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Elizabeth I: Reputations and Reconfigurations

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This year is a momentous one for students of early modern Britain. Elizabeth I?s death, four hundred years

ago, ended the Tudor dynasty and brought the Stuart kings of Scotland to the English throne. The dynastic changeover inaugurated a new phase of the history of this island. Key words and concepts ? *inter alia*, Britain, union, empire, Englishman, Scot ? acquired new meaning and relevance, as James VI and I?s accession gave birth to a political configuration that, since the marriage of Margaret Tudor to James IV in 1503, had (in Gordon Donaldson?s judicious phrase) ?never been a remote contingency.?(1) The intervening century had given Scotsmen and Englishmen plenty of opportunity to look at each other across the border and to consider what union with the other might mean. The examination intensified as Elizabeth?s reign progressed, the passage of time making the queen?s death without issue one of the few fixed points of reference in a destabilised political landscape.

Undoubtedly these circumstances gave Englishmen the occasion to reflect on, and to extol, Englishness, often in proleptic and elegiac terms. They also made possible a compelling synecdoche of queen and nation. For dynastic politics dictated that James, who claimed the throne on the basis of blood right, would enter into this portion of his inheritance in his own person: as a Scot, and as a man whose blood claims to monarchical authority transcended those that he carried from his Tudor forebears. ?Great Britain? might prove to be the means by which, in the latter days, God?s grace would redeem mankind. It might prove to be ?less than little England was wont to be?, as ?Tom Tell-Troath? announced in 1620.(2) But from 1603 onwards the new relationship between Scotland and England threw into relief an image of ?little England? as an idealised autonomous past as well as a continuing geopolitical presence. And because Elizabeth I was the last of her line and ?mere English? ? especially because she came to signify this England ? her myth achieved political significance from very early in the Stuart century.

Over time the overt political significance of that synecdoche has diminished. Arguably it flickered, weakly and for the last time, for a brief moment in the 1950s, when Elizabeth II came to the throne and a coterie of the English establishment (now including Scots) could meaningfully describe themselves, in terms as much cultural as political, as the ?New Elizabethans?. But the myth continues to shape English-speaking people?s understanding of early modern history and to some extent how they understand their own histories, national and personal. The immensely popular *Elizabeth* exhibition at the National Maritime Museum ends with a contemporary pictorial record of Elizabeth?s funeral procession. Significantly, it is one of the first such depictions of an English sovereign. But as we emerge into the light we encounter Elizabeth resurrected in a series of classic film and television stills, ranging from Flora Robson in *Fire Over England* (1937), to Miranda Richardson in *Blackadder II* (1985), to Dame Judi Dench in *Shakespeare in Love* (1998), and, of course, Cate Blanchett in Shekhar Kapur?s 1998 *Elizabeth*. What other monarch, English or British, could evoke the same range of interest, the same sense of immediate engagement?

This anniversary thus provides a real opportunity for scholars of the period to present their work to a wider than usual audience, using myth as the vehicle to bring together the scholarly and the popular. It also provides a chance to show that we too are aware of, if not actively at play in, our postmodernist present, without impugning our conventional scholarly credentials. In these two books both sets of authors take advantage of the opportunity. There are references to W. C. Sellar and R. J. Yeatman?s *1066 and All That*, the second *Blackadder* series, and the recent BBC programme *100 Greatest Britons* (Elizabeth was in the top ten). Dobson and Watson revel in what they announce as a transgressive task. In their introduction they promise to focus on the kinds of texts that have usually caused historians and literary critics ?fastidious dismay?: ?the spurious, the apocryphal, and the brazenly fictitious.?(pp. 9, 7) In their introduction Doran and Freeman, rather more cautious, wrestle with the inherent subjectivity of both history and myth. They salvage history?s superior status as, ideally at least, ?empirically based and verifiable?, but acknowledge that future readers (if there are any) will ?marvel at ? the myths of Elizabeth? that their book contains.(p.19) Both books are interdisciplinary, bringing together history and literary criticism, and feature more than casual attention to film and art history. ?We have had a great deal of fun writing this book?, Dobson and Watson confess, and I can see why.(p. 332) Opportunities like this don?t come along very often.

In Doran and Freeman?s book the ?play? ends pretty much with the introduction. The body of the book consists of ten chapters that explore aspects of the myth of Elizabeth. Judiciously selected and arranged, they make a consistently interesting and coherent edited collection. The authors include such well-established

historians and literary critics as Patrick Collinson, Andrew Hadfield and Alexandra Walsham (and Doran and Freeman), as well as younger scholars Teresa Grant, Jason Scott-Warren, Brett Usher and Lisa Richardson. Thomas Betteridge, best known for his literary scholarship, concludes the book by surveying ?Elizabeth I on film? in typically lucid fashion, but the collection mostly focuses on the origins of the myth, in Elizabeth?s reign, and its afterlife especially in the first half of the seventeenth century.(3)

In Part 1, ?Trojan horses: contemporary criticisms of Elizabeth?, Freeman and Hadfield use John Foxe?s *Acts and Monuments of the Book of Martyrs* and Edmund Spenser?s *Faerie Queene* respectively to tease out some of the ambiguities of these powerful texts, both of which enjoyed extraordinarily influential half-lives outside the academy; in the case of Foxe?s *Book of Martyrs* right through to the nineteenth century. They see both men as manoeuvring within the language of myth and panegyric to articulate dissatisfaction with Elizabeth?s rule, especially her failure to fully reform the church. Alexandra Walsham takes up this theme in the conclusion to Part 2. Her piece explores the fine line between ?panegyrical praise and stinging reproof?, especially in court sermons. She uses a range of texts and artefacts to show how that line was negotiated during Elizabeth?s lifetime, and how the registers of celebration changed in response to changing political circumstances after Elizabeth?s death. Like providentialism, the myth of Elizabeth as the Protestant Deborah proved to be both flexible and double-edged ? ripe for appropriation for the myth-making that established the English church and that, she argues, ?continues to surround? the historiography of the English Reformation.(pp. 162-3).

The other chapters in Part 2, ?Jacobean perspectives: politic princess or protestant heroine?, examine various seventeenth-century texts to chart how Elizabeth came to be idealized in contradictory terms, as politic monarch and warrior queen. Read in conjunction Patrick Collinson?s and Lisa Richardson?s articles suggest that the first of these readings had a good deal to do with seventeenth-century attempts to define the Supreme Headship of the English Church as the province of a blood right monarch: not the Pope (himself or by proxy), nor a godly man standing proxy for Christ the King. This was an even more significant line of demarcation in the English body politic than that between extolling and controlling the monarch, and one that proved exceptionally difficult to negotiate. Collinson?s meticulous attention to the disjuncture between the Latin and English versions of William Camden?s seminal *Annales* is interesting in its own right and especially welcome as it opens up a text that few scholars, now, can read in the original. Richardson effectively pairs Fulke Greville with John Hayward to show alternative reconstructions of Sir Philip Sidney?s Arcadian motifs in the context of James?s reign.

Teresa Grant changes the focus to the popular, and popularly Protestant, by analysing Thomas Heywood?s massively successful two-part history play *If You Know Not Me You Know Nobody* (1605, 1606). Here we see Foxe?s mythic depiction of Elizabeth resurrected without any of the shadings or subtexts that Freeman describes. Grant calls it a ?supra-Foxian glorification?, written specifically to reflect on James?s kingship. That reflection became more overtly critical in subsequent editions of the play, as James?s attempts to reinvent English kingship unravelled. At the same time, inevitably but significantly, Elizabeth underwent a key metamorphosis, becoming more martial in her chastity, more manly and more heroic.

Part 3 concentrates on gender. Unpacking the gender dynamics of early modern societies as a means of understanding Elizabeth?s reign has paid dividends for historians and literary critics ever since Louis Montrose, in a seminal article, identified the paradox of a woman ruling in a culture in which authority was overdetermined as a male preserve.(4) This collection yields some interesting results. Through a careful analysis of visual representations of the queen in various *genres* Doran concludes that the image of Elizabeth as a virgin came to the fore during the 1580s ? when Elizabeth was in her fifties and definitively past childbearing. It featured in ways that, especially in the later paintings, emphasised the power of virginity. In prints, in contrast, references to Elizabeth?s Protestantism tended to be foregrounded in the visual imagery, while allusions to her virginity were relegated to the accompanying verses. Undoubtedly such manipulation of the virginity trope was designed to reassure those whose loyalty was severely tested by an ageing, now sterile queen, and the unsettled succession. Equally clearly it was intended as a riposte to those who too overtly blamed the queen for that calamitous state of affairs. (In the late 1590s, as Doran notes, Alexander Dickson argued that Elizabeth owed it to her subjects to name a successor ?for to make amends of the wrong

she hath done us in her profession of a maiden life?. [p. 189])

Jason Scott-Warren takes up the problem of the unsettled succession from another direction by focusing on Sir John Harington?s ?gossip?: both his relationship with his ?gossip?, his godmother Elizabeth, and the stream of commentary on people and events preserved in his writings. By the mid 1590s Harington was dropping strong hints, in print, that the queen should subordinate herself to the martial and heroic Earl of Essex: Trajan, in Harington?s pointed compliment. Sometime before 1600 he composed a poem on Mary Queen of Scots?s execution whose closing couplet referred, with damning ambiguity, to the Scottish queen and the unmarried Elizabeth ? ?Grant, Lord, that in this noble isle a queen/ Without a head may never more be seen.?(p. 232) Scott-Warren depicts Harington as longing for the accession of a male monarch to replace the barren Virgin Queen. In this he was by no means alone. By the end of Elizabeth?s reign many men from across the political spectrum had had enough of a hermaphrodite figure who was perceived to be (in Harington?s best known *aperçu*) ?more than a man, and, in truth, sometime less than a woman.?(p. 235)

Dobson and Watson?s work covers some of the same texts and territory, but with a different end in view. They use the figure of Elizabeth in her multiple and various afterlives to investigate what these reinventions tell us about perceptions of Englishness from that day to this. In this ?narrative cultural history?, Elizabeth?s image is the reality, its deployment in a range of *genres* ?from the aspiringly epic to the frankly kitsch? offering the source material for a postmodernist study of English nationalism.(p. 2) Undoubtedly their work will be compared to Jayne Lewis?s similar project, *Mary Queen of Scots: Romance and Nation* (London; Routledge, 1998) and to John Watkins?s more recent book, *Elizabeth in Stuart England: Literature, History, Sovereignty* (Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 2002).(5)

Dobson and Watson?s book cuts loose from conventional chronological moorings, as it does from conventional scholarly sources. It takes the story of our engagement with the figure of Gloriana from the nadir of her popularity in the 1590s up to the present, and from England to America. The final source mentioned is a 2001 book by an American businessman, Alan Axelrod. According to Dobson and Watson, *Elizabeth I CEO: Strategic Lessons from the Leader Who Built An Empire* (Paramus, NJ; Prentice Hall Press, 2000) presents Elizabeth as a ?role model for the globalizing buccaneers of present-day Wall Street?. The reference to swashbuckling Elizabethan privateers is deliberate. Not the least interesting feature of the myth of Elizabeth is its naturalisation in America, a nation that defined itself in opposition to monarchical rule and where, as they note, the homosocial political culture bequeathed by the Founding Fathers ensured that a woman has never embodied state power.(Dobson and Watson, pp. 287, 269)

From their survey, it appears that every age from Elizabeth?s to ours has regarded ?regnant queen? as an oxymoron and struggled manfully to relieve the cognitive dissonance produced by the phenomenon. Dobson and Watson can do little more than sketch out the contours of the various cultural contexts they describe, and without more particularity their unexceptionable conclusion remains, perhaps inevitably, rather too generic to satisfy every reader. On the other hand, the book has much to recommend it. It is written with verve and panache. The broad chronological sweep throws up material that will fascinate those early modernists who rarely venture beyond the mid-seventeenth century, as well as a more general audience. To take only two instances, John Banks?s play *The Island Queens: or, The Death of Mary, Queen of Scotland* (1684) was banned for twenty years due to the succession crisis of Charles II?s reign (regrettably Dobson and Watson do not say why). Banks revised his play, which was then revived in 1704 as *The Albion Queens*. In the context of the impending 1707 Act of Union, the play represented a heroic and singular attempt to make *both* queens, Mary Queen of Scots and Elizabeth, into ?exemplars of the feeling womanhood? that would found and ground this new Albion.(p. 102) The episode enables Dobson and Watson to use Lynn Hunt?s fascinating work on French Revolutionary nationalism to consider how the conception of the nation as female played out in an empire that had two founding ?mothers?, one of whom was held responsible for the (possibly necessary) execution of the other.

Far more often, over the long eighteenth century and later, Mary was consigned to the realm of sentiment, while Elizabeth soldiered on in her Britomart garb ? a trajectory that made sense of the decision to cast Quentin Crisp as Elizabeth in Sally Potter?s film adaptation of Virginia Woolf?s *Orlando* (1992). Perhaps

this bifurcation explains why, in 1831 two MPs argued that Victoria should take the title Queen Elizabeth II when she ascended to the throne. They did so in part, seemingly, on the grounds that the accession of a monarch who was both a Hanoverian and a woman ? two strikes against her out of three ? might irrevocably erode enthusiasm for the monarchy. What more effective response than to resurrect the now glorious hermaphrodite and have the new ruler appear as Elizabeth *redivivus*?

In different ways both these books help to explain why this sixteenth century queen continues to occupy a commanding position in our post-modern pantheon.

June 2003

Notes

1. Gordon Donaldson, ?Foundations of Anglo-Scottish Union?, in S. T. Bindoff, J. Hurstfield, C. H. Williams, eds., *Elizabethan Government and Society: Essays Presented to Sir John Neale* (London; Athlone Press, 1961), pp. 282-314, on p. 312.Back to (1)
2. ?Tom Tell-Troath: or, a free Discourse touching the Manners of the Time?, in Walter Scott, ed., *A Collection of Scarce and Valuable Tracts, Chiefly Such as Relate to the History and Constitution of These Kingdoms* (2nd edn, 13 vols; London; James Ballantyre & Co., 1809-1815), ii, 470-92, on p. 471.Back to (2)
3. Thomas Betteridge, *Tudor Histories of the English Reformations, 1530-83* (Aldershot; Ashgate, 1999). Back to (3)
4. Louis Adrian Montrose, ?Shaping fantasies: figurations of gender and power in Elizabethan culture?, *Representations*, 2 (1983), 61-94 (reprinted widely, including in Stephen Greenblatt, ed., *Representing the Renaissance* [Berkeley; University of California Press, 1988], Richard Wilson and Richard Dutton, eds, *New Historicism and Renaissance Drama* [London; Longman, 1992], Stephen Orgel, ed., *Shakespeare and Gender* [New York; Garland Publishing, 1999], Julian Wolfreys, ed., *Literary Theories: A Reader and Guide* [Edinburgh; University of Edinburgh Press, 1999]). For the legacy among literary critics see, *inter alia*, Philippa Berry, *Of Chastity and Power: Elizabethan Literature and the Unmarried Queen* (London; Routledge, 1989), Susan Frye, *Elizabeth I: The Competition for Representation* (Oxford; Oxford University Press, 1993), and Helen Hackett, *Virgin Mother, Maiden Queen: Elizabeth I and the Cult of the Virgin Mary* (Basingstoke; Macmillan, 1995); among historians see Anne McLaren, *Political Culture in the Reign of Elizabeth I: Queen and Commonwealth, 1558-1585* (Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 1999).Back to (4)
5. Dobson and Watson warmly acknowledge Lewis?s book, which Dobson reviewed (*London Review of Books*, 22:4, 17 February 2000). They have exchanged unpublished materials in draft (see acknowledgements on pp. 303, 333).Back to (5)

Dr Doran and Dr Freeman thank Dr McLaren for her thorough and balanced review, and have no further comments to add to it.

Professor Dobson and Dr Watson thank Dr McLaren for her review and note briefly: 'On the Banks ban, we refer our reviewer to Jayne Lewis's book, though the fact that a play about a close Stuart ancestor and her claims to the throne should have been controversial during the Exclusion Crisis still seems sufficiently self-evident for us not to have spelled it all out in that particular context in our book.'

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