exists of Elizabeth, as Spenser perhaps predicted in Sonnet LXXV:

. . . you shall live by fame:
 My verse your vertues rare shall eternize,
 And in the heuens wryte your glorious name;
 Where whenas death shall all the world subdew,
 Our love shall live, and later life renew.