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**Bailey, Rebecca A (2013) Staging "a Queene opprest": William Habington's Exploration of the Politics of Queenship on the Caroline Stage. Theatre Journal, 65 (2). pp. 197-214.
doi:10.1353/tj.2013.0051**

Official URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/tj.2013.0051>

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/tj.2013.0051>

EPrint URI: <https://eprints.glos.ac.uk/id/eprint/2319>

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Staging “a Queene opprest”: William Habington’s Exploration of the Politics of Queenship on the Caroline Stage

Rebecca A. Bailey

This essay seeks to deepen our growing understanding of the significance of pre-Civil War theatre through an exploration of William Habington’s only play, *The Queen of Aragon* (1640).¹ First staged at court before King Charles I and Queen Henrietta Maria, and “bestow’d” on the royal couple as a gift from the Earl of Pembroke, *The Queen of Aragon* is a prime example of what the literary establishment would once have denigrated as escapist and alarmingly sycophantic.² As is now recognized, Caroline theatre has been misunderstood. Martin Butler was the first critic to reassert the vibrant insight that these politically alert texts allow into the cultural imagination of Caroline England.³

More recently, Julie Sanders has emphasized the “subtle play of intersection, interaction,

and influence" between public and private (especially courtly) Caroline drama, while Erica Veevers and Karen Britland have done much to highlight the groundbreaking performances that emanated from Henrietta Maria's household.⁴ Almost as the embodiment of such scholarly revision, Habington's *The Queen of Aragon*, which appeared on the stage as England teetered on the brink of civil war, further opens up Caroline theatre as a space that energetically discussed the explosive religio-political topics of the moment. Through a brilliant manipulation of Neoplatonic drama, Henrietta Maria's most favored theatrical form, Habington skillfully employed the dynamic space of Caroline theatre (in both its elite and commercial forms) to expose the power of the stage in interrogating those potentially seismic debates that raged in 1640: widespread concern regarding the religio-political ambitions of the queen, the very real danger of insurrection, and the increasingly unwieldy Stuart ideal of absolute rule.

First performed at court on 9 April 1640, Habington's staging of a queen who is deeply mistrusted and despised by her people chimed with the perilous position of England's own queen consort, Henrietta Maria. As has been well-documented, in the popular imagination of the years leading up to civil war, Henrietta Maria persistently figured as an overly powerful Catholic consort whose popery and self-adopted Counter-Reformation mission of succouring and fostering Catholicism within England menaced the well-being of the English nation.⁵ Protestant anxiety was exacerbated by the rise of the Laudian reform movement within the Church of England, and the real (if unfounded) fear that Charles I might return to the fold of Rome under the influence of his overly powerful wife. Notably, Henrietta Maria's self-stylization both on the elite stage and in some portraits of the period fueled Protestant unease. One such portrait, from the studio of Sir Anthony Van Dyck, featured the queen's striking appearance as a seventeenth-century Saint Catherine of Alexandria (fig. 1).⁶ According to tradition, Saint Catherine was so renowned for her success in converting pagans that the Emperor Maxentius attempted to martyr her by means of the infamous spiked wheel of torture now known as the Catherine wheel.⁷ Suggestively, in this painting, Henrietta Maria firmly grasps her own Catherine wheel, reminding the viewer of her Counter-Reformation ambitions and the astonishing number of high-profile converts to Catholicism in the mid-to-late 1630s.⁸ Equally provocative iconography emanated

⁴ Julie Sanders, "Caroline Salon Culture and Female Agency: The Countess of Carlisle, Henrietta Maria, and Public Theatre," *Theatre Journal* 52, no. 4 (2000): 463; Erica Veevers, *Images of Love and Religion: Queen Henrietta Maria and Court Entertainments* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Karen Britland, *Drama at the Courts of Queen Henrietta Maria* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Rebecca A. Bailey, *Staging the Old Faith: Queen Henrietta Maria and the Theatre of Caroline England, 1625–1642* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009).

⁵ Veevers, *Images of Love and Religion*, 2; Britland, *Drama at the Courts*, 8–9; Bailey, *Staging the Old Faith*, 1–2.

⁶ For a wider exploration of the iconography within Henrietta Maria's portraiture, see Erin Griffey, ed., *Henrietta Maria: Piety, Politics and Patronage* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2008); Bailey, *Staging the Old Faith*; and Britland, *Drama at the Courts*. For a fascinating discussion of this Van Dyck portrait, see "BBC Fake or Fortune?" *BBC Television*, series 2, episode 3, 30 September 2012.

⁷ Thwarted by divine intervention, Emperor Maxentius ultimately had Saint Catherine beheaded. For a detailed discussion of the cult that surrounded St. Catherine, see Jacqueline Jenkins and Katherine J. Lewis, eds., *St. Katherine of Alexandria: Texts and Contexts in Western Medieval Europe* (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols Publishers, 2003).

⁸ In July 1634, William Laud recorded the conversion of two daughters of Lord Falkland; Easter 1635 saw the apostasy of Walter Montagu; the following March, Sir Kenelm Digby returned to the Roman



Figure 1. "Queen Henrietta Maria as Saint Catherine" from the studio of Anthony Van Dyck (c.1639). (Source: Queen's College Oxford. Copyright © Provost, Fellows, and Scholars of Queen's College Oxford.)

from Henrietta Maria's elite theatricals, as in the court masque *The Temple of Love* (1635) by William Davenant and Inigo Jones. Paid for by the queen and performed possibly four times at court, with Henrietta Maria dancing the role of Indamora, *The Temple of Love* boldly celebrated the queen's success as a Counter-Reformation champion, encapsulating her anticipation of a deeper and permanent revival of the old faith in England.⁹ It is little wonder that by the 1640s, Protestant concern regarding Henrietta

Catholic fold, swiftly followed by the very public apostasy of Lady Purbeck; and 1637 witnessed an incredible flurry of conversions linked with the missionary fervor of Lady Olivia Porter. For further details, see Bailey, *Staging the Old Faith*, 140–42.

⁹William Davenant, *The Temple of Love: A Masque Presented by the Queenes Majesty, and her Ladies at Whitehall, On Shrove-Tuesday, 1634* (London, 1635). For a full discussion of this masque, see Veevers, *Images of Love and Religion*, 133–34; and Bailey, *Staging the Old Faith*, 143–49.

Maria's religio-political ambitions gripped the nation. As one anonymous tract would later salaciously observe: "[if] ordinary women, can in the Night time perswade their husbands to give them new Gowns [and] Petticotes, and make them grant their desire; and could not the Catholick Queen *Mary* (think ye) by her night discourses, encline the King to Popery?"¹⁰ Such snide invective brilliantly encapsulates the fear in some Protestant circles that Henrietta Maria, as Charles's queen consort and wife, and the mother of his children, would corrupt the king by her feminine wiles, effectively reducing England to popery once more.

Strikingly during this period, conflicting images of ideal queenship were repeatedly staged across commercial and elite theatre. The stage was a particularly powerful space to interrogate such contentious topics. Not only could censorship be avoided through the diversion of the imaginary play-worlds of continental states, but the royal couple's own passion for theatre further enhanced the appeal of the stage. Charles I (unlike his father, James I) regularly performed in court masques, including Thomas Carew's *Coelum Britannicum* (1633) and Davenant's *Salmacida Spolia* (1640), both designed by Jones.¹¹ Indeed, the importance that Charles I placed on his masquing roles is evident from his preparation for the part of "Philogenes or Lover of his People" in *Salmacida Spolia*. Performed on 21 January 1640, barely three months prior to the first performance of *The Queen of Aragon* and despite the demands of challenging political circumstances, the king still found time to practice his dance steps. As the Earl of Northumberland rather incredulously remarked to his sister, "their Majesties are not less busy now than formerly you have seen them at the like exercise."¹² According to Sir Henry Herbert, the Master of Revels, Charles's interest in theatre even extended to suggesting the plot for James Shirley's *The Gamester* (licensed 1633, published 1637): "The Gamester was acted at Court, made by Sherley, out of a plot of the king's, given him [Shirley] by mee; and well likte. The king sayd it was the best play he had seen for seven years."¹³

Henrietta Maria's own passion for theatre is well-documented. In the official version of the royal couple's romance, popularly known as the "Carlo-Maria fable," the young Prince Charles had first fallen in love with Henrietta Maria in 1623 during his incognito travels to Spain to woo the Infanta. Breaking his journey in France, he had secretly watched Henrietta Maria dance the role of Iris during a rehearsal for Anne of Austria's *Grand Ballet de la Reyne*, and then promptly left his heart at the French court.¹⁴ After Henrietta Maria arrived in England in 1625, she drew on her theatrical experiences and transferred to the English court her own distinctive culture, swiftly staging an elite performance of Honorat de Bueil Racan's *L'Artenice* (performed on Shrove Tuesday, 1626).¹⁵ Her assumption of the lead role in this Neoplatonic pastoral

¹⁰ *The Great Eclipse of the Sun, or, Charles His Waine Over-Clouded, By the evill Influences of the Moon . . . Otherwise, Great Charles, our Gracious King, Eclipsed by the destructive perswasions of His Queen, by the pernicious aspects of his Cabbinet Counsell and, by the subtill insinuations of the Popish Faction . . .* (London, 1644), 3.

¹¹ Thomas Carew, *Coelum Britannicum. A Masque at White-hall in the Banqueting-House, on Shrove-Tuesday-Night, the 18. of February, 1633* (London, 1634); William Davenant, *Salmacida Spolia. A masque. Presented by the King and Queenes Majesties, at White-hall, on Tuesday the 21. day of January 1639* (London, 1640).

¹² *Historical Manuscripts Commission*, 3rd Report (London, 1874), 79.

¹³ Bawcutt, *The Control and Censorship of Caroline Drama*, 187.

¹⁴ For further details, see Britland, *Drama at the Courts*, 16–17.

¹⁵ Honorat de Bueil Racan, *L'Artenice* (n.p.: E Allde, 1626). For further details on this performance, see Britland, *Drama at the Courts*, 35–52; and Bailey, *Staging the Old Faith*, 32–37.

caused much consternation among her subjects, as is evident from the Florentine agent Amerigo Salvetti's report to Cosimo de' Medici, the Grand Duke of Florence: "[t]he performance was conducted as privately as possible, inasmuch as it is an unusual thing in this country to see the queen upon a stage; the audience consequently was limited to a few of the nobility, expressly invited, no others being admitted."¹⁶ Despite English alarm, Henrietta Maria continued to perform in court masques and take the lead role in elite pastorals like Walter Montagu's *The Shepherds' Paradise* (performed in 1632) and François le Metel, sieur de Boisrobert's *Florimène* (performed in 1635).¹⁷ Indeed, her innovative court performances allowed her to showcase to an elite audience her express vision for the role of queen consort, supporting Mark Franko's observation that for French nobles, the elite stage was perceived as the "most conspicuous arena of self-display and transformation."¹⁸ Henrietta Maria's fascination with the theatre was not satisfied by court productions alone. In the 1630s, she branched out from the royal environs of Somerset House and Whitehall to patronize the private theatres, in particular Blackfriars. In 1634, she attended *Cleander* by Philip Massinger; the following year, she watched a performance of *Arviragus* by Lodowick Carlell; and she was again at Blackfriars in 1638 for a staging of Davenant's *The Unfortunate Lovers* (licensed 1638, published 1643).

With such active royal patrons, the stage was increasingly seen, during the late 1630s, as a potent medium to engage with vexed political issues, such as the mounting anxiety that surrounded the ideal of queenship. In 1638, Davenant's *The Fair Favourite* promoted a queen who selflessly mediated between the divided parties of a fractured kingdom and was herself empowered as an intrinsic force of well-being for the nation.¹⁹ In January 1640, this pattern of a conciliatory queenship was questioned on the elite stage by Henrietta Maria's spectacular martial appearance as an Amazonian "Chief Heroine," complete with plumed helmet and antique sword, in *Salmacida Spolia*.²⁰ Most provocatively, Nathanael Richards, in the more popular environs of London's Fortune Theatre, showcased the malign influence of a dangerously powerful queen consort in *The Tragedy of Messallina, the Roman Emperesse*.²¹ When Messallina finally commits suicide at the end of the play, the Emperor Claudius, far from mourning his wife, cogently vows: "never shall marriage yoake the minde of *Ceasar* / to trust the hollow faith of woman" (5.1.2619–20).

In April 1640, Habington offered a further alternative to these conflicting images of conciliatory, martial, and malign forms of queenship. *The Queen of Aragon* stages the specific plight of an inherently virtuous queen who is severely chastised by her people for seeking support from foreign powers in quelling insurrection. As this essay will argue, Habington rooted his provocative exploration of good queenship in the precise historical moment of the turbulent years leading to the English Civil War.

¹⁶ *Historical Manuscripts Commission* 11, no. 1 (1887): 47.

¹⁷ For further reading, see Karen Britland, "Florimène: The Author and the Occasion," *Review of English Studies* 53 (2002): 475–83.

¹⁸ Mark Franko, *Dance as Text: Ideologies of the Baroque Body* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 2.

¹⁹ William Davenant, *The Fair Favourite* (London, 1638).

²⁰ Davenant, *Salmacida Spolia*.

²¹ Nathanael Richards, *The Tragedy of Messallina, the Roman Emperesse*, ed. A. R. Skemp (London: David Nutt, 1910). This play was licensed in about 1635 and published in 1640.

Henrietta Maria was widely criticized by the Protestant establishment in exactly such terms when she appealed to Rome and to English Catholics for financial support in suppressing the Scottish crisis of 1638–40, which threatened to overturn Charles I's government.²² Moreover, Habington was actively involved in the queen's fundraising efforts within the recusant community—an amorphous group consisting of those subjects who remained loyal to England's old faith, often at personal cost. Such controversial politicking added an undoubted political edge to his direct engagement on the Caroline stage with the current debate surrounding contemporary queenship. In the safe environment of distant Aragon and through a brilliant revision of the fashionable mode of Neoplatonic drama, Habington transformed the figure of “a Queene opprest” into an ideal of queenly understanding.

“A Holy Man is onely Happie”: Habington's Religio-Political Milieu²³

Habington was peculiarly well-placed to stage such a daring vision of queenship. Although to a modern readership he is most famous for his volume of poetry, *Castara* (1634), which records his secret courtship of Lucy Herbert (daughter of William Herbert, first Baron Powis), Habington had close ties to the theatrical world. His friendship with leading Caroline playwrights jockeying for the patronage of Henrietta Maria is evident from the commendatory verses that he wrote to accompany Davenant's *Albovine* (published 1629) and Shirley's *The Wedding* (licensed between 1626 and 1629, published 1629).²⁴ By 1638, with the appearance of an elegy by Habington in *Jonsonus Virbus*, it would seem that Habington was even recognized as one of “the sons” of Ben Jonson.²⁵ Equally important from a religio-political perspective, by the 1630s, Habington was himself firmly entrenched within Henrietta Maria's Catholic court circle, which also included Shirley and Davenant. As Kevin Sharpe has noted, religion in the early modern period was never “just about doctrine, liturgy or ecclesiastical government; it was a language, an aesthetic, a structuring of meaning, an identity, a politics.”²⁶ Until recently, general scholarly consensus has rather disparagingly dismissed Habington as one who “ran with the times” and was “not unknown to Cromwell.”²⁷ Yet, as Robert Wilcher indicates in *The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Habington had a strong recusant lineage.²⁸ This religio-political identity strengthened his ties to Henrietta Maria and her theatrical coterie, so it is important to understand its complexities.

²² Caroline Hibbard argues that because both Cardinal Barberini and George Con, the Papal Agent, perceived the Scottish War in terms of a personal campaign against Calvinism, Henrietta Maria herself increasingly adopted a campaign-like mentality. See Hibbard, *Charles I and the Popish Plot* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983), 94–96, 108.

²³ William Habington, *A Holy Man. Third Part of Castara* (London, 1640), 169, EEBO, available at http://eebo.chadwyck.com/search/full_rec?SOURCE=pgimages.cfg&ACTION=ByID&ID=99839360&FILE=../session/1364670998_21298&SEARCHSCREEN=CITATIONS&SEARCHCONFIG=var_spell.cfg&ECCO=N&DISPLAY=AUTHOR (accessed 30 March 2013).

²⁴ William Habington, “In Hymeneum Ingeniosissimi Iacobi Shirley” and “To his noble Friend, th' Author on his Tragedy of *Albovine*,” in *The Poems of William Habington*, ed. Kenneth Allott (Liverpool: University Press of Liverpool, 1948), 154–55. See also Habington's dedication to William Davenant's *Madagascar: With Other Poems* (London, 1638), in *The Poems of William Habington*, 157–58.

²⁵ William Habington, “An Elegie upon the Death of Ben. Johnson, the most Excellent of English Poets” (1638), in *The Poems of William Habington*, 156.

²⁶ Kevin Sharpe, *Remapping Early Modern England: The Culture of Seventeenth-Century Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 12.

²⁷ A. H. Bullen, *The Dictionary of National Biography*, s.v. “Habington, William,” vol. 23 (London, 1890), 415–16.

²⁸ Robert Wilcher, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, s.v. “Habington, William (1605–1654),” vol. 24 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 386–87.

Habington was born on the eve of the Gunpowder Plot (1605) into a notoriously recusant family. His uncle, Edward Habington, had been executed in 1586 for his involvement in the Babington Plot, while his father, Thomas, although not one of the leading Gunpowder plotters, had offered refuge to the fleeing Jesuit priests Edward Oldcorne and Henry Garnet at the family home of Hindlip Hall, near Worcester.²⁹ Receiving a typical education for the son of a recusant gentleman at the Jesuit institution of St. Omer in France, Habington's continued link with Catholic families on his return to England is evident from a number of occasional poems in *Castara* addressed to known recusants like the Talbots and the Earl of Argyll.³⁰ Habington's willingness to locate himself within the recusant community is strongly suggested by his position as one of the leading, if ultimately unsuccessful contenders in the mid-1630s for the role of the queen's Papal Agent to the Vatican.³¹ This exchange of agents with the Curia, the first since the break with Rome, was of enormous political import. The qualifications essential for the key post of the queen's agent in Rome were "good birth, appearance and education, exemplary Catholic life, and, if possible, some private means."³² It would seem from Habington's ruminations in *A Holy Man*, which appeared in the third edition of *Castara*, that he had long considered the peculiarities and distinctions of living such an "exemplary" Catholic life in Protestant England:

A Holy Man is onely Happie. . . . Catholique faith is the foundation on which he erects Religion; knowing it a ruinous madnesse to build in the ayre of a private spirit, or on the sands of any new schisme. . . . His obedience moves still by direction of the Magistrate: And should conscience informe him that the command is unjust; he judgeth it neverthelesse high treason by rebellion to make good his tenets; as it were the basest cowardize, by dissimulation of religion, to preserve temporall respects.³³

Published in 1640, the same year that *The Queen of Aragon* was performed and printed, this reflection offers a rare insight into early modern English Catholic thinking in those volatile years prior to civil war.

Habington's intimate knowledge of the well-rehearsed contradictions and hardships of recusant daily life, together with his familiarity with the queen's court circle, made him a prime candidate to assist Henrietta Maria in her controversial scheme to raise Catholic financial aid for Charles I during the Scottish rebellion. In a desperate attempt to consolidate the astonishing gains achieved by Catholics under her leadership in the mid-1630s, the queen urged English Catholics to show their support for the king "by some considerable summe of money, freely and cheerefully presented."³⁴

²⁹ According to legend, it was Habington's wife Mary who alerted her brother Lord Monteagle about the Gunpowder Plot through a secret letter; see Antonia Fraser, *Faith and Treason* (New York: Doubleday, 1996), 152–56. The priests were finally discovered at Hindlip Hall in January 1606 and executed as traitors at Worcester; see Charles Knight, *The Popular History of England*, vol. 3 (London, 1857), 336.

³⁰ For a contemporary view of Habington's education at St. Omer, see James Wadsworth, *The English Spanish Pilgrime. Or a new Discoverie of Spanish Popery, and Jesuiticall Stratagems* (London, 1629), 21–22. For those poems that spotlight Habington's recusant network, see *The Poems of William Habington*, 35, 80. See also Helen Hackett's recent work on the Catholic cultural connections of the Aston–Thimbleby circle, which demonstrates how Habington's poetry was neatly copied into Constance Aston Fowler's commonplace miscellany (Hackett, "Women and Catholic Manuscript Networks in Seventeenth-Century England: New Research on Constance Aston Fowler's Miscellany of Sacred and Secular Verse," *Renaissance Quarterly* 65, no. 4 [2012]: 1094–1124).

³¹ For further background to this event, see Gordon Albion, *Charles I and the Court of Rome: A Study in Seventeenth-Century Diplomacy* (London: Burns, Oates, and Washbourne, 1935).

³² Habington, *The Poems of William Habington*, xxxiv.

³³ Habington, *A Holy Man*, 169–70.

³⁴ *A Cobby of 1. The letter sent by the Queenes Majestie concerning the collection of the recusants mony for the Scottish warre, Apr. 17. 1639. 2. The letter sent by Sir Kenelme Digby and Mr. Montague concerning the*

Sir Kenelm Digby swiftly organized this levy, requesting recusants in each county to nominate “such persons as shall in your opinions be agreed of for the ablest and best disposed in every severall County, not onely to sollicite, but to collect such voluntary contributions, as every bodies conscience and duty shall proffer.”³⁵ As I have discovered from an examination of a list titled “The names of the Collectors for gathering the Recusants money,” Henrietta Maria had two representatives in Worcester, one of whom is recorded as “Mr. William Abingdon” (a common spelling of Habington’s name).³⁶ As a designated collector for Worcestershire answering the direct call of the queen, Habington was urged to “sollicite” all those Catholics “that you have relation unto, as powerfully as you can, to contribute cheerefully and bountifully upon this occasion.”³⁷ Such active engagement in a specifically recusant endeavor that was the brainchild of the queen suggests a sharper edge to Habington’s religio-political affiliations than has previously been realized. Remarkably, the Catholic collection to assist Charles I financially in his Scottish wars amounted to some £10,000. As John Dauncey recorded, “almost as great a sum was gathered from them, as from the more numerous Protestants, many of them proportioning their affections beyond their abilities.”³⁸

Ironically, this attempt to prove recusant loyalty—to “really demonstrate your selves as good Subjects, as God and nature requires of you”—backfired.³⁹ As Habington was acutely aware from his own recent family history, the populace had always been deeply suspicious of the allegiance of English Catholics. In the political uncertainty of 1640, this anxiety metamorphosed from a phantasmagorical monster of nightmare into a seemingly tangible reality. If even a moderate figure like Sir Edmund Verney, bearer of the king’s standard, remarked in 1639 how “the catholiks” use “all the means and wayes they can to sett uss by the ears, and I thinck they will not faile of theyr plot,”⁴⁰ it is perhaps unsurprising that sensational pamphlets like *The Black Box of Rome* threw down a more lurid gauntlet: “let every true patriot and lover of his Country not end ure to see the bowels of his deare Mother Country to be gnawne out by these Vipers, but as much as in him lyeth, discover, and oppose all such traitor-hearted adversaries.”⁴¹ To many godly Englishmen, Henrietta Maria was the epitome of such a “traitor-hearted” adversary. Despite her warlike appearance in *Salmacida Spolia* and the suggestive iconography of martyrdom in Van Dyck’s portrait, however, the queen’s confessor, Phillip of Sanquhar, observed that Henrietta Maria was “much afflicted” by

contribution. 3. The letter sent by those assembled in London, to every shire. 4. The names of the collectors in each county in England and Wales. And 5. The message sent from the Queenes Majestie to the house of Commons by Master Comptroller the 5. of Febr. 1639 (London, 1641), 1, EEBO, available at http://eebo.chadwyck.com/search/full_rec?SOURCE=pgimages.cfg&ACTION=ByID&ID=99859482&FILE=../session/1364672734_22782&SEARCHSCREEN=CITATIONS&SEARCHCONFIG=pgthumbs.cfg&ECCO=undefined&DISPLAY=AUTHOR (accessed 30 March 2013).

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 7, 9.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.

³⁸ John Dauncey, *The History of the Thrice Illustrious Princess Henrietta Maria de Bourbon, Queen of England* (London, 1660), 59.

³⁹ A Copy of 1. the letter sent by the Queenes Majestie, 3.

⁴⁰ John Bruce, ed., *Letters and Papers of the Verney Family Down to the End of the Year 1639* (London: John Bowyer Nichols, 1853), 228.

⁴¹ *The Black Box of Roome [sic] opened. From whence are revealed, the Damnable Bloody Plots, Practises, and behaviour of Iesuites, Priests, Papists, and other Recusants in generall: Against Christian Princes, Estates and the people in those places where they have lived, &c* (London, 1641), 19.

her increasing alienation from the wider populace, which, if it “durst, would pull the good Queen in pieces.”⁴² Strikingly, at this juncture, Habington, a documented enabler of the queen’s political aims and a leading recusant, entered the theatrical arena for the only time in his literary career, persuasively engaging with current staged debates about queenship and employing the Caroline stage to offer in *The Queen of Aragon* a nuanced alternative to such troubling political isolation.

**“Bestow[ing] a play on the Kinge and Queene”:
Producing *The Queen of Aragon***

Surviving records suggest that the staging of *The Queen of Aragon* was an eagerly awaited court event. Herbert, the Master of the Revels, documented how the play was performed under the particularly lavish auspices of the Earl of Pembroke: “On thursday the 9 of Aprill, 1640, my Lord Chamberlen bestow’d a play on the Kinge and Queene, call’d Cleodora, Queene of Arragon, made by my cozen Abington. It was performd by my lords servants out of his own family, and his charge in the cloathes and sceanes, which were very riche and curious. In the hall at Whitehall.”⁴³ The space of the performance is itself worthy of note. As John Orrell observes, the great hall had been “the scene of royal festive and ceremonial occasions from the time when Henry VIII took it from the disgraced Cardinal Wolsey until it burned down some 170 years later. . . . During a life of almost two centuries the hall saw the production of a host of plays and masques.”⁴⁴ No extant records document exactly how the great hall was fitted up for *The Queen of Aragon*, but it was customary to construct a raised platform or “halpace” for the monarchs to view the play, and it would seem likely that there would have been the same flurry of transformational activity as is recorded for the Shrovetide plays performed before Elizabeth I in 1602: “making ready y^e haull, and great chamber with seates or standinges, & particions in sundrye places, Joisting, and bourding with deales, y^e haull florre all over bourding vp sundry lightes in y^e stonne windowes there making of degrees sundry one vpon another for the Queens Majestie vnder y^e clothe of estate in the haull, all for y^e plaies at Shrovetide.”⁴⁵

The anticipation surrounding the two court performances of *The Queen of Aragon* would have been enhanced by the novelty of watching a cast of actors selected from within the Earl of Pembroke’s own household,⁴⁶ and by the fact that Pembroke, a wealthy landowner who lived in luxurious style, appears to have spared no expense in creating an opulent spectacle with which to enchant his royal audience. The scenery was specially designed by Jones and his pupil John Webb and included three perspective scenes: a fortified camp, a throne room, and a general palace interior. Pembroke’s readiness to finance such an extravagant production indicates the importance he placed on this theatrical gift. No details of the costumes provided for *The Queen of Aragon* have been discovered, but bearing in mind Herbert’s comment that the costumes and

⁴² Robert Phillips, *The Copping of a Letter of Father Philips, the Queenes Confessor, which was thought to be sent into France, to Mr. Mountagues* (London, 1641), 4, 1.

⁴³ Bawcutt, *The Control and Censorship of Caroline Drama*, 207.

⁴⁴ John Orrell, *The Theatres of Inigo Jones and John Webb* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 128–29.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 131 (underlining in original).

⁴⁶ Details of these actors have not yet emerged from existing records, but this essay is part of an ongoing research project.

scenery were “very riche and curious” and, moreover, the usual competition among nobles, one can gauge just how sumptuous these might have been from diarist John Aubrey’s observation on a court production of John Suckling’s play *Aglaura* (1638): the costumes Suckling provided for *Aglaura* reportedly cost between 300 and 400 pounds and were “very rich; no tinsell, all the lace pure gold and silver.”⁴⁷

Notably, *The Queen of Aragon* was not the first venture between the Earl of Pembroke and his kinsman Habington.⁴⁸ At first glance, such an alliance might seem unlikely: Pembroke was known as a godly Protestant and would ultimately side with Parliament in the Civil War. David Smith reminds us, however, that Pembroke “strongly favoured peace during the campaigns against the Scots,”⁴⁹ and so Habington’s play promoting the quintessential need for harmony within a kingdom rather than rebellion neatly fit within Pembroke’s political strategy. Moreover, as Malcolm Smuts has observed, Henrietta Maria did not surround herself only with a coterie of court Catholics.⁵⁰ Indeed, the cognoscenti would have been aware that in 1634, it was the Protestant Earl of Pembroke who had promoted Habington in his bid for the role of Papal Agent.⁵¹ If Pembroke was angrily disappointed by the failure of the former venture, *The Queen of Aragon* was an unqualified success. The royal couple was so enthralled by Pembroke’s gift that they watched the play twice and “commended the generall entertaynment, as very well acted, and well set out.”⁵² *The Queen of Aragon* then transferred to Blackfriars Theatre, as is evident from Herbert’s record that it was “all[owe]d to [the] Kings Comp[any]” and the surviving epilogue and prologue written especially for performance at Blackfriars.⁵³

Habington’s position in his theatrical alliance with Pembroke is tantalizing. According to Sir Anthony Wood, he was reluctant to see his play performed, perhaps because he conceived the text originally as a closet drama. Wood writes that Pembroke “caused it to be acted at court, and afterwards to be publish’d against the author’s will.”⁵⁴ Such authorial modesty is inscribed within the play’s “Prologue at Court” in which Habington insists, in what was a direct address to his royal audience, that *The Queen of Aragon* had been “fashion’d up in hast for his owne delight”: “Had not obedience ov’rrul’d the Authors feare / And Judgement too, this humble peece had nere / Approacht so high a Majestie.”⁵⁵ As Allott argues, such bashfulness seems unlikely.⁵⁶

⁴⁷ Cited in Charles L. Squier, *Sir John Suckling* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1978), 63.

⁴⁸ Habington was related to Pembroke through his marriage to Lucy Herbert, whose father, Lord Powis, was first cousin to Philip Herbert, Earl of Pembroke.

⁴⁹ David L. Smith, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, s.v. “Herbert, Philip, first earl of Montgomery and fourth earl of Pembroke (1584–1650),” vol. 26 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 716.

⁵⁰ For further details on Henrietta Maria’s deliberate alliance with a godly cabal whose anti-Spanish policies complemented her own pro-French, anti-Richelieu sentiments, see R. Malcolm Smuts, “The Puritan Followers of Henrietta Maria in the 1630s,” *English Historical Review* 93 (1978): 26–45.

⁵¹ “[I]l S^r Abintone giouane nobile Inglese, et bell’ingegno è raccomandato del Gran Ciambelano, del quale è anche parente, e del Milord Gorin, e di molti altri,” Public Records Office, Roman Transcripts 9/17, Panzani Correspondence, 1634–37 9 April–16 May, in Habington, *The Poems of William Habington*, xxxiv.

⁵² Bawcutt, *The Control and Censorship of Caroline Drama*, 207.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 206; “The Prologue at the Fryers” and “The Epilogue at the Fryers,” in Habington, *The Poems of William Habington*, 150, 153.

⁵⁴ Anthony Wood, *Athenae Oxonienses*, vol. 3, ed. Philip Bliss (London, 1817), 224–25.

⁵⁵ Habington, *The Poems of William Habington*, 150.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, xxxv.

Habington was fully immersed in the world of Caroline theatre, was a popular and published poet, and was aware that writing a fashionable play was a means to gain preferment and social prestige. As the character Prusias slyly remarks in William Cartwright's *The Siedge* (written around 1638 and most likely not performed), "[h]ee's scarce a Courtier now, that hath not writ / His brace of Plaies."⁵⁷ Indeed, this idea of theatre functioning merely as an adornment of court life was a key reason why critics once charged the Caroline stage with dramatic decadence.⁵⁸

Yet, although "bestow'd" on the royal couple, *The Queen of Aragon* was by no means a work of sycophancy. In fact, Habington's play has a marked polemical edge that could explain his recorded unease at the royal performances and subsequent publication. This tension is underscored in "The Epilogue at Court," which, in time-honored fashion, begs for a merciful audience: "Yet in your Majestie we hope to finde / A mercy; and in that our pardon sign'd."⁵⁹ Although there are no records documenting the reception of the play at Blackfriars, it would seem that at court at least, Habington's anxiety ultimately proved unnecessary. Rather, his vision of a city in turmoil, with its people revolting against a queen seeking aid from foreign powers, proved to be compelling viewing in the fractured landscape of England in 1640. Such a production was, as Habington's disquiet suggests, especially electric when performed before an audience that included the king and queen, adding an undoubted vibrancy to the Caroline stage's interrogation of contemporary debates.

Shifting the Neoplatonic Paradigm: The Education of a Queenly Heroine

Martin Butler has deftly argued that the promotion of *The Queen of Aragon* by the Earl of Pembroke, a leading peer with known Parliamentary connections, unquestionably offers "a clue to the play's meaning."⁶⁰ Locating the text in the specific anxiety of England's civil unrest, Butler reads Habington's play as a brilliant reminder to Charles I of the need for fundamental respect between a monarch and his people so that, in the play-world at least, "the dignity of king and subject is mutually confirmed in an order founded on love, not fear."⁶¹ It should be remembered, however, that the focal image of *The Queen of Aragon* is specifically of "a Queene opprest" (2.1.C4v). The skewing of the text toward Henrietta Maria is suggested even in the style of the play, which was crafted within the Neoplatonic tradition, the ideals of which were influential in the fashionable society of Caroline England and that were clearly associated with the queen. As James Howell reported in June 1634: "The Court affords little news at present, but that ther is a Love call'd Platonic love, which much swayes there of late. . . . This love sets the wits of the Town on work; and they say ther will be a Maske shortly of it, whereof Her Majestie, and Her Maids of Honour will be part."⁶²

⁵⁷ William Cartwright, "The Siedge: Or, Love's Convert," in *Comedies, Tragi-Comedies, With Other Poems* (London, 1651), 4.7.26–27.

⁵⁸ See, for example, Keith Sturgess, *Jacobean Private Theatre* (London: Routledge / Kegan Paul, 1987), 57.

⁵⁹ Habington, *The Poems of William Habington*, 153.

⁶⁰ Butler, *Theatre and Crisis*, 62.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 72.

⁶² James Howell, *Epistolae Ho-Eliauae: Familiar Letters Domestic and Forren; Divided into sundry Sections, Partly Historicall, Politicall, Philosophicall, Vpon Emergent Occasions* (London, 1645), 203. The masque in question was Davenant's *The Temple of Love*.

At the heart of the concept of platonic love was the elevated ideal of womanhood, which had been popular as a reforming force within the debauched court of Henrietta Maria's father, Henri IV of France, when she was an impressionable princess. It has been well-documented how Henrietta Maria had eagerly translated this chivalric notion of chaste love to the English court.⁶³ With her intense fascination with all things theatrical, it was inevitable that the Neoplatonic ideal of a heroine whose beauty encouraged her platonic lover to moral excellence would become one of the defining images of the Caroline stage. Repeatedly, the heroines of Caroline Neoplatonic drama are virtuous beauties who purify and revitalize stagnant courts.⁶⁴ Moreover, this distinctive femino-centric trope bridged the gap between elite and commercial theatre. Henrietta Maria appeared as the ultimate Neoplatonic heroine in her own starring performances in masques like Jonson's *Chloridia* (1631) and Davenant's *The Temple of Love* and *Luminalia* (1638), all designed by Jones. In *Luminalia*, for instance, as John Peacock notes, "the Queen [is] idealised as a neo-Platonic demi-goddess, who provides the rationale for Jones's 'Festival of Light.'" ⁶⁵ Making an intrepid entrance from the heavens, Henrietta Maria's "seat," as it descended to the stage, was surrounded by "a Glory with rayes, expressing her to be Queene of Brightnesse" (l. 357). Notably, the Chorus welcomes this deific vision in Neoplatonic terms, marvelling at the beauty and moral integrity of this "Goddess" who can redeem onlookers with a glance: "If it be safe to gaze on beauty in extremes, / Look there, correct your judgements by your sight!" (ll. 341–42). This queenly embodiment of truth and enlightenment quite literally dazzled her courtly audience. As Barbara Ravelhofer argues, even Henrietta Maria's masquing costume was designed to create an overwhelming brilliance, with myriad rays of shooting light "cut in star-like beams of white" and tacked together onto the fabric "with small twists of gold" (ll. 360–62).⁶⁶

By the 1630s, with Henrietta Maria herself occasionally patronizing Blackfriars Theatre, it was no accident that an array of Neoplatonic heroines swiftly peopled the commercial stage in texts like Shirley's *The Young Admiral* (licensed 1633, published 1637) and Davenant's *Love and Honour* (licensed 1634, published 1649). Like *The Queen of Aragon*, Shirley's and Davenant's plays were performed at court before the royal couple, as well as at Blackfriars, and their heroines were both molded within the popular Neoplatonic form.⁶⁷ Rosinda in *The Young Admiral*, for instance, is a reforming figure who heals the war-torn kingdoms of Naples and Sicily and redeems her wayward suitor Cesario, Prince of Naples. Rosinda's courage is repeatedly remarked upon in terms of her moral beauty, as demonstrated by the King of Naples's eulogy: "with what eyes could [one] look / Upon this beauty, and not love it" (5.2.226–27),⁶⁸ yet as

⁶³ See Caroline Hibbard, "Translating Royalty: Henrietta Maria and the Transition from Princess to Queen," *The Court Historian* 5, no. 1 (2000): 15–28; Veevers, *Images of Love and Religion*; Sophie Tomlinson, *Women on the Stage in Stuart Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Britland, *Drama at the Courts*; and Bailey, *Staging the Old Faith*.

⁶⁴ See Sanders, "Caroline Salon Culture and Female Agency," 449–64.

⁶⁵ John Peacock, *The Stage Designs of Inigo Jones: The European Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 202.

⁶⁶ Barbara Ravelhofer, *The Early Stuart Masque: Dance, Costume, and Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 180.

⁶⁷ Bawcutt, *The Control and Censorship of Caroline Drama*, 184, 204.

⁶⁸ James Shirley, *The Young Admiral*, in *The Dramatic Works and Poems of James Shirley*, vol. 3, ed. William Gifford and Anthony Dyce (London: J. Murray, 1883), 93–181. Subsequent references will be from this edition and given within the text.

Vittori, the beleaguered Admiral of Naples, remarks, Rosinda's "beauty is her least perfection, / It speaks her woman; but her soul an angel" (5.2.228–29). Habington's own engagement with this powerful Neoplatonic paradigm is evident even from the opening lines of the prologue to *The Queen of Aragon*, in which Henrietta Maria was explicitly addressed through tropes specifically associated with her preferred theatrical experience and that thus directly connected the production with its royal audience:

From your eye
Bright Madam, never yet did lightening flye
But vitall beames of favour such as give a growth to all
Who can deserve to live. (Prologue, A2r)

With the opening act, this Neoplatonic thrust of *The Queen of Aragon* was transferred from the queen of England to Cleodora, queen of Aragon. Decastro, the general of Aragon, declares how the "beauty" of Cleodora has a "Sovereigne" power (1.1.B4v), while Ossuna, Decastro's advisor, celebrates Cleodora's virtue for being as "hard as a rocke of Diamond" (1.1.B4r).

For the savvy playgoer of 1640, the use of such imagery within Habington's play would have chimed instantly with admired heroines of the Caroline stage like Rosinda in *The Young Admiral*. In light of such recent productions, the Caroline audience may well have expected *The Queen of Aragon* to follow the usual format of the Neoplatonic tragicomedy, whereby a noble and beautiful female leads her misguided suitor toward right conduct, and indeed, up until the final act, *The Queen of Aragon* appears to develop on these familiar terms. Cleodora is beloved both by Florentio, the general of Castile, and Decastro, her own chief advisor in Aragon. Decastro has the support of the Aragonese people in his romantic quest, but Cleodora insists on her right to marry Florentio. As the Aragonese revolt, Ascanio, the disguised king of Castile, comes to Cleodora's rescue and immediately falls in love with his queenly neighbor. On one level, in true Neoplatonic style, both Decastro and Ascanio capitulate to the beauty of the queen's virtue, allowing Florentio and Cleodora to marry and the state of Aragon to return to harmony, yet there is a crucial twist to this Neoplatonic tragicomedy that stems from the exact political moment of performance. Astonishingly, in a staging before an audience intensely aware of the strident clamor surrounding the politics of queenship, a tension aggravated by the very real danger of insurrection in Scotland, Cleodora is revealed to be in need of education herself—most daringly, not by her royal suitor, but by her subject. This shift within the Neoplatonic ideal, a trope closely associated with Henrietta Maria, would have resonated across commercial and elite theatre, further illustrating the power of the theatre to engage with the contemporary disquiet swirling around the concept of good queenship.

The first intimation that *The Queen of Aragon* is no standard Neoplatonic text comes from Cleodora's witty maid of honor, Cleantha.⁶⁹ Besieged by the attentions of a particularly tedious married suitor, Cleantha wryly observes: "Ist now in season" to "heare and talke that emptie nothing Love . . . when an Armie lyes / Before our Citie gates,

⁶⁹ Veevers sees Cleantha as an example of a "précieuse"—a female who was still virtuous though less idealistic about love—which explains Cleantha's more lively approach to platonic love (*Images of Love and Religion*, 53, 63). For further discussion, see Sanders, "Caroline Salon Culture and Female Agency," 449–64.

and every houre / A battery expected?" (1.1.B1r). This textual image of a kingdom in uproar was intensified through Jones's bold implementation of perspective scenery consisting, as the inscription notes, of "a shutter of a fortified Toune & a Campe a farr off."⁷⁰ Such a specific backdrop of war enhanced the spirit of the volatile political moment of performance. Cleantha's question had undoubted resonance in 1640s London, where preparations were already underway for a second military campaign in Scotland. In fact, Habington's greatest triumph in the play was his transformation of this "emptie nothing Love" into a probing exploration of queenship and rebellion on the Caroline stage. The familiar arguments surrounding rebellion are swiftly rehearsed. Decastro insists that he is acting legitimately in effectively imprisoning the queen of Aragon, as he has the support of the Aragonese people: "The peoples suffrage, which inaugurate Princes, / Hath warranted my actions" (1.1.B4r). In time-honored fashion, his rival Florentio squarely accuses Decastro of false counsel, of manipulating Cleodora's subjects to his own advantage:

profainely 'gainst
All Lawes of Love and Majestie, you made
The people in your quarrell seize upon
The Sacred person of the fairest Queene,
Story ere boasted. (1.1.C1v)

This focus on insurrection is tightened as Cleodora openly denounces her former chief counsel as a rebel—a charge that Decastro furiously denies:

Humbly I have labor'd
To win her favour: and when that prevail'd not;
The Kingdome, in my quarrell, vowed to emptie
The veins of their great body. (1.1.B4r)

These conflicting and equally persuasive views brood over the text, and it is this skillful promotion of such opposing and challenging convictions that makes *The Queen of Aragon* such a compelling example of the power of pre-Civil War theatre to encapsulate and dissect the anxieties of the moment.

Indeed, the tension of the play's staging of good queenship is heightened through an unflinching debate on "the supream Law / Of Princes" (2.1.C4v). Once more, the "very riche and curious" scenery that Pembroke sponsored out of "his own charge" would have enriched the performance, for it is likely that this debate would have taken place against Webb's lofty design, "A Throne Room," specifically created for *The Queen of Aragon* (fig. 2).⁷¹ This impressive backdrop, which measured eleven-and-a-half-feet high and thirteen-feet wide, served to foreground Cleodora's role as monarch. In Webb's sketch, the throne is raised up on an ascent of four steps, which would have had the effect of directly mirroring the halpace upon which Henrietta Maria and Charles I would have been seated in the auditorium. Thus at the Whitehall performances, the debate onstage surrounding the politics of queenship would have inevitably been electrified through the added energy of the royal gaze. Remembering how Henrietta Maria was widely criticized for seeking help from foreign powers during the Scottish crisis, it is remarkable that Decastro specifically accuses his queen of endangering

⁷⁰ Stephen Orgel and Roy Strong, "The Queen of Aragon: Scenery," in their *Inigo Jones: The Theatre of the Stuart Court*, vol. 2 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 789.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 790.

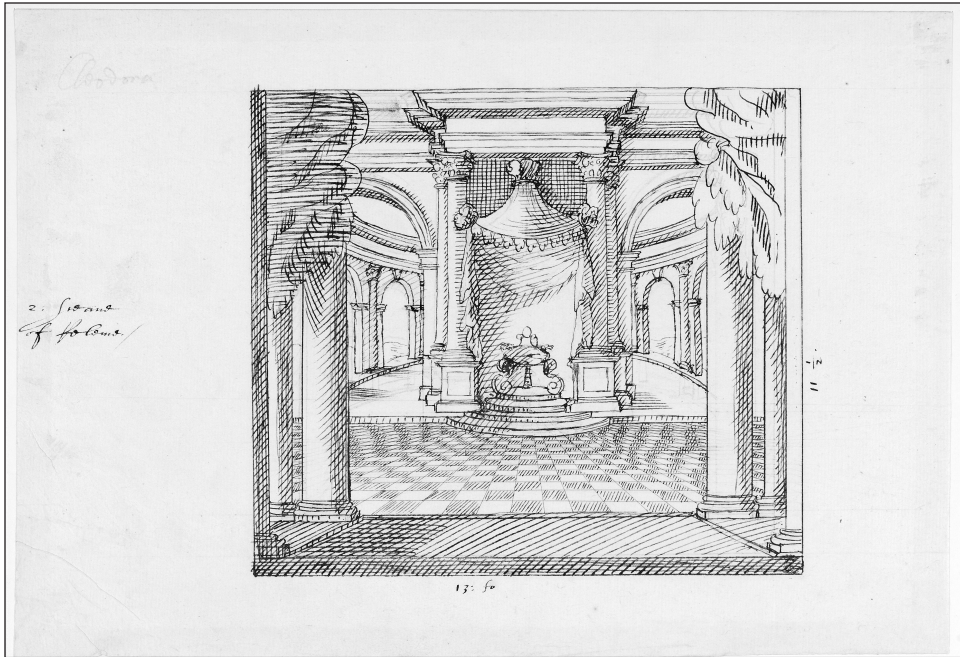


Figure 2. "A Throne Room" by John Webb (1640). (Source: Chatsworth. Copyright © Devonshire Collection, Chatsworth. Reproduced by permission of Chatsworth Settlement Trustees.)

"the peoples safety" (2.1.C4v) in accepting foreign aid. Notably, Cleodora rebukes her unruly general by praising the charity of Ascanio for attempting to rescue "a Queene opprest." This clash of visions, so central to the burgeoning debates in 1640s England, sharpens further when the disguised Ascanio radically insists that "no distinction is 'twene man and man" (3.1.F1r), thus firing Cleodora into a passionate defense of the values of absolute rule:

But yet heaven hath made
 Subordination, and degrees of men,
 And even religion doth authorise us
 To rule; and tells the subject tis a crime
 And shall meete death, if he disdaine obedience. (3.1.F1r)

In his historical tract *Observations Upon History* (1641), Habington upholds Cleodora's view, arguing that pride and ambition are at the heart of all rebellion, which "is so monstrous to the eye of conscience, that it blusheth to appeare it selfe, and therefore weares a vizard which oftentimes betrays the ignorant. Every man in taking Armes protested this warre contrived to worke a more honest peace: as if sinne could smooth the way to vertue, and the conspiracie of many tempests calm the Ocean."⁷² Noticeably, in *The Queen of Aragon*, Velasco, a repeated voice of wisdom in the text, locates the Aragonese rebellion as stemming directly from Decastro's "pride" (3.1.D4r). In Aragon, as in 1640s England, within the crucible of such a conflicting political and philosophical impasse, the inevitable result is mutiny. Order is only resolved in the

⁷² William Habington, *Observations Upon History* (London, 1641), 112.

play-world when Decastro, in true Neoplatonic fashion, is overcome by his love for Cleodora and once more freely offers his support to his queen, ordering his followers to “[w]ith me bow to your Sovereigne” (5.1.I1r).

According to the conventions of Neoplatonic drama, the capitulation of the wayward male to the virtuous heroine should be the transformational moment of the play: with the honor of the maligned heroine finally recognized, Cleodora should be swiftly reestablished in her rightful position as monarch. In Davenant’s *The Fair Favourite*, for instance, the queen is immediately restored and her integrity celebrated by the nation in typical Neoplatonic tropes: “Her virtue is as restless as the Sun, / Still moving, and yet never tir’d; and like / His purer Beams it comforts everything” (5.1.211–13).⁷³ In contrast, in *The Queen of Aragon*, in a surprising three-stage departure from the Neoplatonic paradigm and against the explosive backdrop of mutiny, Cleodora is required to undergo her own journey of enlightenment. First, Decastro reminds Cleodora of the importance of listening to “safe counsell” from wise advisors (5.1.H4r). Second, the queen freely admits to learning “compassion” (5.1.I1r) from Decastro’s generosity of spirit. And third, and with unusual royal candor, she recognizes her own moral limitations, as is reinforced by the unusual syntax of her reflection: “Pray rise up my Lord, / Would I could merit thus much favour; but” (5.1.I1r). In fact, the great strength of the play, perhaps reflecting the dual provenance of its staging—written by Habington and promoted by Pembroke—is its ability to transform the complexities of fundamental political problems into such a vivid and even-handed translucency.

Much has been made (and rightly so) of Habington’s striking staging of Decastro, whose generosity forces Cleodora into a recognition that “Kings rule but at the Courtesie of Time” (2.1.C4v).⁷⁴ In contrast, Habington’s frank portrayal of “a Queene oppressed” has been strangely overshadowed. Scholarly opinion on Cleodora is curiously divergent: Butler deems the queen to be “wayward,” while Veevers perceives her as “rather retiring.”⁷⁵ Quite simply, Habington’s refreshingly honest spotlight reveals Cleodora to be tormented by her predicament as she laments:

Fortune! O cruell! For which side soe’re
Is lost, I suffer: either in my people,
Or slaughter of my friends. No victory
Can now come welcome, the best chance of warre
Makes me how ere a mourner. (2.1.D1v–D2r)

Such agony is underscored through Cleodora’s nuanced understanding of her responsibilities as a monarch, in particular her insistence on the indelible trust between prince and subject:

promises of Princes must not be
By after Arts evaded? Who dares punish
The breach of oath in subjects; and yet slight
The faith he hath made them? (4.1.G4r)

⁷³ William Davenant, *The Fair Favourite*, in *The Dramatic Works of Sir William D’Avenant*, vol. 4 (Edinburgh: William Paterson, 1873), 201–80.

⁷⁴ Butler, *Theatre and Crisis*, 70.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 65; Veevers, *Images of Love and Religion*, 72.

Decastro might wearily conclude that there is little difference between a prince and his subject, yet the beleaguered queen of Aragon, wrongly mistrusted by her people, maintains her dignity to suggest otherwise. In the bluster of the final act, with the city in mutiny, Cleodora negotiates a delicate balance: honoring her original oath to Florentio while guiding Ascanio to proper conduct and, ultimately, heeding Decastro's wise counsel. Such a model of queenship transforms her from the unruly figure of report, who willfully precipitates her kingdom into war and shows little care for the safety of her people, to a beleaguered ruler who is constant to a mode of government that staggers on the cusp of change. Crucially, the queen of Aragon not only has the beauty and virtue that are the prerequisites of any Neoplatonic heroine, but also the humility and wisdom to learn from her seemingly turbulent subject, Decastro. Through this bold manipulation of the Neoplatonic motif, a form particularly associated with Henrietta Maria, Habington widened the debate on the politics of queenship—from within the queen's own circle—to bravely suggest that monarchs, as much as subjects, require instruction at moments of national crisis.

1640s Realpolitik: After the Show Was Over

Habington's single foray onto the Caroline stage, embodying such theatrical and political dexterity, illustrates the vitality and significance of Caroline drama and suggests why this text was successful on the London stage in 1640. Through his reinvention of the Neoplatonic paradigm, Habington trained an unerring spotlight on contemporary anxieties to rigorously expose the complexities of his time. But where, in the play-world of Aragon, Decastro vows loyalty to Queen Cleodora and then disappears to live as a hermit to ensure the end of future rebellions, in England, matters would not be so easily resolved. Some four days after *The Queen of Aragon* was staged, what was to become known as the Short Parliament sat at Westminster on 14 April 1640. In this first Parliament called by the king in eleven years, Charles I's aim was to raise finances for the Scottish campaigns, but several members of the assembly swiftly raised concerns regarding overly powerful Catholic influences at court. Sir Francis Rous of Truro, an MP from Cornwall, implacably asserted how "the root of all our grievances" was an intended union "betwixt us and Rome," revealing how, in the heated political climate of the early 1640s, the Catholic specter of traitorous intrigue was firmly reentrenched in the Protestant imagination.⁷⁶ This fear culminated in England's most visible and potent symbol of Counter-Reformation Catholicism, Henrietta Maria, to the extent that a very real threat to her life was evident a month later when, with the abrupt closure of the Short Parliament, troops were ordered to guard her palace, Somerset House. By 1641, Giustinian, the ambassador to the Doge in Venice, reported that "*disgraceful pasquinades*" against the queen were openly posted in the streets of London.⁷⁷ With some irony, Henrietta Maria found herself writing to Parliament in an attempt to remove "all misunderstanding" about the recusant levy she had raised in 1639, vowing "to be more cautious hereafter."⁷⁸ Notably, she tried to protect recusant collectors like Habington, assuring Parliament that her sole intention had always been to "employ her owne power to unite the King and people and desireth the Parliament to looke

⁷⁶ Hibbard, *Charles I and the Popish Plot*, 149.

⁷⁷ Giustinian to the Doge and Senate, May 1641, in *Calendar of State Papers Venetian, 1640–42*, available at <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.aspx?compid=89496> (accessed 30 March 2013).

⁷⁸ A Copy of 1. the letter sent by the Queenes Majestie, 11–12.

forwards and passe by such mistakes and errors of her servants."⁷⁹ As for Habington, after his sortie onto the Caroline stage, he retreated from the theatrical world, most likely due to the imminent closure of the theatres in 1642 and the pressures of the impending Civil War. He fought under the royal standard during the war and then retired to his country estate, where he continued to write poetry until his death in 1654. In contrast, the Earl of Pembroke became increasingly alienated from the court and, with the queen's recommendation, Charles I dismissed him from the post of Lord Chamberlain in July 1641, thus sealing Pembroke's allegiance to Parliament.⁸⁰

Michael Stapleton once argued that Habington should be "remembered as a minor poet who avoided involvement in anything, apart from his courtship of and marriage to Lucy Herbert,"⁸¹ yet this image is far from the truth. Instead, Habington was a respected figure in recusant circles, secure in the patronage of Henrietta Maria and fully immersed in the vibrant world of Caroline theatre. In a play performed before both monarchs, he cracked open the façade of Neoplatonic drama, both to spotlight that most crucial of bonds—the relationship between monarch and subject—and to rehabilitate the vexed ideal of contemporary queenship. In a two-pronged attack, with the country on the brink of civil war, Habington audaciously reminded his royal audience that a monarch rules only "at the Courtesie of time," while at the same time, through the arresting figure of Cleodora, he boldly tempered the more militant recusant iconography issuing from Henrietta Maria's court. Thus through the cultural agency of the queen's own preferred Neoplatonic theatrical experience, Habington, as a true "son" of Ben Jonson, fiercely wrestled with popular concern surrounding the politics of good queenship. Defining and reflecting upon these vivid and complex debates, Habington's play contested and deftly redeemed, on the Caroline stage at least, the remarkably resonant, yet deeply troubling image of "a Queene opprest."

⁷⁹ Ibid., 12.

⁸⁰ Smith, "Herbert, Philip," 716.

⁸¹ Michael Stapleton, *The Cambridge Guide to English Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 373.