

Reviewed Work(s):

Elizabeth's Glass, with "The Glass of the Sinful Soul" (1544) by Elizabeth I and "Epistle Dedicatory" and "Conclusion" (1548) by John Bale. by Elizabeth I; John Bale; Marc Shell

Sara Jayne Steen

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Marc Shell. *Elizabeth's Glass, with "The Glass of the Sinful Soul" (1544) by Elizabeth I and "Epistle Dedicatory" and "Conclusion" (1548) by John Bale.* Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1993. 9 illus. + xvi + 368 pp. \$36.50.

Renaissance scholars will be pleased to have ready access to Elizabeth's *The Glass of the Sinful Soul*, her prose translation of

Marguerite, Queen of Navarre's French poem *Le Miroir de l'âme pécheresse*, in which a tormented sinner explores the nature of God's love. In this mystical meditation, the female narrator draws on scripture to posit her soul's fourfold relationship with God, as daughter, sister, mother, and wife: God is a father in creating and protecting her, a brother in having taken human form, a son conceived by her soul's faith, and a husband who cherishes his erring wife.

Marc Shell here provides Elizabeth's translation in two versions. Occupying fully one-third of *Elizabeth's Glass* is a photographic reproduction of the 1544 manuscript (Bodleian MS Cherry 36) written by the eleven-year-old Elizabeth, with a dedicatory letter to her stepmother Queen Catherine Parr. This text, last published in facsimile in 1897, will be highly useful to scholars interested in Elizabeth's, and Renaissance women's, education, prose style, orthography, and even handwriting—and the young Elizabeth employed a clear italic hand. The reproduction is preceded by a fully modernized transcription, by which I mean that, in addition to revising Elizabeth's punctuation and spelling, Shell has silently eliminated multiple negatives, altered verb tenses, replaced obsolete terms, and omitted or added occasional words, making the translation flow more smoothly to a modern ear. Even in a modernization, these are not editorial choices I advocate; however, Shell has been consistent in applying his principles, and, since he presents the photographic reproduction as well, scholars conveniently can compare the manuscript text with the modernization (and with Renja Salminen's 1979 old-spelling transcription). Shell also includes the dedicatory epistle and conclusion that John Bale composed for the 1548 publication of Elizabeth's translation; in them, the Protestant Bale situates nobility in godliness as well as birth and places Elizabeth, the king's half-sister and a potential heir whose legitimacy was in question, among the learned and noble women of English history, several of whom ruled.

Shell's admittedly speculative introduction to *The Glass of the Sinful Soul* explores Elizabeth's psychology in relation to Christian theology and English nationhood. Shakespeareans familiar with Shell's 1988 *The End of Kinship* will recognize the Freudian and anthropological theories he applies here. Interpreting the text in light of "universal siblinghood," his term for the doctrine in which all humans are brothers and sisters in Christ—and therefore, he

maintains, all sexual intercourse incestuous—Shell proposes that the sinful soul, bound by what Elizabeth translates as “concupiscence,” is enslaved by desire for incest. *The Glass of the Sinful Soul* in that context reveals physical incest transcended by a spiritual incest in which God is father, brother, son, and husband. In developing his case, Shell draws on a wide range of medieval and Renaissance sources, but he is sometimes surprisingly literal in his treatment of theological metaphor and so convinced of his thesis that he too often assumes or asserts what he should argue. The discussion, moreover, is disjointed in style and difficult to read.

Extending his interpretation, Shell contends that *The Glass of the Sinful Soul* presages the political structure Elizabeth would bring to England, a politically incestuous “national siblinghood” in which she would be simultaneously mother and wife of her people, moving them from a patriarchal model toward a more egalitarian family unit—a free nation. I remain unconvinced that this translation, one of several Elizabeth presented to family members in the mid-1540s, was crucial to Elizabeth’s psychological development or the history of English government; nonetheless, Shell’s broader analogies between Elizabeth’s and England’s Christianity and politics do raise provocative questions. In *Elizabeth’s Glass*, then, Shell offers a controversial interpretation and the text that will enable scholars to respond.