

Maureen Quilligan, Duke University
“Solid Gold Ephemera”



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The current TV show “The Crown” images the beginning of constitutional royal power—the physical creation of a crown out of molten gold. Gold, like royalty, is supposed to last forever. Roman coins in a vault will gleam with their special luster while other kinds of coins, silver, copper, bronze, are black with age and indistinguishable from each other. As John Donne also reminds us, gold can be “to airy thinness beat,” literally, that is, to the width of one atom--hence Gold leaf, and the glittering roofs of many famous eastern European churches. As if to convey lasting regality, in 1566 Elizabeth I sent a solid gold baptismal font to Mary Queen of Scots for the christening of her son, James VI of Scotland, who ultimately became James I of England. This moment, intended to have been memorialized by the font, has become invisible to history; the font was melted down to pay soldiers. And history remembers Mary and Elizabeth as great enemies, not co-parents of a future king. Passing into the status of ephemera, barely traceable in the historic record, the font—extant for a mere 4 months—can stand for the way only a knife’s edge of difference marks the border between ephemera and monuments meant to last forever, like half acre tombs. Rather than celebrating or memorializing, such evanescence threatens worldly power--ironically the only crown to remain from pre-restoration Britain is Mary Stuart’s own. All the Tudor crowns were melted down by Cromwell to pay soldiers. As the construction of the crown and the baptismal font shows, however, there is a strong drive by historians and contemporaries of the period to make more substantial the “insubstantial pageants faded” of what seemed in their time monumental moments. In fact, Mary’s baptismal festivities were modeled on her former mother-in-law, Catherine de Medici’s, elaborate festivities in France, and Catherine managed to make a lasting, monument--recorded and remembered to this day--out of these fleeting assemblies.

Maureen Quilligan is the R. Florence Brinkley Professor of English at Duke University. She has published four books: *The Language of Allegory: Defining the Genre* (1979), *Milton's Spenser: The Politics of Reading* (1983), *The Allegory of Female Authority: Christine de Pizan's Cite des Dames* (1991) and *Incest and Agency in Elizabeth's England* (2005).

