ELIZABETH I
GENDER, POWER & POLITICS

Susan Doran looks at what it meant to be a female monarch in a male world and how the Queen responded to the challenges.

Judging from the results of last year’s BBC television poll of Great Britons, Elizabeth I is the best known and most admired English monarch, at least among those members of the public who decided to vote. Given her high profile in films and biographies, the Queen’s relative success in the poll is perhaps unsurprising, especially as her life was so full of incident and drama. The evidence suggests, however, that it was specifically Elizabeth’s ability as a woman to exercise power successfully in a man’s world that earned her the votes and commanded the respect of today’s viewers; she scored highest on her bravery and leadership qualities, while the comments of her supporters, as reported on the BBC website, emphasised her difficulties as a female ruler and her role as ‘the ultimate British feminist icon’.

Recent academic opinion is usually less kind to Elizabeth. Christopher Haigh has described her as a bully and a show-off, while Susan Brigden seems to share the Elizabethan Council’s irritation with their Queen’s indecision, prevarications and sometimes faulty judgement. Nonetheless, whatever their views about the character of the Queen, many historians today share the pre-occupation with Elizabeth’s gender; they tend to stress the problems she faced as a female ruler in the patriarchal sixteenth century and the ways she attempted to circumvent them. I would suggest, however, that these difficulties have been overstated and that Elizabeth’s methods of negotiating her gender have been partially misunderstood.

Elizabeth riding the chariot of fame: she claimed the same prerogatives as her male predecessors and adopted the same visual imagery.
Of course, there is no question that early-modern society was deeply patriarchal in its structure and attitudes. Male primogeniture governed most property arrangements as well as the laws of succession to the crown. In theory, at least, women were not expected to assert any independent authority but were deemed subservient to male relatives whether fathers, brothers or husbands. The Scottish Calvinist preacher John Knox (c.1513-72) famously railed against female monarchy as an abomination in his _The First Blast of the Trumpet against the Monstrous Regiment of Women_, a work written in 1558 to contest Catholic Mary I’s right to be queen. Yet, despite patriarchal attitudes, female rule was no great novelty in the sixteenth century; not only had women inherited the thrones of Castile, Scotland and England before Elizabeth’s accession, but more importantly they had also been selected to act as regents in Spain, Scotland, the Netherlands and France during the absences of their monarchs. Furthermore, Knox’s views were extreme and reiterated by only a handful of other Protestants.

In any case, at the time of Elizabeth’s accession, barely a murmur was heard querying the legitimacy of female rule. Catholics at home and abroad presumably did not think to use Knoxian-style arguments to challenge Elizabeth’s right to the throne, because their claimant, Mary, Queen of Scots, was also a woman. In general, the prevailing sentiment within England in mid-November 1558 was not concern at the accession of another queen of England, but rather relief that Mary Tudor’s reign – marked by harvest failure, epidemics and military humiliation – was now over, and that Elizabeth’s succession was smooth and for all practical purposes undisputed without military intervention from France, Scotland or Spain. Protestants were obviously delighted by the new regime: Thomas Becon, who in 1555 had bemoaned the accession of a female ruler as God’s punishment towards a ‘people unworthy to have lawful, natural and meet governors’, now accepted with joy Elizabeth as:

...a most worthy patroness of all true religion and of learning, a most noble defender of all godly disposed people [and] a noble conqueror of antichrist.

With Elizabeth on the throne, Knox himself hurriedly backtracked, even though he never actually recanted his earlier opinions. Other Protestant theologians, though,
explicitly endorsed Elizabeth’s right to rule and openly rejected Knox’s arguments. In a letter to William Cecil in 1559, John Calvin (1509-64) reasoned that female rule was acceptable in countries where it had been established by law or custom and, furthermore, asserted that in exceptional circumstances God deliberately chose to channel His authority through women rulers, witness the Judge Deborah and prophetess Huldah in the Hebrew Bible. Possibly because Knox’s views were not widely held, only two English writers felt impelled during the first years of Elizabeth’s reign to write tracts refuting his *First Blast*, and only the work of one of them – John Aylmer’s *Harshrowe for faithfull and true subiectes* – was published (in 1559). In England, it seems, the monarchy was excluded from patriarchal assumptions and a female monarch was given rights by God which permitted her to rule over men.

Elizabeth justified her right to rule on the non-gendered grounds of the laws of inheritance, her father’s will and the 1544 Act of Succession. At the same time, like her grandfather, Henry VII, and half-sister, Mary, she emphasised the role of God in preserving her from danger and placing her on the throne; during the Coronation procession of January 1559 she not only allowed herself to be identified with Deborah, the instrument of Divine Providence, but also compared herself to Daniel, who had been saved from the lion’s den. Throughout the reign, Elizabeth claimed the same prerogatives as her male predecessors, adopted the same visual imagery and mottoes on her coinage, and participated in traditional royal rituals, adapting them where necessary to suit a female monarch. Thus, on Maundy Thursday she washed the feet of poor women (instead of men) as part of the Easter ceremonies; on the feast of St George her ladies-in-waiting joined her in the Great Procession with the Knights of the Garter; and she sometimes chose to wear a magnificent gown rather than the customary martial attire. In the 1570s after the papal bull of excommunication, she decided to use the ancient form of royal magic and touch for the King’s Evil (to cure the disease of scrofula) in order to emphasise her God-given sovereignty.

Despite the general acceptance of a woman’s right to rule, there was at the outset of the reign some uncertainty about the extent to which Elizabeth would exercise power. Aylmer had assumed that the government would be in her name and on her behalf but executed by her Council and Parliament. Her first principal secretary, William Cecil, had initially presumed that the queen would leave the cut and thrust of decision-making to her most important councillors, particularly over areas of policy which fell within the male preserve of diplomacy and international affairs. But Elizabeth immediately made it absolutely clear that she intended to rule in deed as well as in name. She put her stamp on the membership of the Council by appointing several of her relatives and loyal friends, as well as associates of Cecil. Although she agreed to a change in title from Supreme Head to Supreme Governor of the Church of England, she made sure that the new settlement of religion reflected her own religious preferences as much (or more) than those of Protestant theologians or trusted ministers. Those royal injunctions of 1559 which ordered waferstobe used for communion, insisted on clerical dress, and safeguarded church music in cathedrals, were the product of her own desires, and indeed were anathema to most of her advisers. Similarly, royal proclamations of 1560 and 1561 designed to prevent further outbursts of iconoclasm, particularly those which threatened funeral monuments, were the work of her hand.

As time went on, Elizabeth continued to exercise power and to take the final decisions on policy. It was the Queen who prevented influential councillors and members of parliament from passing legislation in the 1560s and 1570s which would have excluded Mary, Queen of Scots, from the throne. Without Elizabeth’s protection after 1569, moreover, Mary might well have knelt at the scaffold years before her execution in 1587.

As far as foreign policy is concerned, Elizabeth usually put her weight behind those more cautious councillors who wanted to avoid outright war with Spain during the 1570s and early 1580s and who preferred to follow a policy of giving

*The Royal Maundy* c.1565, attributed to Levina Teerlinc. The Queen wears an apron to wash the feet of the poor women, seated to the left and right.
1566. Had a more radical and less assertive monarch been sitting on the throne, a very different Church of England would have emerged in the second half of the sixteenth century.

Baffled by the Queen’s failure to see the wisdom of their advice, Elizabeth’s advisers often expressed their frustration in the gendered, sometimes misogynistic language of their day. Thus, they would criticise the Queen’s feminine irresolution, female fickleness and womanly compassion towards papists and traitors. Nonetheless, their concern was more about what they saw as the Queen’s mistaken policies and refusal to listen to good sense than about the inappropriateness of a woman taking decisions. Until at least the mid-1580s their frustration was a measure of Elizabeth’s independence and their failure to persuade or browbeat her into following their own particular line of policy.

Elizabeth’s independence was made more palatable to her councillors by the style of her leadership. But whether or not the qualities she exhibited in managing her male advisers can be labelled ‘feminine’ is a moot point, and writers today should really stop making simplistic assertions that Elizabeth capitalised on her ‘feminine characteristics’ to secure obedience and achieve her goals in statecraft. Like her father, Elizabeth displayed a mixture of radiating charm and unpredictable rages; like him, too, she demanded to be the centre of attention and enjoyed the flattery of courtiers (even if she had the intelligence to see through it). Unlike Henry VIII, though, she was immensely loyal to those she trusted, and men soon realised that they could present her with unwelcome advice without risking their necks. Her frequent refusal to be pro-active or pinned down to a particular line of action may have infuriated them, yet this flexibility and apparent indecisiveness always left open the possibility that she might rethink her position and change her mind. Consequently, until the later 1590s, when Elizabeth’s skills of political management were waning, there was no need for anyone in the Council or at court to feel permanently excluded from power or entirely cut off from influencing the Queen, unless she unwise-ly overstepped the mark by questioning her authority.

Historians and literary critics have also suggested that Elizabeth dealt with the problems of her gender by adopting strategies that turned her into the iconic Virgin Queen: first by deciding to remain unwed and second by fashioning herself into the Virgin Mary for propaganda purposes. Each of these propositions presents problems of interpretation. As far as Elizabeth’s marriage is concerned, it has become almost a cliché that the Queen was determined to stay single so that she could rule as well as reign. Elizabeth, it is said, had learned this maxim from the sad experiences of Mary, who had allowed political power to slip into the hands of her husband, Philip of Spain, thereby dragging England into the disastrous Habsburg wars against France which resulted in the loss of Calais. Yet there is little evidence that Elizabeth rejected the idea of marriage as a deliberate act of will. On the contrary, far from being totally committed to the single life, Elizabeth on two occasions signalled that she wanted to marry a particular suitor. In 1560 she gave every appearance of being in love with Lord Robert Dudley; in 1579 she demonstrated a strong inclination to wed the French duke, Francis of Anjou. In both instances, however, the fierce opposition to her choice of husband, expressed in Council, at court and in the country at large, led Elizabeth to

Armor worn by Leicester in tournaments, c.1575. Several of the Queen’s counsellors made it clear that marriage to her favourite would damage her reputation – advice she heeded.

Sutor to the Queen: Francis, Duke of Anjou (1554-84). Elizabeth responded to political objections to the match, ultimately refusing his hand.
conclude that she would lose the support of influential subjects and create grave political difficulties if she went ahead with the match. In the case of Dudley, Cecil and other royal servants warned her that marriage to him would seriously damage her reputation and might even imperil her seat on the throne. They were probably right; the widespread rumours that Elizabeth had been involved in an adulterous relationship with her favourite and had conspired with him to murder his wife could only be allayed if she distanced herself from him. As for Anjou, most English Protestants abhorred his religion, disliked his French blood, and believed that Elizabeth’s marriage to him would bring the wrath of God down on England. Once again, Elizabeth demonstrated political sense in ultimately rejecting his suit.

Despite the hostility targeted at Dudley and Anjou, Elizabeth was under intense pressure from her councillors and Parliament to end uncertainties about the succession by marrying and giving birth to an heir. Cecil, who had spearheaded the campaign against the Dudley match, found what he thought was a far better marital candidate in the Archduke Charles of Austria, a younger son of the Holy Roman Emperor Ferdinand. The Archduke, argued Cecil, was suitable in terms of his age, lineage and reputation, and would bring England an advantageous diplomatic alliance with the Habsburgs. In his enthusiasm for the match, Cecil persuaded himself that Charles’s religion (he was a Catholic) would not prove a barrier to it. Elizabeth, though, was less keen on the Archduke. With Dudley out of the running she preferred to remain single, and besides she had heard unfounded rumours that Charles was deformed. Nonetheless, she found it impossible to withstand the pressure from all sides to marry; after all, the public image she had cultivated was that of a queen devoted to the interests of her subjects, even to the point of self-sacrifice. She therefore could hardly seem to be putting her personal preferences above the dynastic needs of her country. Consequently, in 1564 Elizabeth agreed to open discussions with the Austrians and soon afterwards she authorised envoys and councillors to negotiate a matrimonial treaty. From the start, however, Elizabeth insisted that the marriage had to be on her terms, terms which denied the Archduke any political power in England and compelled him to accompany her to Protestant church services and to forgo a public mass. It should not be thought that Elizabeth stipulated these conditions in order to sabotage the negotiations; Cecil and other supporters of the match also required them as safeguards for England’s political interests. Although the Austrians eventually agreed to the articles which excluded Charles from any role in government, the Archduke demanded access to the mass, if only a private one to be held in his own apartment. On this issue the negotiations broke down, for Elizabeth refused to permit any compromise over religion. No doubt she was heartily relieved to have found a get-out clause, but her decision was supported by a number of her councillors as well as her divines and London preachers. Thus, in the end it was the religious question and not gender concerns that caused the collapse of the Archduke Charles matrimonial suit.

The image of Elizabeth as the Virgin Queen was not evident early in the reign, when Elizabeth’s hold on power was arguably the least secure, nor was it she herself who first devised the image. The language and iconography of perpetual and powerful virginity first made their appearance during the Anjou matrimonial negotiations of 1578-81 as part of the weaponry employed against the match by its opponents. Thereafter, the figure of Elizabeth as the Virgin Queen gained currency as
a courtly fashion to flatter, and also (including that of Edmund Spenser's Faerie Queene) to criticise the Queen. Courtiers and poets were the main creators of the image, though certainly Elizabeth helped to promote it in her entertainments at court (such as the 'Four Foster Children of Desire') and in the miniatures she commissioned, where she was portrayed as the goddess Diana or Cynthia. Whenever Elizabeth was depicted or addressed as the Virgin Queen, it is very rare indeed to see any unambiguous allusions to the Virgin Mary. Far more direct iconographical references to the classical goddesses Diana, Cynthia and Astraeca or to Petrarch's chaste maidens, Laura and Tuccia. For all these reasons, there seems to be no case for claiming that Elizabeth appropriated the cult of the Virgin Mary as a strategy to secure acceptance as a female ruler.

Why did representations of Elizabeth as a Virgin Queen become so pervasive in poetry and portraiture during the 1590s? One strong possibility is that this mode of representation was thought a safe and effective way of depicting an elderly woman as a credible military and political leader of a country at war. Elizabeth's impenetrable body politic was a natural metaphor for the impregnable body politic withstanding invasion from a foreign king. At the same time, symbolic associations with the moon-goddesses, Diana, Phoebe and Cynthia, signified both England's sea-power and the Queen's immutability and continuing potency, despite her advancing age.

Arguably, Elizabeth experienced her greatest difficulties with her gender during the last fifteen years of her life, just when the image of her as the all-powerful Virgin Queen was taking hold. Until then, the gendered outbursts of courtiers and councillors had barely affected the tone of political life, as outward def-
One of the ‘Sieve’ portraits, (c.1580-83, and attributed to Cornelius Ketel) this richly allegorical painting combines imperial aspirations with positive reference to the Queen’s chastity.

At the same time, the presence of an adult male king, James VI of Scotland, waiting to inherit the throne made many of Elizabeth’s courtiers impatient to see the end of female rule. John Harington, for example, mused that:

... wheresoeuer God shall call [Queen Elizabeth], I perceive we are not like to be governed by a lady shut up in a chamber from all her subjects and most of her servants, and seen seld but on holidays ... but by a man of spirit and learning, of able body, of understanding mind.

With a male monarch on the throne, thought Harington, the privy chamber would again be staffed by men, and male courtiers would no longer be denied opportunities for intimacy and advancement.

Undoubtedly, Elizabeth’s authority was affected by this new attitude at court. Once out of England, her military commanders flagrantly disobeyed royal instructions. During the Rouen campaign of 1591, for example, Essex conferred no fewer than twenty-four knighthoods in defiance of the Queen’s express instructions. More seriously, during the Cadiz campaign of 1596 he planned to seize a base in Spain in total contradiction of Elizabeth’s orders, and was only thwarted in his design by his co-commander, Lord Admiral Howard. Part of the problem was that Elizabeth was at a disadvantage in not being able to go in person to the battlefield. As an unmarried queen, moreover, she could not even call on her husband to act as a figurehead in her place, as had her sister Mary at St Quentin. But age was another factor. In the 1590s Elizabeth was old enough to be the grandmother of the new generation of courtiers, many of whom found her out of touch with their culture and aspirations. Their declining respect for their queen was demonstrated in the many sexual scandals that disrupted the court in the 1590s. Not only were a significant number of male courtiers prepared to flout Elizabeth’s authority by embarking on illicit sexual relationships with maids of honour, but also every elopement and pregnancy that occurred was a stark reminder of ‘her own physical and political sterility’. Nonetheless, despite her age, Elizabeth could on occasions impress observers with her majesty and intelligence: in 1596 her impromptu speech in Latin reprimanding a Polish ambassador who had offended her, so delighted English listeners that it was published; in 1601 her ‘Golden Speech’ which silenced complaining members of parliament was similarly printed and distributed to the wider populace.

All in all, Elizabeth’s gender had less impact on political life than is generally assumed. The key political issues of the day were those that had dominated earlier reigns: religion, the succession and international affairs. While Elizabeth had her own style of leadership, she worked within the same institutional structures and adopted the same royal conventions as earlier monarchs. Even Elizabeth’s image was not so very different from that of her male predecessors and contemporary kings; like them she emphasised her regality, religion and role as carer of her people. The part that Elizabeth’s conservatism and reliance on tradition played in making female rule acceptable to male subjects should not be forgotten; she provoked no fears that the social and gender hierarchy would be subverted by female monarchy. In this sense, Elizabeth was no feminist icon. Her reign did however demonstrate that a woman could be an exceptionally successful ruler even in dangerous times. In this sense, she was!

**FOR FURTHER READING**

Paul E.J. Hammer, ‘Sex and the Virgin Queen: Aristocratic Conceit and the Court of Elizabeth I’ Sixteenth Century Journal 21 (2000); Susan Doran, Monarchy and

Matrimony: The Courtship of Elizabeth I


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A decorated bible given to Elizabeth as a New Year’s Gift in 1583-84.

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