

Mary and Elizabeth Tudor: Embracing and Manipulating Gender Expectations

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Born to King Henry VIII during the 16th century, Mary and Elizabeth have both served as the first Queens regnant of England. They now share a tomb together in Westminster Abbey. However, while Mary has been portrayed by historians as a barren, intolerant Catholic queen who had an unpopular marriage to Phillip II of Spain, Elizabeth has been regarded as the Virgin Queen and a symbol of English Protestantism. Mary is remembered as a closed-minded religious persecutor, but Elizabeth's image is held in divinity. Modern historians have condemned Mary as being trapped by her own femininity while Elizabeth has been praised for being more masculine than her sister. Nonetheless, Mary was a pioneer of female rule, as her reign set the precedent that allowed her Elizabeth's later rule to be accepted. Mary provided her sister with various examples and lessons of how to deal with the difficulties of being a female ruler in a male dominated society. The embracement and manipulation of gender expectations, her use of virginal imagery, and her presentation embodying masculine characteristics at different times were all responsible for Elizabeth's success in meeting the challenge of being a female ruler. Mary and Elizabeth Tudor were each presented with the most stringent gender expectations of the Tudor era, and how they chose to meet or ignore those expectations would define their success, or failure, as rulers.

Gender Expectations in the 16th Century

The Tudor queens' plight can be explained by understanding the sixteenth century home and women's place within it. As Susan Amussen has suggested, "we cannot understand politics (as conventionally defined) without understanding the politics of family."¹ The gender hierarchy exhibited an arrangement where "wives were subject to their husbands," and as a result "women were subject to men."² The problems associated with female rule had been directly influenced by the patriarchy represented in the home. The family was a powerful socializing agent that provided the basis for social and political order. Likewise, James Daybell, whose work has exposed letter writing as reinforcing subservient nature and obedience, argues "the early modern household was seen as a microcosm for the hierarchy of the state."³ The superiority of men in was sustained in everyday life informally through "culture, custom, and differences in education, and more formally through the law."⁴ Maintaining the subjugation of women was seen as crucial to maintaining an orderly household. In the sixteenth century women were expected to be mothers and wives, and therefore were not work in high level professions. If women did manage to find work outside of the home it was often low paying and menial. Despite their differences, both Mary and Elizabeth had the same problem in that they were women rulers in a male dominated society. The men they governed viewed female rule as a threat to their status and

¹ Susan Dwyer Amussen. *An Ordered Society Gender and Class in Early Modern England*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 2.

² Amussen, *An Ordered Society*, 3.

³ James Daybell. "Gender, Obedience, and Authority in Sixteenth-Century Women's Letters." *Sixteenth Century Journal* 41, no. 1 (2010): 49.

⁴ Amussen, *An Ordered Society*, 3.

place within the Great Chain of Being. According to the societal understanding of the time, everyone had their own place in the natural and divine hierarchy. The Tudor queens were initially expected to be good wives and mothers who would let their men rule for them. However, both sisters took drastically different approaches to these expectations.

Mary the Maid

Femininity has played a large role in historical evaluations of the Tudor female monarchs. Thomas Betteridge identifies the gendered ways in which historians have discussed Mary Tudor.⁵ He points out that the maternal imagery and use of the term maiden throughout the Marian Reformation to characterize Mary as a maid, and servant to God who was restoring order and harmony to the kingdom. Although this imagery made her seem more able to restore order and harmony, ultimately it did little to counteract the negative connotations surrounding her gender. “Holinshed’s Chronicle” is often utilized in Tudor historiography and has become the principal source of historical writings. Betteridge cites how the “Holinshed’s Chronicle,” a journal published in 1587, delivered an image of a feeble Mary “unable to carry the weight of her crown.”⁶ Many historians claim that Mary’s rule was a complete failure because of her inability to restore the Catholic faith in England or produce an heir. She adhered to the expectations of her gender, but ultimately it had disastrous consequences for her. She was too rigid and inflexible which restricted her ability adapt in response to new challenges. Unlike Mary, Elizabeth was able to manipulate her identities and successfully played off of them to her advantage. While Elizabeth had a female ruler before her, Mary was forced to set precedents for a female ruler, and had to fight harder to legitimize her position.

The Mary Men

Mary’s life revolved around three men; the one who maintained her church, the one she married, and the one she never had. Although both Tudor queens had plans to rule the country in spite of the low expectations of their gender, they each knew that they would need males in the government to lend their administrations legitimacy. Each knew their subjects would have difficulty accepting a government run entirely by women. According to Anna Whitelock, Mary used trusted special agents and “representatives of royal will in the midst of insurrection and threat.”⁷ Like the intimate political agents of her father’s Privy Chamber, Mary’s household men served as gatekeepers, passed along requests and acted as representatives of royal authority. In Mary’s case, Eamon Duffy determined that Cardinal Reginald Pole was “the single most influential figure in the Marian restoration: put briefly, he was in charge.”⁸ He played a major part in trying to convert English Protestants to Catholicism. According to Duffy, “Even the realization that the Queen’s health was failing and Elizabeth’s likely succession did not slow the campaign, for Pole himself was seen as a powerful bulwark against any attempt to restore the

⁵ Thomas Betteridge. “Maids and Wives: Representing Female Rule during the Reign of Mary Tudor.” In *Mary Tudor: Old and New Perspectives*, edited by Susan Doran and Thomas S. Freeman, 138-152. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 138.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 139.

⁷ Anna Whitelock. “Woman in a Man’s World: Mary I and political intimacy, 1553-1558.” *Women’s History Review* 16, no. 3 (2007): 329.

⁸ Eamon Duffy. *Fires of Faith: Catholic England under Mary Tudor*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010. 33.

religion of King Edward.”⁹ However, Pole died mere hours after the death the Mary. There was no one to continue the Counter-Reformation and the progress that the Marian Church had made ceased. It was the loss of both political and religious figures, not the “waning of determination, that halted the Marian project, and the Marian burnings, in their tracks.”¹⁰ Mary’s short reign and the death of one of her most fervent advisors greatly contributed to the portrayal of her reign as a failure.

In accordance with the established gender expectations of her time, Mary was expected find a king, have children, and be obedient to her husband. However, even though Mary was expected to have a King, nobody could agree on who she should have married. When Mary chose to marry her cousin, King Philip II of Spain, the majority of her council and the English people opposed, calling the match unpatriotic. Philip’s strong Catholic religion and foreign citizenship were the main complaints of the opposition. Philip’s beliefs, merged with Mary’s strong Catholic faith, were perceived as a great threat to the Protestant population of England. The infamous Wyatt’s Rebellion arose from a desire to prevent Mary’s marriage to Philip. In response to the threats posed by Wyatt’s rebellion, she relied particularly upon the loyalty of her “male political intimates” to deal with the uprising.¹¹ Mary was a traditional woman who believed that a wife should be obedient to her husband, and that Philip should be given every respect and privilege that she was given as the monarch. Despite acting as a dutiful woman, Mary’s desire to be a loving wife greatly contributed to her unpopularity.

The third man in Mary’s life was the son she failed to produce, though not for lack of trying. She attempted to create a male heir that would be able to continue her mass religious conversion. It was also a crucial requirement for Mary’s image as a mother. Unfortunately, Mary was unable to produce a child. She experienced a false pregnancy in 1554, induced by stress stemming from Mary’s overwhelming desire to have a child.¹² Mary’s insistence on living up the expectations of her gender hindered her reign, and ultimately caused its failure.

Eamon Duffy’s Mary

Although historians once saw Mary as plagued by weak qualities, new interpretations claim she was actually courageous and politically determined. Recently, Eamon Duffy asserted that Mary’s reign was met with public support when she enacted a systematic intimidation of wayward Protestants. Before Duffy’s interpretation, “almost everyone agreed that Mary’s church was backward-looking, unimaginative, reactionary, sharing both the Queen’s bitter preoccupation with the past and her tragic sterility. Marian Catholicism, it was agreed, was strong on repression, weak on persuasion.”¹³ Duffy has reexamined the religious agenda of Mary’s reign, and argues that much of the Catholic restoration was not only making great strides in reverting England to Catholicism, but was also largely supported by the general public. Mary’s reputation as a bloodthirsty tyrant is undeserved, since Elizabeth killed many people during her reign as well. Elizabeth “burned no catholics, but she strangled, disemboweled and dismembered more than 200.”¹⁴ While in typical historical interpretations, only Mary’s

⁹ Duffy, *Fires of Faith*, 187.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 187.

¹¹ Whitelock, “A Woman in a Man’s World,” 329.

¹² Robert Bucholz, and Newton Key. *Early Modern England 1485-1714: A Narrative History*. (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008), 114.

¹³ Duffy, *Fires of Faith*, 1.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 82.

executions are discussed, Elizabeth executed just as many, if not more subjects. The only difference between the executions was the labels Elizabeth and Mary assigned to it. Elizabeth called it treason while Mary simply called it heresy.¹⁵ Mary is often accused of religious zealotry for executing 'heretics,' Elizabeth's executions of 'treasonous individuals' seems more justified. The majority of the executions in Mary's reign transgressed without incident as there was nothing to suggest disapproval from the overall public.¹⁶

Elizabeth's Marriage

Each Tudor monarch dealt with the stereotypes surrounding their positions in different ways. According to Anne McLaren, Mary strove to fulfill her gender role by becoming a wife and attempting to become a mother, whereas Elizabeth merely kept up the appearance that she was trying to find a husband to appease her subjects. While initially the Privy Council could not agree on anyone to marry Elizabeth, she eventually announced that she would not marry because she was devoted to England.¹⁷ Elizabeth knew that she would have to give up control of her kingdom once she married. She was pressured by Parliament to marry, but wrote numerous speeches to Parliament, effectively avoiding the question of her marriage. Carole Levin states that "Elizabeth [was] often carefully crafting her statements for public consumption, and they reveal not so much what she felt about marriage but what she felt she would be politic for her to say about marriage."¹⁸ By doing this, she manipulated her public image. In Elizabeth's "Speech to the House of Commons, January 28, 1563," she addressed their concerns over her marriage and succession. In this speech she stated, "I did send them answer by my Council I would marry, although of mine own disposition I was not inclined thereunto."¹⁹ She evaded the question by saying she would marry when she wanted to and would not be forced to. In the same speech, she said, "A strange thing that the foot should direct the head in so weighty a cause, which cause hath been so diligently weighed by us for that it toucheth us more than them."²⁰ By using the Great Chain of Being philosophy as her defense, she reasoned that the Queen's subjects should not try to command the Queen to marry. Elizabeth's Privy Council urged her to marry since they believed it was for the best for her to have a strong man by her side. She exposed her fiery and autonomous demeanor when she said, "I will have here but one Mistress, and no Master."²¹ She couldn't bear giving up control of her kingdom and becoming powerless. As a result of her sister's experiences, she understood the disadvantages of having a husband. She was still attempting to manipulate gendered expectations, however remaining an unmarried woman created problems. As stated before, an unmarried woman was out of the norm, and was viewed as a threat to men. Once she announced she would not marry because she was devoted to England, it became important to manipulate her image once more.

¹⁵ Duffy, *Fires of Faith*, 82.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 83.

¹⁷ Anne McLaren. "The Quest for a King: Gender, Marriage, and Succession in Elizabethan England." *Journal of British Studies* 41, no. 3 (2002): 265.

¹⁸ Carole Levin. *The Heart and Stomach of a King: Elizabeth I and the Politics of Sex and Power*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1994), 44.

¹⁹ Elizabeth I, Speech to the House of Commons, January 28, 1563. *The Norton Anthology: English Literature*. Ed. Stephen Greenblatt. Vol. 8th ed. vol. 1. Ed. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006), 693.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 692.

²¹ Levin, *The Heart and Stomach of a King*, 47.

Elizabeth the Virgin

According to Dale Hoak, in the sixteenth century, England witness the birth of a cult inspired by the accidents of Queen Elizabeth's femininity, remarkable personality, political longevity, and the calculated maintenance of her virginity.²² The first known writer to associate Elizabeth with the Virgin Mary was John Aylmer. Aylmer integrated Elizabeth with the qualities of "Mother England, linking in strongly nationalistic terms love of England and obedience to the queen."²³ Elizabeth would take on a motherly image like her sister, but since she did not have a husband or children, it became necessary to link her to Mother England and view her as a mother to her subjects. Aylmer understood the challenges that would come from having an unproven and unmarried woman as a monarch, therefore he associated Elizabeth with the Virgin Mary. God had chosen Elizabeth as queen and therefore those who were against her were also against God. Not only did he link her rule to God, but also to Parliament. Aylmer highlighted that she would not be ruling alone but rather that she would have the "seasoned and wise men of Parliament... [to] give her the sort of advice and counsel she needs."²⁴ She was not trusted to rule by herself, therefore having men by her side gave her credibility. Elizabeth also came to be associated with the biblical figure Deborah, because "it fitted Aylmer's model of female 'magistrate' whose just, pacifying rule rested on 'her commons consent, and confirmacio(n) of laws."²⁵ This elevation in status made her rule seem more palatable to those who held strongly to the gender stereotypes.

King and Queen to England

Elizabeth used virginal and angelic personas to convey to the people of England a feminine and motherly figure, however she also played on her more masculine traits to prove her strength. When England faced an invasion from Spain in 1588, Elizabeth appeared before her troops wearing a white gown and a silver breastplate; this demonstration affirms her use of masculine theatrics to manipulate public opinion. Like a general and leader, Elizabeth stood by her troops and ignored her council's requests for her to leave the scene. She knew her life was in danger, but she admirably would not leave. She explained her refusal to abandon them in her speech "I know I have the body but of a weak and feeble woman; but I have the heart and stomach of a king, and of a king of England too – and take foul scorn that Parma or any prince of Europe should dare to invade the borders of my realm."²⁶ As shown by Retha Warnicke, "Women, as well as men, were socialized to accept and to act on the widespread belief of males as the superior sex."²⁷ English values dictated that women were to be seen as the 'weaker sex' and therefore not capable of being able to handle power, ultimately Elizabeth recognized that her femininity was a weakness. However, she also recognizes that she is not like other women, and

²² Dale Hoak. "A Tudor Deborah? The Coronation of Elizabeth I, Parliament, and the Problem of Female Rule." In John Foxe and His World, edited by Christopher Highley and John N. King, 73-88. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2002. 73.

²³ Hoak, "A Tudor Deborah," 77.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid., 78.

²⁶ Elizabeth I, Speech to the Troops at Tilbury, August 9, 1588, Luminarium: Anthology of English Literature <<http://www.luminarium.org/renlit/tilbury.htm>> (accessed April 30, 2015).

²⁷ Retha M. Warnicke. *Wicked Women of Tudor England: Queens, Aristocrats, Commoners*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan. 2012), 146.

reaffirmed her authority as a monarch. She acknowledges that as the Virgin Queen she lacked physical strength but declares that she has the inner fortitude of a powerful king.

Conclusion

Both of the Tudor sisters faced adversity in their reigns, and although they had different responses, it is unfair to categorize either sister as a complete success or a complete failure. Despite being a woman in the sixteenth century and the briefness of her reign, Mary was still a powerful and influential ruler. She secured her throne in a coup d'état against Protestant rival, Lady Jane Grey, extended royal authority in the realm, and managed her parliament well.²⁸ She also set a precedent as the first female monarch to rule on her own in a deeply patriarchal society. This precedent made it easier for Elizabeth's later rule to be accepted. The reevaluated views of Mary help to highlight how Elizabeth learned from Mary's examples (and mistakes), while Elizabeth learned how to deal with the difficulties of being a woman in what was traditionally a male role. Elizabeth took up examples and precedents set by her sister and tailored them to fit her circumstances. The fact that the two queens reigned for such drastically different lengths—Mary's five years against Elizabeth's forty-five—has also contributed to the polarity of opinions regarding the success or failure of each reign. Mary was making progress, but since her reign was cut short, we will never know the full effect of her policies. Both queens exceeded the expectations and limitations of their gender and successfully exploited their femininity; Elizabeth was just able to do it better.

²⁸ Robert Bucholz and Newton Key. *Early Modern England 1485-1714: A Narrative History*. (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008), 108.

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