

“Virtue must be hir chiefest garnish” Rules for Painting an Early Stuart Lady as Evidenced by Larkin’s *Mary Curzon*

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Early Stuart portraits are, for the most part, pictures of beautiful women, women who in dress and face conform to social ideals that dictated rich attire for the elite and prized white brows and red lips, soft limbs and bright eyes in women of any class. For the early Stuart audience, however, the notion of beauty was accompanied by a deep-seated ambivalence. Vexingly, womanly beauty was associated with both sides of an antithetical argument. It was *either* an illusion, an artificial carapace for a corrupt interior *or* it was a shining reflection of inner purity and worth, most often referred to by seventeenth century writers as a woman’s “virtue.”

In the *Asylum Veneris, or a Sanctuary for Ladies*, Daniel Tuvil insisted:

It is not purple, needle-worke, or precious stones that must adorne and beautifie a woman. / These be arguments of hir wealth, not of hir worth, and get hir nothing but a popular applause... Virtue must be hir chiefest garnish.¹

What comprised a woman’s Virtue? For Gervase Markham, the meritorious early Stuart lady was not only pious and zealous, amiable and delightful, but also

Of chaste thought, stout courage, patient, vntryed, diligent, witty, pleasant, constant in friendship, full of good Neighbour-hood, wise in Discourse, but not frequent therein, sharpe and quicke of speech, but not bitter or talkatiue, secret in her affaires, comfortable in her counsels, and generally skilful in the worthy knowledges which doe belong to her Vocation...²

Markham, Tuvil, and other authors of prescriptive tracts and defense treatises seemed to have a never-ending supply of adjectives with which to describe the ideal woman.³ For the por-

traitist, however, Tuvil’s widely held belief that “Virtue” should be a woman’s greatest ornament posed an enormous challenge not shared by the writer. Namely, he had to translate Virtue—a vague, general, multifaceted concept, which was intrinsically non-material—into tangible, visual terms. What is more, the observable signs an artist had at his disposal for communicating virtue were precisely those superficialities contemporaries regarded with suspicion—beautiful faces, for instance, and extravagant clothing. Given these circumstances: how did an artist, such as William Larkin, paint an early Stuart lady like Mary Curzon?

Wearing the right dress

William Larkin’s portrait of *Mary Curzon* (Figure 1) is generally dated to c. 1612, the year in which Mary married Edward Sackville, later fourth Earl of Dorset. Both the choice of artist, a favorite painter of the Sackville family, and the work’s provenance, since its production part of the Dorset collection at Knole House, seat of the third Earl, make it likely that *Mary Curzon* was commissioned by or for the family of her husband.⁴ The Sackvilles were a great dynastic family in England and Richard, the third Earl, was not only a member of the royal circle, but had in 1609 increased the family’s wealth and reputation through his own marriage. Hanging in the home of Mary’s titled brother-in-law, the Larkin portrait would not only act as a testament to the pledge made between Mary and Edward, and by extension, between Mary and her new family, but also attest to Mary’s suitability for the role of Sackville bride and wife.

Contemporary seventeenth-century prescriptive literature urged unions between men and women of comparable wealth and position, and in his list of recommendations regarding match-making, Richard Brathwaite exhorted the man of dignified birth to “Chuse one whose parentall blood / makes claim

las Oakes for John Harison, 1631) 3.

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¹ Tuvil, Daniel. *Asylum Veneris. or A Sanctvay for Ladies Iustly Protecting them, their virtues, and sufficiencies from the foule aspersion and forged imputations of traducing spirits*. (London: Edward Griffin for Laurence L’isle, 1616) 22-23.

² Gervase Markham, *The English Hovse-Wife, Containing the inward and outward Vertues which ought to be in a compleate Woman* (London: Nicho-

³ For examples and a discussion of literature attending to women during the period, see Linda Woodbridge, *Women and the English Renaissance: Literature and the Nature of Womankind, 1540-1620*, (Urbana: U of Illinois, 1986).

⁴ On the provenance of the work, see Roy Strong, *William Larkin: Icons of Splendor* (Milan: F.M. Ricci, 1995) 64.

⁵ Patrick Hannay, *A Happy Husband or, Directions to a Maide to choose her Mate. A Wives behavior towards her Husband after Marriage. To Which is adoiyned the Good Wife; together with an Exquisite discourse*

to virtue.”⁵ Wealth, as Tuvil insisted, was distinct from Virtue. Nobility, however, was a stipulation of non-material worth. Paralleling such sentiments, Mary’s portrait, by showing her attired in costly and fashionable garments on the eve or event of her marriage, reminds the viewer that she is both an heiress and the daughter of a genteel family. Her status, emphatically conveyed through her costume, as is common in portraits of upper-class ladies, gives her an intrinsic “claim to virtue,” thereby enhancing her status as an apt match for the brother of Richard Sackville.

Like many other female sitters for Jacobean easel paintings and miniatures, Mary wears an excessively embroidered dress. The gold and silver needlework that appear on Mary’s armband and petticoat were most likely the work of a professional embroiderer who would have invested a good deal of time in creating exact and intricate patterns with hard-worked metal thread.⁶ The abundantly embroidered bodice, sleeves, and skirt of her gown might also have been the creations of a hired laborer. It is possible, however, that the threaded flora and fauna adorning Mary’s dress were the handiwork of female amateur elites, perhaps of Mary herself.

Proficiency in needlework was a requisite skill for the aristocratic lady and was often seen as a mark of nobility, since it was considered not toil, but rather pastime, for the wealthy woman for whom manual, income-producing work was anathema, not to mention unnecessary. The embroidery decorating Mary Curzon’s dress twice proclaims her nobility—once through its evident priciness and once through its identification with a gentlewoman’s accomplishments. Mary’s rank, in turn, is inextricably linked through her embroidered gown with an aptitude for sewing, one of those worthy knowledges that belonged to the vocation of her sex.

In *The Needle’s Excellency*, John Taylor remarks,
 ...And more the Needles honour to advance,
 It is a Taylors Javelin, or his Lance.
 And for my Countries quiet, I should like,
 That Women-kinde should use no other
 Pike⁷

Taylor’s playful conceit holds that sewing is more appropriate to women than sport or war. Not for women were outdoor pursuits demanding physical exertion and dexterous mobility. Rather, women were suited for sedentary work, which required small, careful movements carried out within the safety of the domestic realm. Moreover, Taylor’s stanza proposes that when needlework keeps women industriously occupied, the country is kept “quiet.” Literally, this turn of phrase suggests that women engaged dutifully in needlework will be silent. Figu-

ratively, it suggests that needlework will prevent women from participating in unwanted or dishonorable practices that could disturb the social order of the country. Taylor’s words, therefore, equate sewing with female honor in the form of female obedience arrived at through proscribed movement in a circumscribed space. Two decades before Taylor’s book appeared on the market, Mary Curzon’s portrait relied on the same associations between embroidery and domesticated passivity as markers of feminine virtue.

Standing still

Like countless women in early Stuart portraits, Mary Curzon exists in a state of stasis concocted through a series of formal elements suppressing and denying the sitter’s potential for action. First and foremost, the very unwieldiness of Mary’s gown implies that awkwardness would accompany attempted movement.⁸ The cumbersome fullness of her cylindrical skirt is played up by a series of circular forms—the arc of her ruff, the dip of her bustline, the wheel of her farthingale, and the curve of her hemline. These centralized elements create a weighty vertical axis that suctions the sitter into place. The nearly symmetrical curtains that hang at either side of Mary repeat the curving forms found elsewhere, and reaching to the top of the farthingale wheel, serve to enclose the sitter, further denying her motion.

Mary’s choice of fashion and the artist’s circular ploys, however, account for only a degree of the stillness the image imparts. Perhaps more important is the configuration of Mary’s limbs in this portrait. Mary’s arms rest upon her farthingale; her hands, hanging limply over its edges, are useless. Upon close inspection, it is clear that Mary does not even hold the fan at her side. Touching, but not gripping the fan’s handle, the inactivity of the hand, outlined with deep shadows and called out with reflected light, is made a central focus of the image. In this particular portrait, the inefficacy of Mary’s upper appendages is intensified by the inarticulation of her wrists, and the hyperbolic, almost monstrous size of her hands that results. The juxtaposition of Mary’s large right hand and the white expanse of feathers below leads to an equation of body part with accessory.

Like her hands, Mary’s feet serve to set her in place. Perfectly positioned, her right heel abuts her left toe. The arrangement of Mary’s feet is not conducive to the taking of a step, and the sense of her fixity is amplified by the patterns of the carpet, whose lines echo her turnout. We imagine Mary to be tied indefinitely to the space in which she stands. There are no references to the outside world and the sense of confine-

of *EPITAPHS, including the choysiest thereof, Ancient or Moderne by R.B., Gent.* (London: John Beale for Richard Redmer, 1619).

⁶ On professional vs. amateur embroidery, see George Frederick Wingfield Digby, *Elizabethan Embroidery*, (New York: Thomas Yoseloff, 1964) 26-31.

⁷ John Taylor, *The Needle’s Excellency. A New Booke wherin are diuers Admirable Workes wrought with the Needle. Newly inuented and cut in*

Copper for the pleasure and profit of the industrious, 10th ed. (London: For James Boler, 1634) A.

⁸ Of course, the farthingale construction would in life as much as in art have been maneuvered with difficulty, and it has been pointed out by Filipczak and others that women’s fashion in general seemed designed to restrict movement. Zirka Filipczak, *Hot, Dry Men, Cold, Wet Women: The Theory of the Humors in Western European Art 1575-1700*, (New York: The American Federation of the Arts, c. 1997) 126 especially.

ment created by the picture’s black backdrop and framing curtains would only have been stronger when the portrait was in its initial state. The original canvas was smaller, only later extended on the top and sides to make it a pendant to Larkin’s portrait of her brother-in-law.⁹

Compared to the artist’s portrayal of Richard Sackville, the third Earl (Figure 2), Mary’s containment is even more apparent. Richard also stands centrally, framed by curtains. However, the Earl’s body, unlike Mary’s, is ready for action. An implied diagonal running from the gloved fist at Richard’s waist through his uncovered hand on the table is mimicked in reverse by the diagonal of his sword belt. This crossing of diagonals sets up a push and pull tension at the very core of the work that allows for the possibility of movement. Richard’s spread feet seem much better prepared to take a step than Mary’s tight footwork, and although the carpet design apes the turnout of his right foot, his left foot imperiously breaks the horizontal lines making up the carpet’s border. A bent elbow not only gives him spatial dominance and suggests his potential to turn in space, but also aligns Richard with a visual tradition in which the arm akimbo represents masculine assertiveness and boldness associated with both warriors and kings.¹⁰

If we think back to Taylor’s injunction that the woman’s needle is her lance and pike, we become aware that while the defining instrument of manly activity—the sword—is present in the picture of Edward Sackville, there is no needle in evidence in Mary’s portrait. In fact, needles are never present in early Stuart portraits of women. In *Renaissance Clothing and the Materials of Memory*, Ann Rosalind Jones and Peter Stallybrass discuss woman’s needleworking as a site of contention. Needlework could be a sign of nobility and virtue, but sewing, paradoxically was a creative outlet for women that allowed them to achieve public fame, which as a general rule was a male prerogative.¹¹

Mary’s embroidered gown in the Larkin picture draws up associations with womanly skill and virtue, but her unmoving body and useless limbs negate her potential for creative production considered inappropriate for the aristocratic woman. We are free to assume that this dress could be the work of a professional as easily as that of a dexterous noblewoman and the ladies of her circle. In fact, the details of the embroidery in the Larkin portrait are rendered so carefully in paint that, ultimately, we must attribute them to the hand of the male artist, whose expressive imagination, unlike woman’s, was encouraged and praised. In the end, Mary’s relationship to her em-

broidered gown reminds us that woman’s duty was not creative but procreative.

Mary is not pictured in the act of producing needlework, but she wears the results of sartorial efforts. Those efforts have led here to an embroidered gown covered with living creatures and leafy vegetation. Mary’s passive body, *woman’s* passive body, becomes a fecund garden teeming with life. Her creative potential is thus redirected into her “natural” role as progenitor. As the future or new wife of Edward Sackville, a large part of Mary Curzon’s appeal, especially to the portrait’s owners—her in-laws—would be her ability to conceive heirs.

Mary’s clothing marks her as fertile; her posture, meanwhile, assures that she is chaste. In a social system that based inheritance on primogeniture, a woman’s fidelity to her husband, in other words, her chastity, was imperative. The issue was a particular concern for members of the upper strata to which Mary Curzon belonged because so much could be lost if paternity came into question.¹² Thus, chastity was associated not only with female obedience, but also with the successful maintenance of the social structure. Like stitching, it could keep the country “quiet.” Chastity was best protected from woman’s own lascivious inclinations and against unwanted advances from the opposite sex when women were relegated to the home. The passive, indoor existence of the needleworking noblewoman was, therefore, especially conducive to developing and safeguarding this greatest of feminine virtues. As explained earlier, the delicate, precise, and constrained movements of the embroiderer represented a more profound control over woman’s conduct. Specifically, the sewing woman could be seen as a metaphor for the woman who adhered to her place within the social and natural order. Passive women complied; active women disobeyed.

Unchastity meant both a literal and figurative lack of control over the female body. Thus, the immotile woman became associated not just with the virtue of conformity, but also with that of chastity. Meanwhile, the unruly female body became a sign of promiscuity. In *Faultes, Faultes and Nothing Else but Faultes*, Barnabe Rich writes that a besotted man will buy his mistress all the trappings of a Venetian courtesan, including “a Buske to streighten a lasciuious bodie.” He goes on to call the man’s mistress “loose legged.”¹³ The mistress is inherently crooked. It is up to man to straighten her out, to bridle her body, and in doing so, to take possession and command of her sexuality.

Mary’s body is carefully controlled through the fastidious stitches and repetitive patterning of the needle/brush, the shap-

⁹ Strong 64.

¹⁰ Joneath Spicer, “The Elbow Akimbo,” *A Cultural History of Gesture*, eds. J. Bremner and H. Roodenburg, (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1992) 92-93.

¹¹ Ann Rosalind Jones and Peter Stallybrass, *Renaissance Clothing and the Materials of Memory* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000) 131-174.

¹² For middle class women, chastity was a point of honor, which Henderson

and McManus suggest may have served to distinguish women of that rank from lower classes generally believed to engage freely in licentious behavior. On the English woman’s chastity, see Henderson and McManus, *Half-HumanKind*, 59.

¹³ Barnabe Rich, *Faultes, Faultes, And nothing else but Faults*, 1606 Facsimile reprint, ed. M. H. Wolf, (Gainesville, [FL]: Scholars’ Facsimiles & Reprints, 1965) 21.

ing silhouette of her gown, and the disciplined carriage of her body proper. The ideological potency of attire and posture by which Mary is deemed chaste in the portrait is supplemented by symbolic language: like the blue rosette, the strawberries embroidered on Mary Curzon's sleeves are an emblem of purity.¹⁴

Properly accessorized

Having announced the sitter's fertility and chastity, the portrait must promise both to Edward Sackville and his kin. At the middle of Mary's neckline is a dark blue rosette, visually compelling both because it is centrally placed and because it sharply contrasts with the dominant palette of whites and reds employed in the piece. The rosette becomes a secondary focus to the face itself in this portrait. Its importance should not be underplayed. In the world of Elizabethan and early Stuart fashion, colors were often assigned symbolic meaning. While the significance of certain hues changed from hand-book to handbook, blue was a color consistently associated with amity and faithfulness.¹⁵ Thus, positioned at the center of Mary's breast, the knotted blue ribbon rosette immediately suggests that this picture is about both the affection of Mary's heart and her virtuous fidelity.

Once the eye is drawn to the rosette, it moves easily to a second blue element in the portrait. A larger blue rosette, embroidered with gold, is tied around Mary's left arm. The band is, as Roy Strong points out, the favor of a suitor.¹⁶ The favor's status as an object of faithful devotion is intensified by the symbolic meaning of its pigmentation. Rendered in the same color and placed close to one another, the two rosettes form a pair. At the core of the work a marriage takes place between objects—one associated with Mary, the other with Edward Sackville.

For contemporary viewers, other accessories in the portrait might have alluded to the union of woman and man as well. Falling almost in line with the portrait's central vertical axis and placed adjacent to the attention-grabbing triangle of red petticoat filling the opening in the front of Mary's gown, the extravagant and expensive fan in the portrait cannot be missed. This object is a conventional testament to wealth, but might also be a token of love given by Edward. Objects such as fans, handkerchiefs, gloves, and jewels were often gifts from

suitors, fiancés, or husbands. Several authors have lately noted the symbolic currency of these goods, which could simultaneously mark emotional investment between a man and woman and act as a materialization of a more official bond between the two.¹⁷

The bracelet Mary wears wound around her left wrist, like the fan, might be interpreted not only as a palpable sign of fortune, but also as an emblem of connubial commitment. Bracelets were extremely common items of courtship in early modern England, sometimes referred to as "Cupid's manacles."¹⁸ The multiple strands of Mary's bracelet, further, suggest that the bond to which she is committed is a fast one, not to be undone. Mary's bracelet wraps around her exceptionally long wrist until its final strand falls loosely about the flesh of her hand. As it does so, it calls out a less prominent piece of jewelry—a ring. One of the few pieces of jewelry Mary wears, her ring, in dialogue with her pearl bracelet, becomes a symbol of her wooing or of her newly wedded status.¹⁹ The representation of Mary's ring functions as a semi-public display of her attachment, ensuring, in turn, that the picture itself becomes a declaration of her troth to Edward. On a deeper level, the presence of the ring, and other possible love tokens, confirm her place within the established social order.

Playing her part

In Markham's terms, wifedom and motherhood were a woman's primary "vocations" in early Stuart England. The 1632 *Law's Resolution of Women's Rights* was among a multitude of authoritative documents, including the Bible, to affirm the belief that "All [women] are understood either married or to be married..."²⁰ Marriage and motherhood were not only presupposed for early Stuart women, but were in fact key obligations for any woman pretending to probity. In attending to their duties as wives, and by extension mothers, the female sitters of early Stuart portraits prove their virtuousness vis-à-vis their consensual participation in the patriarchal social order. Mary poses as a woman "married or to be married" and by way of that virtue—natural and enacted—she is deemed, tautologically, a worthy bride.

Mary Curzon's picture presented the likeness of an individual and functioned within the specific circumstances of her life. As a portrait of an early Stuart lady, however, it is not

¹⁴ On the meaning of strawberries, see Thomasina Beck, *The Embroiderer's Flowers* (Devon: David & Charles, 1992) 112.

¹⁵ On color symbolism in early modern England, see Beck, *The Embroiderer's Flowers*; Digby, *Elizabethan Embroidery*; and M. Channing Linthicum, *Costume in the Drama of Shakespeare and his Contemporaries* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1936).

¹⁶ Strong 64.

¹⁷ On the exchange of tokens in the rituals of courtship and marriage, see Diana O'Hara, *Courtship and Constraint: Rethinking the Making of Marriage in Tudor England* (Manchester; New York: Manchester UP, 2000) 57-99. On the circulation and meaning of love tokens in cultural production, also see Juana Green, "The Sempster's Wares; Merchandiz-

ing and Marrying in The Fair Maid of the Exchange (1607)," Renaissance Quarterly 53 (Winter 2000): 1084-1118.

¹⁸ Pearl necklaces and bracelets are recurrent accessories in portraits of early Stuart women. See Diana Scarisbrick, *Tudor and Jacobean Jewellery* (London: Tate, 1995) 88.

¹⁹ On rings as tokens, see O'Hara, *Courtship and Constraint*, 62 especially; and Scarisbrick, *Tudor and Jacobean Jewellery*, 93-95.

²⁰ I.L., *The Lawes Resolutions of Womens Rights: or, the Lawes Provision for Woemen. A Methodicall Collection of such Statutes and Customes, with the cases, opinions, arguments and points of learning in the law, as doe properly concerne Women* (London: John More, Esq. for John Grove, 1632) 6.

unique. The Jacobean lady, and the Caroline woman after her, were bound to a shared repertoire of representational conventions associated with female virtue. Their images repeat and recycle the same symbols, signs, and role-playing attitudes, and through that multiplicity produce a “picture” of virtuous womanhood, both recognizable and desirable. Thus, William Larkin’s portrait of Mary Curzon—wearing the right dress, standing still, properly accessorized, and playing her part—

like so many other female portraits of the period, actively defined not only the shape of Woman, but also her substance, constructing ideological expectations regarding both Woman’s appearance and her behavior and conspiring with other culture discourses to perpetually recreate the justifications for and terms of Stuart patriarchy.

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Figure 1: William Larkin, *Mary Curzon*, c. 1612-13, oil on canvas, 211.5 x 130 cm. Courtesy of Lord Sackville, Knole House, Kent.



Figure 2: William Larkin, *Richard Sackville, 3rd Earl of Dorset*, 1613, oil on canvas, 213.4 x 127 cm. Courtesy of Lord Sackville, Knole House, Kent.