The Anonymous 'Eliza': A Puritan Virgin Poet Internalizes Seventeenth-Century English Absolutism

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Abstract

In her only known published volume, *Eliza's Babes: or The Virgin's Offering* (1652), the anonymous poet known as 'Eliza' figures her virgin identity as a political and religious trope; however critics have been ambiguous on the topic of this poet's political affiliation. In the various themes that thread Eliza's work is evidence of a constant personalizing process of contemporary trends in both religious belief and political opinion. Pausing only briefly to overtly discuss political events, Eliza tends to internalize religious doctrines and political events until her overriding sense of her own female identity serves to reconcile political and religious conflicts. Although Eliza's Puritanical orientation may have, presumably, aligned her against the monarch for a time, as demonstrated by my examination of her verses and their contextualization within Civil War sermons, she was highly influenced by the Presbyterian sense of sympathy toward the beleaguered cause of King Charles I that was enabled by the unreconciled tensions between their interests and those of Parliament

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The "superannuated virgin," as termed by political commentator Mary Astell (1666-1731) at the end of the seventeenth century, is one who refuses to participate in the matters of marriage, the foundational institution of patriarchal society (Astell 1997: 41). Considering the political context of this form of self-abstraction, the theme of virginity in seventeenth-century poetry can be understood as a feminizing of the Civil War literary discourse of engagement and withdrawal from public life. "Retreat" as a concept is enmeshed not only in the wartime associations of whether or not to engage in battle, but also in the specifically Royalist concerns with exile and banishment from public duties altogether. However, the notion of retreat or withdrawal as it concerns the literary theme of virginity is not isolated to Royalist alignment. The virgin state holds appeal for differing reasons to women of Catholic, Puritan and High and Low Church Anglican sympathies and is situated comfortably at different places along the spectrum of

Monarchist to Antimonarchist allegiance, as evidenced by the work of seventeenth-century women poets, such Jane Barker, Katherine Philips, Mary Astell and the anonymous poet called “Eliza.”[1]

In her only known published volume, *Eliza’s Babes: or The Virgin’s Offering* (1652), Eliza figures the virgin identity as a political and religious trope, however critics have been ambiguous on the topic of this poet’s political affiliation. Elaine Hobby, whose work first brought the verses to critical attention, determined that the anonymous author was a “defeated royalist” in exile possibly at The Hague (Hobby 1988: 55). Similarly, Eliza was anthologized in *Kissing the Rod* (1989) as being of a “Royalist family” (Greer 1989: 144). The most recent scholarship on Eliza, by Erica Longfellow, runs the gamut of politico-religious persuasions for Eliza, arguing at different times that the poet is “shocking” yet “moderate,” “radical” yet influenced by “conformist[s],” and paradoxically she defines Eliza’s poetry as expressing “potential unorthodoxy” yet being “orthodox to the extreme” (Longfellow 2002: 258, 247, 261, 258, 250, 258). In a close textual analysis of Eliza’s actual poetry, however, Longfellow finds it is “in line with disaffected royalists who did not find Charles’s behavior sufficiently kingly or divine” (246). The poet’s Royalist alignment is seemingly supportable by poems such as “To the Queen of Bohemia,” praising the sister of Charles I, who was revered as a champion of Protestantism in England, “To the King. Writ, 1644,” respectfully chastising Charles I with hope of a reconciliation, and “To Generall Cromwell,” a boldly complaining poem about the new national leader. L.E. Semler, however, has published extensive research on Eliza’s possible identity and finds much to undermine a Royalist affiliation for the poet. He establishes that Eliza’s ideas are strongly influenced by Puritan preacher and pamphleteer Richard Sibbes (1577?-1635) and makes a thorough argument for the possibility that Eliza was the wife of author, soldier, poet and prophet, George Wither (1588-1667) (Semler 2000: 438-448; Semler 2000: 520-536). Semler has also identified her publisher “M.S.” as Matthew Simmons, who was responsible for producing John Milton’s *The Tenure of Kings and*

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[1] For a discussion of the virgin poetry of these authors, see Stone Stanton 2008: 20-29.

Magistrates (1649) and *Eikonoklastes* (1649), in addition to works by Quakers, Baptists and Fifth Monarchists (Semler 2000: 445). Not nearly as radically religious as these writers, however, Eliza's verses reveal one who is "part of the mainstream Reformed Protestant tradition, with verbal parallels matching closest with Presbyterian statements of faith and practice" (Semler 2001: 20). Despite these advances in determining the poet's identity, Semler shies away from assigning Eliza a specific political alignment, as it would only "oversimplify the issue" (Semler 2001: 17)· Instead, Semler finds in Eliza's work an often "genuinely apartisan response of faith to political changes." In spite of this potentially apolitical precedent in Eliza scholarship, this essay locates and identifies evidence of of political influence in her verse, even though the danger of oversimplifying keeps this study from assigning the poet a specific political category. Building on Semler's findings concerning Eliza's Reformed Protestantism and Hobby's original suspicion that the poet has some kind of relationship to the Royalism of her contemporaries, I will first look at her overtly political writings in order to isolate specific strands of political influence.

Finding Eliza's Place in the Civil War

Due to Eliza's frequent figurations of her unfiltered relationship with God in her verses, the poem "To Generall Cromwell" promises by its title to give some insight into what one would expect, given her Puritanism, to be her endorsement of the aspiring ruler. Flattering Cromwell's military prowess, the poem opens: "The Sword of God doth ever well / I'th hand of virtue!" (Eliza 1652: 54. 1-2). Cromwell is represented as the "rod" of authority, and Eliza offers her submission, to "kiss the Rod, and honour thee" (54.6). With its narrator apparently comfortable showing respect for the nation's foremost military leader, then, this poem is also linguistically and ideologically connected with Parliamentarian rhetoric through the expectation that "from Tyrants you'l us free" and the apparent satisfaction that Cromwell's physical might renders "Kings and Princes scourged" (54.17, 9). However, Eliza's poem does not offer an uncomplicated or unequivocal approval of Cromwell. In the second line, Eliza announces that the actual purpose of the poem is to answer the question "O Cromwel / But why doe I, complain of thee?"

(54.2-3). The poet's grievance is specified as a demand for law (and lawyer) reform for her own benefit because "we are put off from our due."[2] If Semler's theory that Eliza is the wife of George Wither is true, then she, indeed, will have suffered when Wither's estate Farnham Castle was plundered by Royalists and given to John Denham (Semler 2000: 527-529). So, with Eliza's demand that Cromwell "Free us from their Laws Tyranny," her only poem on Cromwell can in no way be understood as an unqualified demonstration of praise or approval (Eliza 1652: 54.18).

While Eliza's poetry does not offer an illustration of complete satisfaction with Cromwell, her poem "To the King. Writ 1644" gives a very sympathetic political perspective on the other side in the civil war. Again, Eliza begins with an outright offer of respect:

> To thee, Great Monarch of this Isle
> I send my Babes, pray make them smile;
> For yet methinks tis in thy power[.] (Eliza 1652: 23. 1-3)

At a time when general feeling toward the King was in what was thought to be an irretrievably rapid decline, Eliza is generous in calling Charles "Great," uncritical of his right of dominion over the "Isle," trusting him with her precious metaphorical offspring and then validating the constructive potential of his "power." After summarizing the details of her divine union with "My Prince" who helped produce these babes, the poet actually brings the King into her conjugal felicity by drawing parallels between his own kingship and that of the father of her verses (Eliza 1652: 23.9). In an inclusive spirit, she suggests that Charles "fix your eye / On my great prince, that is your King" (Eliza 1652: 23.12-13). And as Jesus "by yielding won the field," the poet advises Charles to "Be not too rigid, dear King yeeld" (23.9, 10). Then with a strategic turn of her own Christ-Charles parallel, she uses the example of Jesus's suffering departure to warn Charles of potential doom: Christ "left a Heaven, you peace to bring. / A Kindome I'de not have you leave" (23.14-15). Just as Eliza clearly states that she would prefer for the King to compromise rather than lose his position, in a bid for peace, she appeals to him not to "with war my Babes affright" (23. 7).

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[2] 54.12. For a discussion on the law reform issue, see Semler 2001: 14-17.

Semler interprets this poem's final lines as "like a parliamentarian threat," thereby undermining his own assertion that Eliza uses verses to transcend the traditional Royalist / Parliamentarian divide. However, the poet explicitly specifies her position on the matter, which is neither distancing nor threatening, and by using the first-person, she owns the advice she offers. The poem concludes:

> A Kingdome I'de not have you leave,
> But rather three reform'd receive.
> All blisse and peace I wish to you,
> Let us in peace, your presence view. (23.15-18)

Leaving the poem with offerings of reconciliation, Eliza expresses the hope that Charles will understand the need for Reformed Anglicanism, but she does not in any way indicate that her good tidings are contingent upon his conversion. Semler, to bolster his theories concerning Eliza's association with Civil War radicals, reads Eliza's wish to be "in peace" as the "subtly worded ultimatum . . . leave the kingdoms or allow their reformation" (Semler 2001: 16). However, I believe that Semler's argument concerning Eliza's milieu is valid without ill-fittingly extending it to include all her verses. Eliza is offering "*All* blisse and peace" and concludes with an inviting proposal that by keeping the peace, Charles's subjects will be more open to appreciating him (italics mine). So, where Semler sees Eliza rehearsing Parliamentary opposition to the King, I see her granting the ultimate compliment: a Charles-Christ parallel that is in line with the emerging literary trends of Royalist and Anglican literature.

The key to determining Eliza's sympathies in this poem could be in that final invocation: "Let us in peace, your presence view." Two years prior to Eliza's poem encouraging Charles to be another prince of peace, Edward Symmons (1607-1649), a controversial Church of England minister and Royal supporter, came to public attention using a similar methodology in sermon form, whereby he drew comparisons between Charles and Christ and invoked Charles's appearance in the saviour role. Symmons's argument is based on the premise that Charles "is the *Image* of Christ, as *Judge* and *Governor* of the world" (Symmons 1643: 13, all italics here and after are his). From this idea of Charles as a Christ-like figure of authority, Symmons asserts:

> [I]f a Prince shall . . . converse more familiarly with his people for their good, shall he (being most highly adorned with the sweet *Spirit of the Gospell*, and the conditions thereof, meeknesse, patience, mercy, affability, and the like) rather delight to appear to his Subjects as *Christ the Saviour*[.]

Symmons's depiction of a direct linearity between Charles I and Christ created an extensive debate and resulted in the loss of his living. The argument was not only furthered in his later sermons, but it also functioned as an intrinsic part of Charles's own understanding of his rule as explained in *Eikon Basilike* and continued as one of the most characteristic elements of the cult of Charles the Martyr.[3] Eliza's belief that Charles has the power to bestow peace on his subjects coupled with her final expressed desire that Charles "Let us . . . your presence view" evokes Symmons's own desire for the prince to "appear to his Subjects as *Christ the Saviour*." So while I could not assert that Eliza is actually arguing on behalf of the embattled King, her appeal to Charles, her "dear King," shows that far from discounting his right to power, she would have him continue to reign, as she sees the potential in him for a spiritually enlightened (Reformed) and more explicitly Christ-like King.

In her panegyric "To the Queen of Bohemia," Eliza further manifests the influence of the literary traditions surrounding the personality cults of the Stuarts. Sister to Charles I, Elizabeth Stuart and her husband Frederick V, who briefly ruled Bohemia together before being forced into exile, captured the English poetic imagination in the first half of the seventeenth century as Protestant defenders against Roman Catholicism. Their marriage in 1612 was meant to link England with the protestant union, an association of German princes and cities, and it was hoped by many, in the words of George Wither, "that from out your blessed loynes, shall come / Another terror to the *Whore of Rome*" (Wither 1871: 464 emphasis his). Elizabeth Stuart was celebrated in iconography, poetry and prose as "Elizabeth altera" by James I, the "*Queen of Hearts*" by James Howell and "the eclipse and glory of her kind" by Henry

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[3] See Lacey 2001: 28-31; Wilcher 2001: 261-286; Potter 1989: 173-174.

Wotton, as well as being the subject of poetry by John Donne and John Taylor and at least one masque by Wentworth Smith.[4] As an exiled Protestant heroine, Elizabeth of Bohemia inspired her knighted defenders to adoration. Christian of Brunswick battled on her behalf with her glove on his helmet and wrote to her in the chivalric language of high romance as the one "whom I love 'outré le possible'," and Sir Thomas Roe declared "I am ready to serve your Majesty to deathe, to poverty, and if you shall ever please to command, I will be converted to dust and ashes at your Majesty's feet" (Oman 2000: 265). This extraordinary example active feminine piety also inspired wonder in Eliza who describes her experience when "I then did see her so admir'd" (Eliza 1652: 24.9) In keeping with the popular image of Elizabeth as a fierce defender of Protestant ideals who also inhabits the feminine powers of charm and beauty, Eliza found in the exiled Queen both a "minde so great and brave. . ." and "A spirit high so humble bee, / To deigne her sweet regards to me" (Eliza 1652: 24.11,13-14). Eliza, like so many before her, is moved to "admire" and "pray" for Elizabeth that she will have the crown in heaven that she has been denied on earth. Semler argues that the similarities of subject matter between Eliza's "To the Queen of Bohemia" and George Wither's "Epithalamia" support the assertion that Eliza was the wife of Wither. Given the extensive body of literature about "Elizabeth altera," the poem may not in fact support a direct connection between Eliza and Wither outside the text. What it does, however, is indicate the influence on Eliza's writing of popular literature about the Stuarts.

While Eliza's few explicitly political poems provide indications of the political framework in which she writes, most of her poems are intended to articulate the poet's own highly romanticized position as a subject and sovereign in God's kingdom. Eliza's amorous configuration of divine kingship is, I argue, enabled, perhaps even inspired, by her contemporaries' newly developed sympathy for the plight of King Charles I. A closer look at some of the verses detailing this relationship, much of which was written in the years leading up to the execution of

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[4] See Ash 2004; Howell 1650: 2.2.13 emphasis his; Oman 2000: 213-214. For a brief, general discussion of poetry written on the occasion of Elizabeth's marriage, see Oman 2000: 86-88.

Charles I, finds Eliza, again, not simply transcending the political chaos around her but, instead, participating in a potentially pivotal historical moment when a portion of public sentiment against Charles, even amongst Puritans, was beginning to soften.

The Virgin as the Site of Rule

Because *Eliza's Babes* is a survey of the poet's written work since childhood, the reader can follow the development of her self-reflexive identification as a Christian from that of being God's servant to his lover to his wife. The reader also sees her development as a woman, from the young virgin, who vows never to submit to an earthly master, into a wife, who, despite marrying, still refuses to submit. However, even in Eliza's love poems to God, there is something politically specific about the way she profiles her relationship with God in monarchical terms—she is, after all, configured as his subject *and* co-ruler. In the following discussion of Eliza's verses, I will demonstrate how she interweaves a historically specific, conjugally-oriented version of Christianity, a profound desire for monarchic stability and a drive for female agency to produce the ultimate patriarchal love story.

Eliza's figuration of herself as the actual kingdom of Christ the King is a frequently used trope in her work, and in this can be seen the influence of contemporary anxieties concerning the rights of the sovereign and hopes for the potential stability of the newly organized nation-state. Semler's work situating Eliza in, or at least near, a specific religious position finds that her ideas fit inside the 1640s Presbyterianizing movement within Anglicanism (Semler 2001: 21). Eliza's sympathy for Presbyterianism could provide answers as to why this clearly Puritan poet is so comfortable extensively utilizing themes of kingship at a time when the very existence of monarchy was increasingly regarded as anachronistic. A highly visible strand of Presbyterians in the late 1640s underwent an important change of heart toward the King's cause as some of their most visible church leaders converted (or were reported to have converted) back to Anglicanism. Nathaniel Hardy (1619-1770), a popular London preacher and dean of Rochester, and General Alexander Henderson (1583-1646), possibly the most important convenanting minister and who also debated episcopacy with Charles I while he was being held in Newcastle, were both thought to have converted (Tai 2004; Coffey 2004). Even more significant for my study is the example provided to contemporaries by other Presbyterian leaders, who, while keeping their religious beliefs, publicly changed their position against Charles. William Sedgwick (1609-1663), army chaplain and well known London preacher, after changing his mind about Charles, spent the last year before the execution campaigning against bringing the King to trial (Sampson 2004). The vociferous Presbyterian Royalism of Luke Milbourne (1622-1668) resulted in his own notorious maltreatment by Parliamentary soldiers (Wright 2004). Finally, in 1648, there was a split between Presbyterian and Parliamentary interests when the army utterly undermined power, expelling over one hundred and sixty Presbyterians from the House of Commons and arresting forty-five in a theatrical blocking of the entrance that came to be known as Pride's Purge.[5] Although this shift in the Presbyterian stance against Charles's rule occurred too late to change his fate, it is still detectable, I would argue, in a great number of religious poems by Eliza. With "Christ's Kingdome" and "The Renowned King," for example, she presents an absolutist devotion to her God-king figure that, I would argue, reflects this softening shift in the Presbyterian stance on monarchical theory in the 1640s.

In "Christs Kingdome," angels bring "the news of heav'ns great King" who has left heaven "To raise his Kingdome with my heart" (Eliza 1652: 18.2-4). The poet introduces her narrative, her "news," as a kind of divine current event in which God has chosen Eliza as the location to create his kingdom. She explains:

> When thou hast cast off that foul sin,
> Thy Kingdome in me didst begin,
> And here thou wilt still reign in me,
> Till I shall come and reigne with thee. (Eliza 1652: 18.13-16)

Eliza is the embodiment of her king's territory and has become the seat of his rule. Figuring her own person as the site of cohesive subjecthood, Eliza creates in herself a kingdom free from the divisions of her homeland. Unlike the faction-ridden nation in which she must live, in her divine kingdom there is no discontinuity between sovereign and state, Catholic and Protestant or Anglican and Reformed. The seamlessness of her heavenly domain's unification allows the poet to slide easily between the position of governed and co-governor. At the end of her king's reign in her, she will reign over heaven with her king. This shift from being God's domain to enjoying her own enthronement is then reiterated in "What Kingdome to be wisht" where Eliza declares, "That Kingdome ought I wish to be, / But where all thine shall reign with thee" (Eliza 1652: 57.3-4). Personifying God's kingdom again, the virgin-poet's desires for sovereignty are resolved in much the same way as in "Christ's Kingdome," as she finds "Earthly blessings doe me surround, / With heavenly blessings I am crown'd."[6] The transition from Eliza as a site of rule to being a ruler is then made complete in "The renowned King," in which she presents nothing less than a methodology for female empowerment through Jesus.

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[5] Gentles 2004. See also Vernon 2001 and Lacey 2003: 43-45.

With this poem, the poet addresses other women in order to tell them of the authorizing potential of subjugation to her king: "He is a King of great renown, / And on your head can place a Crown."[7] In her adolescent writings, Katherine Philips too found that "A Virgin state is crown'd with much content."[8] But Eliza returns to this coronation image repeatedly, suggesting more explicitly how the woman can use God to invert the social hierarchy ("He will you take from your mean place"), how she can use her chaste subjection to God to bypass subjection to men on earth ("That Crowne shall no man take from thee"), and how her devotion to God gives her licence to assert herself in any given situation ("If you love him you may be bold").[9] In itself, this poem can be understood as a statement nearly as concerned with her own public validation as that of God, and as such, I would argue, that the king in "The renowned King" is really Eliza herself. The idea that Eliza perceives herself as an empowered sovereign is supported by her essay "The Royall Priest-hood," where she proclaims that as "Souls have no sex . . . I will no more now see my self as mortall; but as an immortall King will I begin to live."[10] Bypassing the conventionally subservient role for women on earth, Eliza's reconfigured notions of kingship expand to include herself as a sovereign. Once her uncontested kingly prerogative is articulated and the divine right of her own ungendered soul established, the next natural step for any sovereign is to seek out a mutually beneficial alliance. Having already created her own ideal state of monarchy in other poems, Eliza orchestrates a royal match.

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[6] Eliza, "Christ's Kingdome," ll. 11-12.
[7] Eliza, "The renowned King" in Semler, 78-79, ll. 5-6.
[8] Philips, "A marryd state," in Thomas, 254, l. 5.
[9] Eliza, "The renowned King," ll. 26, 31, 22.

With her own right to rule now firmly established, in "The Renowned King," God the Son is re-introduced in the form of an eligible bachelor prince, a role he frequents in this virgin-poet's self-inscription. Eliza confides to women:

> Ladies! If beauty you desire
> Or to high fortunes doe aspire,
> Come now with me I have descride,
> A Prince, that to all can you guide.[11]

Describing her saviour in terms of the perfect available man, Eliza's prince is handsome and the holder of a great fortune. But rather than desiring him strictly according heterosexual mandates of monogamy, she offers to show others the way to him too, thereby opening the way for ultimate female agency to the rest of her sex. The aesthetic appeal of this prince is heightened as he is described as the conveyor of sensual pleasures:

> He's like the Rose in Sharon fields
> Pleasant to sight, and sweetnesse yields,
> With sweet and faire, from his bright face,
> The Lilly and the Rose gets grace. (ll. 17-20)

With the use of the rose and lily, the poet, on the most obvious level, alludes to a beauty pleasing to the senses of sight and smell. Adding to the sensual stimulation, the sense of taste is provoked as well by the suggestion of his sweetness. However, as Romance emblems, the flowers also conjure notions of romantic and courtly love, both pure (lily) and actively amorous (rose) in connotation, while Sharon fields of the Song of Solomon locate all this arousal biblically in a place of abounding fertility. So if we also consider that there is also something "yeeld[ing] . . .sweet and faire, from his bright face" (a good description of a coy gaze) Eliza has for the "Ladies" the lushly described offer of a sensually exciting and excitable potential partner who is available and interested as well as having the promise of being rich in fortune and fertility. Her king's romantic eligibility is also discussed in Eliza's preface to the reader where she advises young women, "place not your affection in your Youth, beneath your selves . . . bestow your first affections on my Almighty Prince."[12] Eliza proudly declares, "the Prince of eternall glory had affianced mee to himselfe," but rather than claiming exclusivity for their arrangement she declares generously, "I would have you all love him, and him to love you all." However, in this matrix of the virgin-poet's many relationships with God, with "My Descent" she makes an effort to explain how she manages to have God as both king and betrothed. Differentiating between her relationships with God the Father and God the Son, Eliza would have the reader understand:

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[10] Eliza, "The Royall Priest-hood," 133.
[11] Eliza, "The renowned King," l. 1-4.

> I'me daughter to the King of Kings,
> And must contemn base earthly things.
> To heaven's great Prince, he married me
> And now my linage you may see.
> And while I mean am in your eye,
> I often to my glory flye[.][13]

Now adding daughter, daughter-in-law and wife to Eliza's previously assigned self-figurations as God's servant, subject, kingdom and co-monarch, one may begin to understand that the virgin is actually appropriating God's ability to be all in one. As a self-described virgin, it might be presupposed that Eliza is defined by what she is not—married, sexually known or knowing, seeking placement in the social hierarchy, reproductive. However, instead Eliza insists that she be defined by the multiplicity of roles that her love of God enables her to undertake.

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[12] Eliza, "To the Reader," 57.
[13] Eliza, "My Descent," 94-95, ll. 5-10.

In the various themes that thread Eliza's work is evidence of a constant personalizing process of contemporary trends in both religious belief and political opinion. Pausing only briefly to overtly discuss political events, Eliza tends to internalize religious doctrines and political events until her overriding sense of her own female identity serves to reconcile political and religious conflicts. Although Eliza's Puritanical orientation may have, presumably, aligned her against the monarch for a time, as her verses demonstrate, she was highly influenced by the Presbyterian sense of sympathy toward the King's cause that was enabled by the unreconciled tensions between their interests and those of Parliament. Regardless of what her personal political opinion was at any given time concerning Charles Stuart's right to rule, or to live, contemporary literary fashions in favour of noble kingship allow her to be neither without a king nor the manifestations of loyalty to a king. Eliza's identification of herself as a virgin-poet and her positioning of herself in relation to her God-king and his kingdom empowered her to a state of unabashed sovereignty over herself and, indeed, over the earth and heavens. The result for the virgin-poet is a figuring of herself as the empowered sovereign, courting and courted by no less than the King of kings.

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