Elizabeth I: Gender, Religion and Politics

Did it matter that the fifth Tudor monarch was a woman rather than a man? Retha Warnicke investigates.

A Patriarchal Society
In 1558, when Elizabeth I became the third queen regnant of the British Isles, the prevailing models for her reign were not propitious. The first queen regnant, Mary Stewart, who succeeded to the Scottish throne in 1542, had faced three rebellions directed against her husbands, who were expected by her subjects to control her realm. Indeed in 1561 Elizabeth had to send an envoy to France to inform Mary, whose first husband, Francis II, had recently died, that her French marriage had led to the Lords of the Congregation's successful revolution in Scotland. Mary Tudor, the second queen regnant, who reigned from 1553 to 1558, also offered a poor marital example. Choosing to wed Philip of Spain, Mary had to squash armed challenges to her authority by rebels concerned about Spanish influence. Addressing this issue in 1554, Parliament found it necessary to enact a statute establishing that queens regnant possessed sovereign powers.

In general females, whether married or single, were viewed as emotional and libidinous, incapable of autonomous political action and biologically inferior to males. Single women—without husbands to advise them and manage their affairs—were looked upon with suspicion and were expected to live under the supervision of male relatives or guardians. That Elizabeth's Church of England joined the Protestant confession, which championed women's vocation as marriage, caused the status of the already marginalised single woman to begin to decline even further.

It was in this patriarchal atmosphere that Elizabeth succeeded to the throne. Clearly, her royal status exempted her from many female handicaps, but she had to govern a realm in which crown and church office-holders were mostly male and to negotiate the prevailing view that monarchs ought to be kings. In 1565 Sir Thomas Smith, equating the reign of a female ruler to that of a king in his minority, stated it was understood that the counsel of wise men would 'supply' her 'defaults'. Some writers argued that because a woman was...
incapable of controlling her appetites, she was more likely, as queen, to become a tyrant than was a king.

Two recent books have raised questions about whether it mattered that Elizabeth was a female rather than a male ruler. In 1999 Anne McLaren identified Protestants in both England and Scotland, who, seeing that they were to be governed by queens regnant, expected the women not only to listen to their Protestant male councillors' advice but also to heed it. By contrast, in 2005, Natalie Mears denied the existence of any overwhelming evidence proving Elizabeth's councillors treated her differently from a male ruler. Although admitting that she found some gendered criticisms of Elizabeth, Mears dismissed them as infrequent or occasional. Gender was not the major issue; religion was.

The Church
It seems appropriate to look at a few of Elizabeth's problems to determine whether her gender figured in her relationship with her councillors. In 1559, when she summoned Parliament, the most pressing issue was the religious settlement. The Church had gone through several changes since Henry VIII had become the Supreme Head of the Church. In his son Edward VI's reign, the royal headship continued and parliaments authorised English prayer books and denied Christ's bodily presence in the Eucharist. Following Mary Tudor's accession, her parliaments revoked these statutes, restoring papal allegiance and the Catholic mass. These various statutes reflected the monarchs' personal beliefs.

From the passage of the Acts of Uniformity and Supremacy in 1559, writers have questioned the nature of Elizabeth's faith. Although recognising that her denial of papal power meant she adhered to some kind of Protestantism, they believed the compromises leading to those statutes' enactment made it unlikely they wholly mirrored her beliefs. That the statutes authorised an English prayer book displeased not only the Catholics, who preferred the Latin mass, but also some Protestants, who thought the reformed service contained too much ritual, such as the sign of the cross in christenings. Mostly Protestants did agree with the Catholics, however, that a woman should not possess the Church's headship.

Since women were allowed neither to deliver the sacraments nor to preach and were expected to remain silent in their parish churches, how then could the queen become the head of the Church? Elizabeth's legislators set out to ensure she would have no sacerdotal function, but since someone had to select the ecclesiastics and monitor the Church's general well-being, they agreed to place her in charge, settling on the title of Supreme Governor instead of the headship.

As Protestants sometimes associated the headship with the papacy, they found attractive the alternative status of governor, and Elizabeth, who on some religious issues, such as her hostility to clerical marriage, was more conservative than many of her ministers, seemed content with the lesser title. Mostly, it made no difference to her exercise of administrative powers, but some of her councillors remained uneasy with her meddling in religious matters. In 1560, Robert Jones wrote to Sir Nicholas Throckmorton, the English ambassador to France, about a recent conversation with Sir William Cecil. The latter had criticised Jones for revealing to Elizabeth the ambassador's views on the Council of Trent. Cecil had admonished Jones for telling the queen 'a matter of such weight, being too much, he said, for a woman's knowledge'.

In addition, preachers, even at court, gave sermons in which they claimed to be messengers sent by God to remind Elizabeth of her Christian obligations. The Scottish minister John Knox is well known for lecturing, like an Old Testament Prophet, to Mary Stewart at Edinburgh about court frivolities, but English preachers also warned Elizabeth that God could send ambassadors to punish monarchs in defiance of His law. Especially were they contemptuous of her mild nature, characterising her as a sheep and demanding she aggressively pursue military endeavors, thereby denouncing qualities contemporaries identified as feminine.

Elizabeth's disagreements with her first two archbishops of Canterbury, Matthew Parker and Edmund Grindal, and other ecclesiastics are well known. She expected them to enforce, on their own authority and not hers, laws they disliked, such as requiring clerics to wear vestments reminiscent to some of Catholic uniforms. A dispute over prophesyings with Grindal is especially noteworthy. Ministers seeking further reform wanted to develop a preaching clergy and began scheduling meetings, called prophesyings, to offer instruction in sermon-giving and in Biblical exegesis. After learning that some disaffected preachers were using them to promote beliefs contrary to Church doctrine, Elizabeth

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denounced the prophesyings as subversions of the ecclesiastical hierarchy. Disagreeing with her, Grindal viewed them, if properly managed, as useful methods for continuing Church reform. When the frustrated queen demanded he suppress the prophesyings in 1577, he refused. He informed her in a letter that she should take advice from her
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bishops, since bishops had judged Roman emperors, not emperors the bishops. He continued: 'Remember Madam, that you are a mortal creature', and 'although ye are a mighty prince ... he which dwelleth in heaven is mightier'. While conceding she was a mighty prince, Grindal addressed her as Madam, not as Your Majesty. Ignoring the pleas of her privy councillors, Elizabeth suspended him from office.

Marriage

Another troubling issue was the possibility of Elizabeth's marriage. Her councillors agreed she should seek a husband but, as she explained to Parliament in 1559, when she was 25 years old, it would suffice her to have engraved on her tombstone that she had lived and died a virgin. She promised that if God determined she should wed, she would take care to choose a spouse who would not prejudice her realm. In 1566, seven years later, she was still assuring Parliament that although she was personally not inclined to marry, she would do so:

"I will marry as soon as I can conveniently, if God take not him away with whom I mind to marry, or myself, or else some other great let [hindrance] happen. And I hope to have children; otherwise, I would never marry."

Her speeches troubled her subjects because, despite some of her well-known courtships, she did not aggressively move to complete arrangements with a suitor. After her sister's accession, although also denying she wished to take a husband, Mary had quickly chosen Philip of Spain and ordered her councillors to negotiate their marriage treaty.

The problem was as Hugh Latimer had explained it in a sermon at Edward VI's court. If the king were succeeded by one of his half-sisters and she married a foreigner, England's diplomacy would be tied to his native land. After Mary wed Philip and agreed to join Spain in the French war in which Calais was lost, some critics blamed his influence. The assumption was that a wife, even a queen regnant, would relinquish her authority to her husband. By contrast, a king who wed a foreigner could easily reject the alliance underpinning their marriage because he remained in control of his realm. In 1516, in The Education of a Christian Prince, Erasmus warned against these unions since they often fostered warfare rather than peace – his example was the union of Margaret Tudor and James IV, which did not prevent James from invading England and meeting death at Flodden Field in 1513.

To return to Latimer's sermon, if one of Edward's half-sisters wed a subject, he would almost certainly foster discord in the realm by favouring his allies. Norman Jones has argued that when rumors spread in 1560 about Elizabeth's possible marriage to Lord Robert Dudley, his powers at court were greatly strengthened against his rival, William Cecil. Jones concluded about queens regnant: 'Any man to whom they were attracted acquired through the possibility of marriage inordinate power in the realm; the sort of power no mistress could ever achieve, since men were allowed to be out in the world.' In other words, men could more easily than women promote their political agendas.

Her rumoured relationship with Dudley caused Elizabeth other problems. While without worrying about blemishing their honour, kings could beget illegitimate children, queens regnant could not take lovers without besmirching their reputations and becoming the subject of gossip and innuendo. In France, in late 1560, Ambassador Throckmorton was so incensed by the rumours circulating about Elizabeth's affection for Dudley that he sent a messenger to warn her bluntly she was gravely damaging her honour. Elizabeth's father had ennoblled his illegitimate son as duke of Richmond, and courted his next wife before beheading or divorcing the wife he already had, without eliciting such disapproval from his courtiers.

Elizabeth decided never to marry, of course, and scholars are still debating when she first arrived at that conclusion. Some claim it was in 1559 when she informed her Parliament she preferred the single life. Others think she seriously entered into courtships until 1582, the year the one with Francis, duke of Anjou, ended. Contemporaries also held opinions about her intentions. In March 1564 Elizabeth's Scottish ambassador, Thomas Randolph, expressed the fear to Cecil that she had decided not to marry, and later that year Sir James Melville, a Scottish ambassador in England, opined she would not take a husband because she wanted to be both king and queen.

It is likely that her decision not to marry was for political rather than personal reasons. As a single woman, she would not have to allow a husband access to her apartments,
thus avoiding any possible duplication of the Scottish queen’s experience. Because Mary Stewart had refused to relinquish regal powers to her second husband, Lord Henry Darnley, he invited assassins into her supper room in 1566 to imprison her and kill her allegedly influential secretary. Remaining unwed, Elizabeth could also avoid the seemingly inevitable rebellions against a queen regnant’s authority when she chose a husband.

Mary Queen of Scots
Another of Elizabeth’s problems was how to treat her Scottish cousin. After James Hepburn, earl of Bothwell, seized and raped Mary in 1567, she wed him, the usual reaction of abducted early-modern heiresses. Some of her subjects, appalled by Bothwell’s advancement, imprisoned her and forced her to abdicate in favour of her son, James. When she escaped in 1568 and her army met defeat on the battlefield, she fled to England. Although officially failing to declare Mary guilty of a crime, Elizabeth imprisoned her Catholic cousin, while permitting her young son, James, guided by his Protestant regent, James, earl of Moray, to continue as king of Scotland. Subsequently, Mary became involved in various conspiracies to escape captivity.

As McLaren pointed out, Elizabeth’s Protestant advisors expected her to seek and heed their advice. Nowhere is this more evident than in issues concerning the Scottish queen. In 1568 Sir Francis Knollys, Elizabeth’s maternal cousin by marriage and the treasurer of the chamber (later of the household), became Mary’s custodian. He was surprised to hear a suggestion of Mary’s agent, John Leslie, bishop of Ross, apparently with Elizabeth’s approval, for Mary’s joint governance of Scotland with James. Knollys wrote to Elizabeth that he was astonished she had let her judgement be ruled by the ‘affections and passions’ dominating her thoughts and warned her to consult with her faithful councillors, whose opinion should be given the most weight in treating these difficult matters. He reminded Elizabeth of her duty to support James’s Protestant regent and speculated that Mary would be too stubborn to move to her next designated residence if Elizabeth appeared too tender and soft, qualities his contemporaries identified as feminine. Early the next year, after learning about Elizabeth’s dealings with Alvarez de Toledo, duke of Alva, regent of the Netherlands and Mary’s ally, Knollys explained to his queen that she should turn those difficult foreign policy matters over to her council resident for resolution and warned that her councillors could not govern England unless she accepted their advice.

Meanwhile, the imprisoned Mary agreed to wed Thomas, fourth duke of Norfolk, as part of a plot calling for her recognition as Elizabeth’s heir. In northern England in 1569, Charles Neville, sixth earl of Westmorland, and Henry Percy, eight earl of Northumberland, fomented an unsuccessful rebellion, later called the Northern Rising, denouncing Protestantism and supporting Mary’s English claims. Upon learning that the rebellion was suppressed, Elizabeth, concerned about military expenses, dismissed most of the troops raised to combat the rebels. In response, her
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maternal cousin, Henry Carey, first Lord Hunsdon and governor of Berwick, wrote angrily to her, surmising that she must have been bewitched and asserting her need to seek counsel from her trusted friends.

This plain speaking was most evident in these relatives’ correspondence, but others could also be blunt. In 1571 Cecil, then ennobled as Lord Burghley, discovered evidence of the Ridolfi Plot, proposing Catholic armies invade England and release the Scottish queen. This plot included Mary’s marriage to Norfolk, who planned to rule England with her. Norfolk was condemned as a traitor in January 1572 and beheaded in June; the Parliament demanding his execution also called for Mary’s death.

One of its members, Thomas Digges, warned that Elizabeth’s faithful subjects would withdraw their allegiance from her if she failed to heed their request to condemn Mary for her crimes.

Until 1586 Elizabeth ignored her legislators’ and councillors’ demands that she have Mary tried for treason. In July of that year, a letter Anthony Babington wrote to Mary, promising to obtain troops to free her and then to send six men to assassinate Elizabeth, was intercepted by a spy of her secretary, Sir Francis Walsingham.

It was read, copied, and sent on to Mary. In her intercepted, ciphered response to Babington, which no longer exists, Mary allegedly placed Elizabeth’s assassination before her own release from prison. Yet this change in Babington’s proposed sequence is not credible since Mary had long feared that if Elizabeth died first, even of natural causes, then her English custodian would kill his captive. All historians agree Walsingham’s secretary recopied her ciphered letter and added a postscript, requesting the names of the six assassins. His recopied version, not Mary’s original, went to Babington. It is likely Walsingham’s secretary added references in it to Elizabeth’s assassination, thereby creating the sequence Mary would have rejected.

Probably, in her original response, she discussed only the part of Babington’s plot that involved her release, leaving Elizabeth’s death for others to arrange.

Walsingham carefully nurtured the conspiracy, waiting to arrest Babington until after Mary responded to his letter. Walsingham’s motive was to force Elizabeth’s hand, since he concluded that the only way to persuade her to heed her councillors’ advice was to make it appear Mary had agreed to her English cousin’s assassination. The reason Elizabeth was reluctant to approve regicide was that she, like other rulers, believed that monarchs were God’s lieutenants on earth with special destinies to fulfill and were responsible only to God for their actions. A monarch’s public execution would challenge the validity...
of the political hierarchy and make other sovereigns' lives vulnerable at a time when Protestant preachers were warning that God would send ambassadors to punish monarchs who disobeyed His law, as they defined it. Meanwhile, Elizabeth justified her leniency on the basis that she followed a woman's code of honour emphasising mercy rather than justice.

Calling Mary a murderess, Elizabeth appointed a commission to try her. After her conviction, Parliament asked Elizabeth twice for Mary's execution, agreeing with the commissioners' recommendation of the death penalty for her. As is well known, Elizabeth reluctantly signed the death warrant; the privy council ordered it delivered without her knowledge, and Mary was beheaded. Would Elizabeth's father have delayed so long? Probably not, and some of Elizabeth's councillors believed she was too soft, that is feminine, in matters concerning her cousin.

Afterwards, Burghley began to worry about Elizabeth's willingness to wield her regal powers. Paul E. J. Hammer has pointed out that, as a female monarch, Elizabeth's on-going 'great fear' was that her greatest male subjects would unite against her and attempt to control crown policies, as they actually did when engineering Mary's execution. Elizabeth responded to their success in 1587, according to Burghley, with threats to use her prerogative to execute those involved in her cousin's death. In a letter to an anonymous correspondent, Burghley made the following gendered statement about Elizabeth's decision to seek legal advice concerning her prerogative:

I would be loath to see a woman of such wisdom as she is, to be wrongly advised, for fear, and men shall be otherwise punished than law may warrant, with an opinion gotten from the judges that her prerogative is above the law.

As in Grindal's letter, Burghley referred to her as a woman, albeit a wise one, and not as the queen.

The Role of Gender
By the end of Elizabeth's reign, had her success as queen regnant significantly changed the cultural attitudes about a woman ruler? The answer is no, since her status was viewed as an exception to the appropriate practice. Later, after the Stuart succession, some writers did recall her governance with nostalgia. In the mid-1590s, however, as most historians agree, the factional politics emerging at the aged queen's court somewhat decreased her powers. One of the factions was led by Robert Devereux, second earl of Essex, and the other by Burghley, who had gained a dominant political position, and by his son Robert Cecil, who is well known for describing Elizabeth as 'more than a man and in truth somewhat less than a woman'. Hammer has argued that the two factions were struggling for control of crown policies, as well as patronage. Angered by Elizabeth's habit of delaying difficult decisions, as well as by Burghley's dominance, Essex referred privately to her as the 'Junio to his Aeneas', meaning she 'embodied a perverse female opposition' to him, the popular military leader. Essex also was willing 'to act behind her back', a defiance leading to his execution in 1601. After Elizabeth's death, the reformed preacher Henry Hooke welcomed James I as king with the comment: the 'elect might hope that what was not possible for a woman to effect, a man should be both able and industrious to perform'.

These incidents indicate that gender was a major issue in Elizabeth's reign. Most of her councillors were not as directly critical as her relatives, Knollys and Hunsdon, but many, like Essex, demonstrated impatience with the aged queen's governance. It is also true that the myriad problems arising from religious controversies, Elizabeth's single status, Mary Stewart's captivity and factional politics were extremely difficult to resolve. For the most part, the queen's tactic of delaying decisions about them was probably politically wiser than accepting her male councillors' 'solutions'.

Further Reading
Norman Jones, The Birth of the Elizabethan Age: England in the 1560s (Blackwell, 1993)
Wallace T. MacCaffrey, 'Knollys, Sir Francis' and 'Carey, Henry, first Baron Hunsdon', Oxford Dictionary of National Biography
Leah S. Marcus, Janel Mueller and Mary Beth Rose (eds), Elizabeth I: Collected Works (University of Chicago Press, 2000)
A. N. McLaren, Political Culture in the Reign of Elizabeth I: Queen and Commonwealth, 1558-1585 (Cambridge University Press, 1999)
Natalie Mears, Queenship and Political Discourse in the Elizabethan Realms (Cambridge University Press, 2005)
Retha Warnicke, Mary Queen of Scots (Routledge, 2006)

Issues to Debate
• What common Tudor assumptions about women were thought relevant to Elizabeth?
• How did these assumptions affect the ways in which the queen was treated by her councillors?
• To what extent were Elizabeth's decisions on key issues more sensible and practical than those of her male advisors?

Retha Warnicke is Professor of History at Arizona State University.