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"Great is Diana" of Shakespeare's Ephesus

F. Elizabeth Hart

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Abstract

This article examines historical and literary genealogies of the goddess Diana of Ephesus (a.k.a. Artemis of Ephesus), applying these genealogies to Shakespeare's *The Comedy of Errors* and *Pericles*. Diana of Ephesus is embedded within the *Abbess of Errors*, and their amalgamation makes topical reference to the Catholic Virgin and Queen Elizabeth I. In *Pericles*, Diana of Ephesus is a providential deity who offers Shakespeare an icon of female authority capable of restoring *Pericles* to his role as king. In the tradition of feminist Shakespeare studies, this article evaluates the function of female characters—mother figures especially—in Renaissance patriarchal drama.

“Great is Diana” of Shakespeare’s Ephesus

F. ELIZABETH HART

Critics have offered a range of interpretations of the West Asian city of Ephesus as a setting for Shakespeare’s *The Comedy of Errors* and *Pericles*. Many acknowledge the city’s early modern familiarity as the vituperative trade center described in the New Testament book of Acts and addressed by Paul in his Letters to the Ephesians.¹ Its status as an early and even model Christian community did not prevent it from taking on apparently contradictory meanings for the early moderns: for instance, while it was often associated with the regenerative spirit of Pauline scripture,² it could also be linked to images of religious division, possibly becoming an image for Protestant reformers of “Popish backsliding” by the official Church.³ Recently, critics have also begun to stress the diversity of social and religious life in Ephesus, pointing out, for example, that in the city of Paul’s day, Christians, Jews, and pagan Greeks lived and worked together—not always harmoniously, but at least together; or that in Shakespeare’s own time, Ephesus was known as one of the eastern Mediterranean sites that had been conquered and occupied by Muslim Arabs and Turks.⁴

This wider angle on social and religious culture has caused attention to shift to another of the city’s central religious figures: the fertility goddess Diana of Ephesus, the “Great Mother” whose famous temple in Ephesus—considered one of the seven wonders of the world—served as bank, asylum, and civic center for centuries before and after Paul’s arrival. Diana was one of a group of powerful “Mothers” who had long been venerated in the east-

F. Elizabeth Hart is associate professor of English at the University of Connecticut, Storrs. This article is part of a book in progress tentatively titled “The Sixteenth-Century Diana.”



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