Importance of Faces in Early Modern Portraiture

The unstable relationship between the “real” face and its painted counterpart entails a formative influence on the conception, in the viewers’ minds, of how Elizabeth’s actual face appeared. Along with mass-produced images featured on coins, cheap prints, and broadside sheets, the faces of her portraits functioned as definitive public statements of Elizabeth’s looks. The interpretations and judgments passed upon Elizabeth’s faces in her portraits became interpretations and judgments upon the queen herself, and it is on these faces, belonging essentially to an elitist and higher quality genre of portraiture, that this chapter is focused.

There exists a 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. To the modern eye, faces in Elizabethan portraiture generally seem to suggest little concern with verisimilitude or resemblance as they seem to carry less realistic emphasis than the surrounding material and symbolic objects. This view is derived partly from the elaborate symbolic and allegoric network surrounding many faces in the English portraits in the period, and partly from the stylistic choices in depiction of faces: a flat, two-dimensional appearance that, in comparison to the extensive use of light and shadow in the contemporaneous Italian art, seems to be deliberately unnatural and mask-like, a result of the insular preference of the line over color/chiaroscuro.¹ For instance, the portraits of Elizabeth often dazzle the viewers with a spectacular array of scrupulously depicted clothing, jewelry, and allegorical
paraphernalia that surround her face, thus incorporating the face into an impressive setting, although detracting attention from the face itself.

Nevertheless, faces were very important to the early moderns. Portraits were often treated as substitutes for the people they represented, and the viewers scrutinized the painted faces intently, commenting on the degree of lifelikeness and resemblance to those they depicted. The artists, too, placed an emphasis on the depiction of the face. As we shall see in this chapter, for Nicholas Hilliard, the sitter’s visage was undisputedly a focal point of a portrait. Earlier in the century, Erasmus’ portraitist issued a similar painstaking demand for precision when he refused to proceed with painting “saying that Erasmus’ face was no longer the same” after his bile was purged by a physician. The painting was delayed presumably until the sitter’s face returned to its former state.

Not only did portraits endeavor to record the sitter’s identity, they also served as a means of providing and soliciting the crucial information in matters of diplomacy and marriage negotiations. Looking for wives in the foreign countries, Henry VI, Henry VII, and most famously Henry VIII sent their artists to produce likenesses of the faces of the potential royal brides. Henry VI’s orders in 1442, for instance, encouraged Hans the painter to focus on the faces of the Count of Armagnac’s daughters, “with all manner of features,” and, in 1505, Henry VII demanded a precise picture of the “veray visage countenaunce and semblance” of Joanna of Aragon. Not only did such portraits allow one to appraise a potential spouse, but they were also used to gauge the viewer’s reaction. French Ambassador Castillon, for example, kept a close eye on Henry VIII’s facial expression and reported to Francis I that Henry has received the “portrait of Mademoiselle de Guise, whom this King does not think ugly, as I know by his face.” Castillon’s remark encapsulates a layered reading that frequently took place during the consumption of portraits in diplomatic contexts: the viewer’s face is being observed and read while the viewer is studying a countenance depicted in the portrait.

Likewise, the face was particularly significant to the consumers of the portraits of Elizabeth. Two poetic meditations on her pictures addressed below allow us to determine the early modern interest in representation of Elizabeth’s royal countenance, both at the opening and closing of her reign. A Latin poem “On