Elizabeth I: Gender, Power and Politics

Susan Doran

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 2002’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 preoccupation 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.

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 fact, 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 1553 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:
... whenssoever 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!

Susan Doran is a lecturer in Early-Modern History at Christ Church Oxford. She is the editor of the catalogue Elizabeth I: The Exhibition at the National Maritime Museum (Chatto & Windus, 2003).

Further reading:

• Paul E.J. Hammer, ‘Sex and the Virgin Queen: Aristocratic Concupiscence and the Court of Elizabeth I.’ Sixteenth Century Journal 31 (2000)
• Susan Doran, Monarchy and Matrimony: The Courtships of Elizabeth I (Routledge, 1996)