

Interpreting Elizabeth I

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Elizabeth I is admired today for her power dressing and her power portraits; her political acumen and her success in a man's world – a 'thug culture', as David Starkey has aptly described Henry VIII's court, where Elizabeth grew up.¹

The adulation of Elizabeth started during her own lifetime when she was praised as a goddess and even as a celestial power. Elizabeth's semi-mythical status is reflected in the many extraordinary portraits of her painted during her lifetime. Among the most iconic is the Rainbow Portrait at Hatfield House in Hertfordshire. Elizabeth's dress is covered in human eyes, ears and lips, which have been interpreted as a reference to Elizabeth's secret service headed by Sir Francis Walsingham.²

After her death there was a rush to eulogise Elizabeth in print and her reign was hailed as a golden age. Sir Robert Naunton famously complimented Elizabeth for balancing the different factions at court: 'the principal note of her reign will be that she ruled much by faction and parties, which herself both made, upheld and weakened, as her own great judgment advised'.³ This was written in the 1630s as a not very coded attack on the rule of the early Stuart kings.

Since the 1980s, in response to wider cultural changes in attitudes to gender, there has been an increased interest in the history of women and the dynamics of gender among historians. This has led to reappraisals of her reign, to a focus on the specific problems Elizabeth faced as a female ruler and to studies of Elizabeth's female privy chamber and individual aristocratic women. We now have greater understanding of how female power was perceived in the sixteenth century. Like Elizabeth herself, her female courtiers are now seen as having an important and independent role to play in politics beyond the all-male realms of the privy council and parliament.⁴

In addition to reappraisals driven by an interest in gender, there has been a revisionist trend in more recent historical writing towards dismantling the glorious image of Elizabeth I. Even the most famous event of her reign, her speech to the troops at Tilbury during the Spanish Armada in 1588 has been questioned. Her immortal words are well known – 'let tyrants fear ... I have but the body of a weak and feeble woman, but I have the heart and stomach of a king and of a king of England too'. Yet the speech only exists in later versions and the earliest manuscript of it in the British Library has been dated to the 1620s. This has caused much debate amongst literary scholars and historians, with Frances

Teague arguing that we know little about what Elizabeth actually said at Tilbury.⁵

Christopher Haigh was one of the first historians to emphasise the contemporary negative reception of Elizabeth's queenship in his 1988 Longman Profile in Power, *Elizabeth I*. The most famous sixteenth-century attack on female rulers had come from John Knox at the start of Elizabeth's reign in 1558. In his notorious *First Blast of the Trumpet against the Monstrous Regiment of Women* Knox had attacked the *regiment* or government of women, arguing that 'to promote a woman to bear rule, superiority, dominion or empire above any realm, nation or city is repugnant to nature, contumely to God, a thing most contrarious to His revealed will and approved ordinance'.⁶

Haigh shows how Elizabeth's sex was used against her and that in 1560-61, and again in 1570-72, there were rumours that she had given birth to numerous illegitimate children, who had been murdered to avoid scandal. The first spate of rumours was associated with the death of Robert Dudley's wife Amy in 1560, when it was widely believed that the queen would marry him. The second wave of rumours was associated with the period of instability surrounding the Ridolfi Plot and the Northern Rebellion in favour of Mary Queen of Scots.

Prosecutions for seditious words against Elizabeth continued throughout her reign and stories that Dudley was the father of her children even resurfaced in the 1590s. In 1591 an Essex man complained that the queen was 'but a woman and ruled by noblemen'. An underlying theme of such outbursts was the belief that, as a woman, Elizabeth would be unable to control her male courtiers: she was their plaything and pawn. Haigh argued that by the 1590s the ageing queen was increasingly indecisive. She ruled with a narrow privy council and was unloved by her people.⁷

Haigh's interpretation dovetails neatly with Patrick Collinson's description of Elizabeth's England as a 'monarchical republic', the title of an important lecture he gave in 1986. In it Collinson stressed the extent to which Elizabeth's privy council operated as a body independent from the queen.⁸ The clear message in the work of these two historians is that all of the most effective of Elizabeth's policies, such as the religious settlement of 1559 or the execution of Mary Queen of Scots, came from her male ministers including William Cecil and Francis Walsingham.

This view is not accepted by all historians and Susan Doran has argued that Elizabeth was not a cipher of her privy council; instead she was a 'charismatic and hands-on ruler'. Similarly, Judith Richards sees her as the 'final arbiter' of policy decisions.⁹ Even Elizabeth's many marriage negotiations can be seen as part of a wider strategic policy and have been described by Susan Doran as an important element of diplomacy with foreign states.¹⁰

Ultimately, however, if success is measured by the ability to take and retain the crown for as long as possible, then Elizabeth was a very successful monarch indeed. Her reign lasted for nearly 45 years, this was longer than any other Tudor monarch and longer than most previous kings.

Designing enquiries to help pupils think about interpretations of Elizabeth I

Key Stage 3: 11 to 14 years

Key Stage 3 students could be asked to explore how Elizabeth I has been interpreted by examining changing filmic and televisual representations of Elizabeth's Tilbury speech, many of which are available on-line. Ask pupils to compare changes in how the speech has been imagined and, perhaps, to consider the differing ways in which Elizabeth herself has been imagined – stiff-backed, Shakespearean and 'regal', for example, in Glenda Jackson's *Elizabeth R* (1971), feisty, guttural and furious in Anna Marie Duff's *Virgin Queen* (2005) and armoured and defiant in Cate Blanchett's *Elizabeth: The Golden Age* (2007). Pupils could be encouraged to explore relationships between these representations and changing ideas of gender over time. They could also be encouraged to explore how the text of the speech has been edited and to consider the different impressions that the different versions of the texts are designed to convey.

A-level: 16 to 19 years

A-level students could begin by looking at Tilbury in the same way – by exploring filmic depictions – and then track accounts of the speech through the historiography of Elizabeth's reign over time and also across genres. How has the speech been treated in disciplinary and other forms of historical writing and how have the stories that the speech is used to tell changed? In addition to the descriptive question 'how have interpretations changed?' students could be encouraged to use this question as a window into how history works in at least two senses. First, in the sense of differences in the genre and style of history – what role does the speech play in different modes of historical writing? Second, in an evidential sense: what does the story of the documents in which the speech is 'recorded' tell us about how contemporaries made sense of Elizabeth and what does the way in which Frances Teague and others read the documents reveal about history as a disciplined practice?

The Editors

Further reading

Collinson, P. (1987) 'The Monarchical Republic of Elizabeth I' in *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester* 69, No. 2, pp. 394-424.
 Doran, S. (2003) *Queen Elizabeth I*, London: The British Library.
 Haigh, C. (1988) *Elizabeth I*, London and New York: Longman.
 Richards, J. (2012) *Elizabeth I*, London: Routledge.
 Whitelock, A. (2013) *Elizabeth's Bedfellows: an intimate history of the queen's court*, London: Bloomsbury.
 Wright, P. (1987) 'A Change in Directions: The Ramifications of a Female Household, 1558-1603' in David Starkey (ed.) *The English Court from the Wars of the Roses to Civil War*, London: Longman, pp. 147-72.

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- Starkey, S. (2003) 'Elizabeth: woman, monarch, mission' in Susan Doran (ed.) *Elizabeth: the exhibition at the National Maritime Museum*, London: Chatto and Windus, pp.3-4.
- The portrait can be accessed at: http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Elizabeth_I_Rainbow_Portrait.jpg?uselang=en-gb
- Cited in Haigh, C. (1988) *Elizabeth I*, London and New York: Longman, p.100.
- Wright, P. (1987) 'A Change in Directions: the ramifications of a female household, 1558-1603' in David Starkey (ed.) *The English Court from the Wars of the Roses to the Civil War*, London: Longman, pp. 147-72; Harris, B. (1990) 'Women and Politics in early Tudor England' in *The Historical Journal*, 33, No. 2, pp.259-81; Whitelock, A. (2013) *Elizabeth's Bedfellows: an intimate history of the queen's court*, London: Bloomsbury.
- Teague, F. (1992) 'Queen Elizabeth in Her Speeches' in S. P. Cerasano and Marion Wynne-Davies (eds), *Gloriana's Face: women, public and private, in the English Renaissance*, New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, p.8 and pp. 65-69, where the speech is quoted.
- Cited in Aughterson, K. (1995) *Renaissance Woman: constructions of femininity in England: a sourcebook* (London and New York: Routledge, p.138.
- Haigh, *op.cit.*, *passim*.
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- Doran, S. (2012) *Queen Elizabeth I*, London: British Library, pp.114-15 and 137; Richards, J. (2012) *Elizabeth I*, London: Routledge, p.209.
- Doran, S. (1996) *Monarchy and Matrimony: the courtships of Elizabeth I*, London: Routledge.

This edition's Polychronicon was compiled by Jackie Eales, Professor of Early Modern History at Canterbury Christ Church University and President of the Historical Association.

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