Elizabeth I and Gender Ambiguity

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Elizabeth I may be the most famous monarch in English history. The Elizabethan Age, as it came to be known, was a nearly 45 year period of growth and progress for England. This era, following the prolific reign of Henry VIII, witnessed the re-establishment of the Church of England, a reduction in royal expenditures and an increase in naval strength. Despite a childhood in which she was viewed as the bastard child of a much-disliked merchant's daughter, Elizabeth I grew to gain popularity and the respect of her subjects. Elizabeth I ascended to the throne at a time when England was against the very idea of a Queen Regnant, but Elizabeth's succession was in reality quite peaceful. Novices may surmise that this stems from societal changes towards women, but unfortunately this was not true. Elizabeth I's accession does not speak to a larger feminist movement in 16th century England, nor did she attempt to change the status of women in her country. Elizabeth I almost always denied her own sex in favor of lending herself masculine attributes. The several occasions on which she did admit femininity, she did so either disparagingly or for political gains, such as comparing herself to the Virgin Mary. Above all things, Elizabeth I's sex was a tool to be used ambiguously and politically; she saw herself as God's sole exception to the unfortunate limitations of Tudor-era womanhood.

Historiography

The significance of the Tudor dynasty, 1485-1603, has resulted in countless texts written on the members of the royal family. Elizabeth I, as one of the most important English monarchs, has naturally attracted the interest of many historians. From her life as a princess at her childhood home at Lambeth to her death in 1603, Elizabeth I has been the subject of much historical scrutiny. Especially important has been the study of how she was able to gain the throne at a time when England was disinclined to accept female rulers. Janel Mueller of the University of Chicago alleges that Elizabeth I suffered "gender anxiety" and that the queen took a stance in favor of her femininity.[1] Cristy Beemer also argues that Elizabeth I exploited her own sex and the accompanying traditional female roles as maiden, wife, and mother.[2] Similarly, an article by Helen Castor discusses the circumstances that put Mary, then Elizabeth I, on the English throne. Castor acknowledges that Elizabeth I justified her position under the auspices of her own personal, divine right, rather than the legitimacy of universal female rule.[3] Castor states that Elizabeth I viewed herself as "a single providential exception to the rule of male sovereignty."[4] Mary Beth Rose contends that Elizabeth maintained her maidenhood by placing her wifely duty to the state. Rose goes on to state that Elizabeth

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[1] Janel Mueller, "Virtue and Virtuality: Gender in the Self-Representation of Queen Elizabeth I" (lecture, University of Chicago Alumni Club, Washington, D.C., October 26, 1999), 1.

[2] Cristy Beemer, "The Female Monarchy: A Rhetorical Strategy of Early Modern Rule," *Rhetoric Review* 30, no.3 (2001). http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/07350198.2011.581937.

[3] Helen Castor, "Exception to the Rule," *History Today* 60, no.10 (2010), 43.

[4] Ibid.

acknowledged female inferiority in her speeches, but her actions conflicted with her statements and traditional gender roles.[5] Allison Heisch also supports the idea that Elizabeth I saw herself as the sole exception to womanly rule in stating that she did not deny what men believed of women, but declared that "God has made an exception in her case."[6] Hiesch states in another piece that Elizabeth maintained power through illustrating to her subjects that she was capable of caring for them. This was a crucial point for English citizens.[7] This contradicts both Beemer and Mueller in their claims that Elizabeth I used her femininity to her advantage. Elizabeth I sought to consolidate her power by using images constructed to protect her femininity and by disregarding her sex when necessary. I will demonstrate how Elizabeth I generally did quite the opposite and, instead, adopted the imagery of a male leader, with one exception: the issue of her marriage.

The Tudor Dynasty before Coronation of Elizabeth I

The period of Tudor dynasty was a time of growth and development for England. Ian Crofton contends that the Tudor's helped create an English national identity. It witnessed the creation and triumph of the Anglican Church, the successful repulsion of foreign invaders, and the flowering of English literature."[8] Under the first Tudor, Henry VII, England experienced an increase in wealth, as well as peace and political stability that the previous reign had not provided.

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[5] Mary Beth Rose, "The Gendering of Authority in the Public Speeches of Elizabeth I" *PMLA* 115 no. 5 (Oct., 2000), 1077-1079.
[6] Allison Heisch, "Queen Elizabeth I and the Persistence of Patriarchy," *Feminist Review* no. 4 (1980).
[7] Allison Heisch, "Queen Elizabeth I: Parliamentary Rhetoric and the Exercise of Power," *Signs* no. 1 (Autumn, 1975), 55
[8] Ian Crofton, *The Kings and Queens of England* (New York: Metro Books, 2011), 122.

His son, Henry VIII, was able to build upon such a positive precedent and became a popular and beloved sovereign. Jane Bingham asserts that young Henry was recognized as the most capable prince ever to ascend to the English throne.[9] He established the Church of England, built numerous palaces and other buildings, assumed sovereignty over Wales and Ireland, and fathered three future sovereigns of England. He united his country and strengthened the English state and the institution of monarchy itself and as a result, Henry VIII was revered, respected and ultimately loved.[10] His daughter, Elizabeth, would experience similar affection from the English citizens.

Women in 15th and 16th century England did not occupy an enviable status. Common women were considered inferior members of society, subject to the rule of their respective husbands. This needs to be emphasized, women were not only subordinate, but were "considered fundamentally inferior," an idea supported by the Catholic Church.[11] Women were denied education beyond the most basic levels, which kept them from taking up any professions, and upon marriage women were forced to hand over all their wealth and property.[12] Women of the aristocracy had slightly more freedom and, importantly, more opportunities for education. They could learn foreign languages, mathematics, music, drawing, and other such arts. This was partly as a result of the Renaissance, which had reached England at about this

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[9] Jane Bingham, *The Tudors: The Kings and Queens of England's Golden Age* (New York: Metro Books, 2012), 47.
[10] J.J. Scarisbrick, *Henry VIII* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 499, 506.
[11] Peter C. Herman, *A Short History of Early Modern England* (West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell,2011), 21.
[12] John A. Wagner, *Historical Dictionary of the Elizabethan World: Britain, Ireland, Europe, and America* (Phoenix: Oryx Press, 1999, s.v. "women."

time.[13] Young Elizabeth was an exceptionally educated woman. As the daughter of the king, she was provided with some of the best tutors. She learned the Latin, Greek, Italian, French, and Spanish languages. This was especially advanced for anyone at the time.[14] She also wrote poetry and translated several literary works. Her access to and level of education spoke to her special status. During her reign, she "endowed scholarships, propped up secondary schools and universities [though] there is no indication that she encouraged the ladies of her court to pursue learning after her example."[15] Heisch further states that Elizabeth I's education "showed merely that she was extraordinary; it did not suggest that women in general might be educable."[16] Her exceptional education is one aspect that made her popular with women and successful as Queen, but she apparently did not feel that all women needed to pursue knowledge as she did.

Her most significant obstacle to the throne was the reluctance to accept a female monarch in England. One contemporary philosopher, John Knox, had much to say on the subject of female rule. He published *The First Trumpet Blast against the Monstrous Regiment of Women*, which states that "to promote a woman to bear rule [...] is repugnant to nature."[17] Knox attests that women are, by nature, "weake, fraile, impacient, feble and foolishe (*sic*)."[18] These qualities make women incapable of effective governance and he states that they should

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[13] Alison Plowden, *Tudor Women: Queens and Commoners* (Gloucestershire, UK: History Press, 2010), 33.
[14] Crofton, *The Kings and Queens of England*, 146.
[15] Heisch, "Queen Elizabeth I and the Persistence of Patriarchy," 53.
[16] Ibid.
[17] John Knox, "The First Blast of the Trumpet against the monstrous regiment of Women 1558" in *The English Scholar's Library of Old and Modern Works,* ed. Edward Arber (London: University College, 1878),11.
[18] Knox, "First Blast of the Trumpet," 12.

not "be appointed to lead [nor] governe (*sic*) the discrete and give counsel."[19] On the same note, Paul E.J. Hammer quotes Thomas Becon's statement that "queens were for the most part wicked, ungodly, superstitious, and given to idolatry and to all filthy abominations, as we may see in the histories of queen Jesebel, queen Athalia, queen Herodias, and such-like."[20]

A major factor contributing to Elizabeth I's succession and success as monarch was her ambiguous attitude towards her own gender. She denied, except on rare occasions, her being female by referring to herself as "prince" repeatedly in speeches in letters. In 1560, Elizabeth I responded to a marriage proposal from Erik of Sweden. In this text, she makes known her desire to maintain "friendship between Princes."[21] In 1563, she referred to herself as "prince" twice in her "Answer to the Lords' Petition that she Marry."[22] She spoke of the "debt [of a] prince's word."[23] In the next year, Elizabeth I gave a speech at Cambridge University in which she again used the term "prince" and likened herself to the male Alexander in that both "breathed forth a sigh" when gazing upon monuments erected by their respective predecessors.[24] She continued to use such language all throughout her lifetime, even until her final speech in front of Parliament in 1601.

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[19] Ibid.
[20] Paul E.J. Hammer, "Sex and the Virgin Queen: Aristocratic Concupiscence and the Court of Elizabeth I," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 31, no.1 (2000), 82.
[21] Paul Halsall, "Modern History Sourcebook: Queen Elizabeth I of England (b.1533, r.1558-1603) Selected Writing and Speeches," Fordham University, http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/elizabeth1.asp.
[22] Elizabeth I, *Collected Works*, 79.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Elizabeth I, *Collected Works*, 88.

On some occasions Elizabeth I conceded that she was a woman, though she did not embrace her womanhood. She saw it as an obstacle to overcome. One such example is found in her 1563 address to the House of Commons, as quoted by Heisch,

> The weight and greatness of this matter might cawse in me being a woman wanting both wit and memory some feare to speake, and basfulnes besides, a thing appropriate to my sex: But yet the princely seate and kingly throne, wherein God, (though vnworthy) hath constituted me, maketh these two causes to some little in myne eyes.[25]

Essentially, Elizabeth told the House that although she knew women were supposed to be witless, forgetful and bashful, she did not and would not fit the bill. After all, she believed herself to be God's exception to the limitations of womanhood. In 1566, she again acknowledged that she was a woman, though laid claim to "a corage asnwuerable to [her] place as euere [her] fathere hade."[26] To be viewed as courageous, which was considered a masculine trait, was obviously very important to Elizabeth I. She refused to "feare to speake" and compared her courage to that of a great king.[27] She referenced her feminine traits, yet emphasized her so-called masculine traits as God-given. This enabled her to overcome the gender obstacles.

The famous "Armada Speech to the Troops at Tilbury" in 1588 contains yet another case of Elizabeth I asserting her courage. She said

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[25] Allison Heisch, "Queen Elizabeth I: Parliamentary Rhetoric and the Exercise of Power," *Signs* 1, no. 1. (1975), 34.
[26] Heisch, "Queen Elizabeth I: Parliamentary Rhetoric and the Exercise of Power," 35.
[27] Ibid.

to her soldiers, as they were about to face the Spanish forces, "I know I have the body but of a weak and feeble woman, but I have the heart and stomach of a king."[28] Rather than embrace her femininity and the virtues and qualities given to women, she apologized for not being a man. She could not deny the physical reality of her sex, but she could give herself the masculine trait of kingly courage. This passage alludes to the fortitude which was considered a specifically male characteristic at this time. Her emphasis on the word "king" further shows her portrayal of herself in masculine traits. It appears in these several instances that she accepted the idea prevalent in the English patriarchal society that women were, in fact, inferior, and she needed to draw a distinction between herself and the rest of women.

Beemer and Mueller claim that Elizabeth I accepted the feminine role of wife in claiming to be married to England. Although she did use such terminology, she did so in order to escape marriage. Elizabeth I learned that marriage would be a political disaster in observing her sister Mary's reign. Mary had chosen to marry Philip of Spain, a country that was continually at odds with England. This made many of the English unhappy, for they feared that Philip would be crowned king and take over control of the nation. Even queens, as women, were expected to obey their husbands. This would essentially put them at the mercy of whomever they chose.[29] This man could potentially have been either a foreigner or an English nobleman. By choosing an English man, she would be forced to marry beneath her social status. In addition, the various aristocratic families were constantly at odds, which made choosing among them a political chess

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[28] Elizabeth I, *Collected Works*, 326.
[29] Beemer, "The Female Monarchy," 262.

match. Marrying a foreigner would have put the country in non-English hands, which would have been unacceptable to her subjects. Elizabeth I recognized the impossibility of a marriage that would be acceptable to all, so she refused to marry. Her Parliament, however, constantly put pressure upon her to marry, as women were not meant to rule kingdoms. She adopted the imagery of England's wife as a method of prevarication. She even "wore her Coronation ring to symbolize her marriage to the kingdom."[30] She wanted to remove the issue of her marriage from Parliamentary discussion entirely, so she designated herself England's wife. Hammer claims that she "had sacrificed her own opportunities to marry for the sake of political stability."[31] Ultimately, she was successful because Parliament eventually accepted her role as England's Virgin Queen. As for the lay people, they also "gradually became accustomed to the novel idea of a virgin Queen."[32]

Despite growing up in a time when women were not valued beyond the household, Elizabeth I did little to improve the lives of women. All of her closest counselors were male and "the ladies of the household, never very many in number, were not encouraged to put themselves forward."[33] Plowden goes on to state that "Elizabeth, perhaps regrettably, showed no interest whatever in the liberation of women."[34] Heisch also expresses that Elizabeth "did little to inspire other women to regard themselves with pride or to persuade men to regard them differently."[35] Proof of this can be found in examining the

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[30] Heisch, "Queen Elizabeth I and the Persistence of Patriarchy," 50.
[31] Hammer, "Sex and the Virgin Queen," 97.
[32] Plowden, *Tudor Women*, 158.
[33] Ibid, 169.
[34] Ibid.
[35] Heisch, "Queen Elizabeth I and the Persistence of Patriarchy," 54.

statutes and proclamation issued by the queen and her Parliament. Her reign as one of the longest in history, proved productive. The subjects of the legislation were nearly endless, from specific laws on the taxes applicable to sweet wines to the appointments of military officers. None, however, are related to the improvement of life for women in the realms of education, inheritance, judicial rights, or otherwise.[36]

All things considered, Elizabeth I was a very popular ruler. Many writers devoted poems to her, regaling her virtues and beauty, such as the following 1563 poem from an unknown author,

> Loe the pearl, whom god and man doth love: Loe here on earth, the only starre of light: Loe here the Queene, whom no mishap can move: To chainge her mynde, from vertues chief delight: Loe here the heart, that so hath honord God: that for her love, we feele not of his rod: pray for her health, such as good subjects bee: (Oh princely Dame,) there is none like to thee.[37]

The last line of this poem is an excellent likening to Elizabeth I and her own views of herself; sexually contradictory language followed by the recognition that she was exceptional. When Elizabeth I did not deny her womanhood, she wielded it like a political weapon used to cut down attacks against her ability to rule. She did not pose herself as an example for future female leaders, but rather claimed herself as the divine exception to the rule, with no thought for the rights of her fellow females.

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[36] G.W. Prothero, *Select Statutes and other Constitutional Documents: Illustrative of the Reigns of Elizabeth and James I (1894;repr., London: Oxford University Press, 1963).*

[37] "Loe the Pearl" (1563) *Early English Books Online.*

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