In November 1592, Queen Elizabeth I visited Oxford, where Sir Henry Lee (1533–1611) commissioned a painting of her that has come to be known as the Ditchley Portrait. According to Sir Roy Strong, the portrait, “the largest surviving image” of the queen, showed her as the “imperial virgin . . . to whom fame and empire are promised,” standing “as an empress of the world, her feet planted on her realm of England.”

These words have resonated in postcolonial scholarship about Elizabethan England’s imperial glory under the virgin queen. However, during her visit to Oxford, Sir Henry did not recognize any imperial achievements (nor potential) in his queen. As the National Portrait Gallery caption states, the theme of the painting was forgiveness: Sir Henry had been living with his mistress, Lady Anne Vavasour, and had thereby angered the queen. By visiting him, Elizabeth was indicating that she had forgiven him. Sir Henry was, of course, well aware of the state of England’s international affairs and knew that there were no imperial ventures afoot. That the queen’s feet in the painting were on the realm of England, Oxfordshire in particular, was quite appropriate: she had protected England against the Armada. In the gulf near Devonshire, there is a ship that appears to be sinking, perhaps recalling one of the Spanish galleons. But Sir Henry would have wondered about the queen being thought of as empress of the world.

So, too, would the Moroccan potentate Mulay Ahmad al-Man-sur, inside the most fabulous palace in North Africa, al-badee’, some thousands of miles away in the royal city of Marrakesh.
This chapter will trace the history of relations between Queen Elizabeth and Mulay Ahmad in Arabic-Moroccan sources. It will show how much, in al-Mansur’s eyes, the imperial virgin was not imperial at all. Elizabeth built a mythology around herself during her life, which poets and panegyrists celebrated; it was a mythology that proliferated after her death, raising her to semidivine heights of Marian veneration. In Morocco, the queen was always praised and admired, but she was not seen as the “Gloriana” of contemporary and later English chroniclers. Rather, she was a monarch who was ever in need of Moroccan gold and saltpeter, and whom al-Mansur manipulated for his own end of reconquering al-Andalus.

Al-Mansur saw Elizabeth as insular, and without a mind for empire because she had never left her island during her life. He, on the other hand, had traveled far and wide beyond the borders of Morocco. He had sailed with the Ottomans, visited Istanbul, and taken part in sea battles that extended from the Atlantic Ocean to the Aegean Sea. With the advent of the new (hijri) millennium in 1591, he had also developed a vision of himself as the supreme leader of the Muslims, the mahdi (the messiah prophesied to appear at the world’s end and establish a reign of peace and righteousness) who would use all means available to fulfill his mission of defeating Catholic Spain and establishing a Muslim empire across the Atlantic. While Elizabeth was fearful for her island, al-Mansur was aggressive for the world; and while he had a vision of the future that included the Christian queen, she had no similar world vision that included Islam.

Numerous letters from al-Mansur to Elizabeth have survived, along with an account by his court scribe/historian, Abd al-Aziz al-Fishtali (1549–1621). These Arabic sources provide the only study of Queen Elizabeth from outside the Anglo-centric and Euro-centric parameter. Indeed, they are the only detailed commentary about a European ruler in non-European sources of the sixteenth century. Through both the royal correspondence and al-Fishtali’s writings, the relationship between al-Mansur and Elizabeth can be reconstructed, revealing the first deep friendship between a Muslim and a Christian monarch in the early modern period. It also reveals a very different view of the queen from the Anglo-European perspective.

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Upon acceding to the Moroccan throne in August 1578, after victory in the battle of Wadi al-Makhazin (Alcazar), Mulay Ahmad al-Mansur