Portraits of Queen Elizabeth I of England: Representations of Gender, Influence, and Power

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Introduction

Queen Elizabeth I began her reign as the young, determined woman seen in her Coronation Robes at the age of twenty-five. [Figure 1] Progressively, she transformed into the deity Gloriana, immersed in layers of imperial promise and legend that is illustrated in the Ditchley Portrait rendered thirty three years later. [Figure 2] The remarkable development of Elizabeth’s person from human to divine, from woman to icon, was executed primarily through visual presentation. Portraiture was a powerful and unique tool for Elizabeth I of England who reigned from 1558 to 1603. It allowed her not only to manipulate her image, but to embellish and perfect the way she wished to be perceived. Portraiture provided Elizabeth with the chance to communicate layers of significance, and meaning.¹ What was the portrayal of the Queen intended to accomplish? How did Elizabeth deal with gender norms and why? The precision and subtleties of an image were invaluable for a woman trying to prove her worth—particularly a woman in the extraordinary position that Elizabeth held: an unmarried monarch who ruled the British Isles. In a time when few women were able to pursue an education, Elizabeth I was a highly accomplished writer and speaker; while many of her personal writings and speeches have been preserved and reveal how she presented herself orally, it was her image, more than anything, that shaped Elizabeth’s monarchy.² In an era where the majority of the population was


Elizabeth’s writings have been conserved in a number of fashions: some have been maintained in their original form, others have been documented and transcribed by her contemporaries or exist in drafts—likely not the final version. Her speeches to Parliament and her councilors were recorded in both official and unofficial documentations of the event. A great deal of letters that Elizabeth both wrote and received throughout her life still exist in their original form and give great insight into her more private correspondences as well as the personal side of politics. Elizabeth’s poems and prayers have been discovered in their original format as well as recorded by witnesses who may have heard Elizabeth recite them. Both the sources themselves and the means by which they have been conserved give great insight into Elizabeth’s life and policies as well as the contexts in which they were produced. *Elizabeth I: Collected Works*, edited by Leah S. Marcus, Hanel Mueller, and Mary Beth Rose is an excellent
illiterate, imagery was that much more influential and important in defining public opinion.

Audiences were captivated by the constructed webs of symbolism and metaphor presented in visual works, and the messages being conveyed were accessible to individuals beyond the highly educated. Elizabeth I’s portraits permitted her a level of control and autonomy that she didn’t possess over her physical appearance as she aged.

Her commissioned works reveal her struggle between the male and female spheres far more thoroughly than any historical documents could. Portraits encompass her entire identity, and represent extensive periods of time, while also making pointed arguments about her identity, as opposed to speeches and writings narrowed to one or two issues. Elizabeth’s image was just as fundamental to her persona and her legacy as any of her policies or actions. Elizabeth’s portraits allowed her to define herself both within the context of her gender and beyond female stereotypes—a definition which was integral to her life and sovereignty. It was this contrived definition which led to Elizabeth I becoming one of history’s most successful monarchs.

Elizabeth I was one of the few women of her time who was not defined solely by her role as wife or mother; however, even as Queen of England she could not entirely escape those roles. Aware of the fact that she could not sever the ties that bound women of her time, Elizabeth employed those restrictions to suit her purposes. Elizabeth I was not only a highly educated individual—especially rare for a woman at this time, but she was also extremely adept at presenting herself to an audience. Throughout her reign, she was both alert to the fact that she

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had an audience, and acutely conscious of the power that audience held over her fate. Elizabeth I’s awareness of how she was viewed and received led to a theatrical life in which physical presentation was paramount: the clothes, makeup and wigs she wore, the priceless jewels and pearls she incorporated into her outfits, her stature, expressions, and speech were all carefully manipulated to present a very specific woman depending on the audience and her motives.6

Portraiture was an essential aspect of this presentation as it was one of the few means by which Elizabeth I could control her public image and communicate to the people of England. Portraits are very carefully controlled representations of a person which focus on specific attributes and which are developed for explicit reasons. They are meant to convey a manipulated version of the subject, even today.7 However, for a woman and a Queen, one who already transformed herself in her daily life, to expose herself to the opinions and approval or rejection of an entire nation, Elizabeth I would have needed to be highly-aware of how she presented

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6 Ibid., 75
7 Pomeroy, Reading the Portraits, 30.

The Tudor Image by Maurice Howard is an excellent examination of representation in Tudor and Stuart England. Howard discusses different types of art form, the events which led to changes in the art world, and how they differed from the art of Continental Europe.

Portraiture was reserved for royalty and the upper-classes in Tudor England. Portraits were created to mark special events and honor individuals. Portraits were often commissioned as gifts to be given to someone important, or as physical representations of a person. Marriage negotiations frequently involved an exchange of portraits if a potential couple did not have the opportunity to meet each other prior to their wedding. As representations, portraits were not necessarily accurate. Depending on the destination of the piece, the aims of the sitter and patron, and the style of the artist, portraits could be slightly manipulated or highly false depictions of the subject.

When Henry VIII began the English Reformation by separating from the Catholic Church, an entire body of artwork was doomed and subsequently destroyed. Relatively suddenly, catholic religious imagery was removed from the landscape of England. Many historians have pointed to this drastic loss as the catalyst for a rise in popularity of portraiture. Henry VIII was also responsible for a marked difference in English Royal Portraiture. In addition to his impressive physical presence, Henry began to be rendered with “decorative imagery” as a visual cue to his power, initiating the tradition of decorative iconography that is seen in Elizabeth’s portraits. Tudor portraits almost never depicted the subject sitting, but were most frequently three-quarter or full-length views.

Miniature portraits were an art form specific to Tudor and Stuart England, particularly to the Royal Court. Miniatures “became increasingly emblematic, developing the private world of personal allusion and an image of the private self in a manner quite different from that of portraits in public places.” (Howard, 55) Miniatures were at once very private and easily shared, marking them as personal in a way that few other art forms had achieved.
herself.\(^8\) In her portraits, Elizabeth I conveyed not only the appearance and virtues of the monarch of England, but the future: the direction and manner in which she intended to lead England to the prosperity of all.

A great deal of Elizabeth I’s awareness of how she interacted with people and was received by them came from observing the women in her life: their roles, their relationships, their decisions, and the lives to which those led. Perhaps the most influential woman in Elizabeth I’s life was her half-sister, Queen Mary I of England (1516-1558).\(^9\) Both during their lifetimes and since, Elizabeth and Mary have been set in opposition to one another: religiously, personally, intellectually, and politically. Mary I, like her sister, ruled England during a time of religious and political change and it largely defined her reign and therefore her legacy as a monarch. During her reign, Mary I made several very impactful decisions which were as much personal as they were political. She married Phillip II of Spain, willingly submitting herself to a man, as well as tying England to Spain politically. Additionally, as a life-long devout Catholic, Mary I saw it as her duty to return England to Catholicism, reversing the actions (blasphemous in her view) of her father Henry VIII who created the Church of England and then proceeded to make himself the head of the Protestant English Church—by breaking from Rome and renouncing the Pope’s authority in England. Both of Mary I’s choices were widely unpopular in England: the first because the English feared the influence the Spanish would have over the Queen and the second because the majority of the population in England was Protestant.\(^10\) Both choices led Mary I to become the woman who is most famously known today as Bloody Mary. Under Mary, England experienced a reign of economic failure, political unease, and most of all

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\(^9\) Ibid., 131.
fear of religious persecution. For the English, she represented female weakness and fallibility: easily manipulated by a man (and a foreigner), politically un-astute, economically incapable, and socially unpopular. To both her government and her people, Mary I was evidence that a woman on the throne was a negative and undesirable event.

Elizabeth I came to the throne during a time of great change in both English and European history. However, in contrast to the vastly changing world of Christian Europe, the lives of women changed very little during the Renaissance, despite being exposed to the same changes and questions that it represented. English women were held to a very strict idea of how society thought they should conduct themselves and spend their lives. Women really served two essential purposes: wives and mothers. This was true of all women, regardless of age, class, or rank and very few individuals managed to move beyond that definition. Every duty, purpose, and potential value of a woman could be traced back to one of those two roles, and therefore, to a man in her life, predominantly her husband. Women were intended to marry; English Professor Kate Aughterson sustains that “woman’s place within [the system of marriage] was defined by her sexual status: virgin, wife, widow or whore; and her function within it as motherhood. Thus (hetero) sexual behavior and its concomitant relationship to a particular man (or men) defined womanhood, legally and politically.”

Even women of the upper-classes and royalty were rarely more than political pawns of their male relations—married off in order to create alliances or enrich nations. Elizabeth was an extraordinary ruler, but she was even more

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11 For a history of Mary I’s reign, see Loades, *Elizabeth I*, 83-122.
14 Ibid., xiii.
extraordinary as a woman in that she successfully ruled a country as an independent female monarch, not as a wife or mother.\textsuperscript{16}

State of Literature

Interest in Elizabeth I was re-ignited in the second half of the twentieth century, and a number of scholars from different backgrounds have carried out research on various aspects of her reign and life, including her portraits. Detailed books and articles on everything from her policies to the makeup she wore to the symbolism of her portraits are relevant to my project. Roy Strong is one of the most noteworthy Elizabethan scholars, having produced several books focused solely on Portraits of Elizabeth I and a number of others which examine different aspects of the Elizabethan era.\textsuperscript{17} As the director of both the National Portrait Gallery and the Victoria and Albert Museum in London (1967 and 1973 respectively), Strong is not only a highly important historian, but a key contributor to the twentieth century art world. Strong was one of the first art historians to discuss Elizabeth I’s mastery of her own image and figure to the extent that there was Elizabeth the person and Elizabeth the idea; two very distinct but inextricably intertwined elements. Strong argues that Elizabeth I, the woman, ascended to the throne in 1558 and ruled for several years before the ‘idea’ of Elizabeth began to form around her being and image. As the queen grew older and the needs of her public image shifted along with the needs

\textsuperscript{16} Aughterson, \textit{Renaissance Woman}, 166.

Aughterson’s \textit{Renaissance Woman: Constructions of Femininity in England} and Mary Beth Rose’s \textit{Women in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance: Literary and Historical Perspectives}, both offer extensive studies of gender during Elizabeth I’s life and reign, including several sections which discuss Elizabeth herself and other female rulers of the time.

of her people, Elizabeth took on more of an allegorical role than previously in her reign. Strong notes that “In the portraits of Elizabeth Tudor we witness [the] creation… of most of the fundamental patriotic myths that have sustained an island people for over three centuries;”\(^{18}\) a creation which Strong has marked as the “Cult of Elizabeth.”\(^{19}\) His work on Elizabethan iconography is central to my research.\(^{20}\)

Many art historians have built upon Strong’s research. Elizabeth W. Pomeroy, author of Reading the Portraits of Queen Elizabeth I, studies Elizabeth’s portraits by “explor[ing] the borderlines between disciplines,” and credits her work as “building upon the extensive work of Roy Strong…in establishing an art-history context for these pictures [Elizabeth’s portraits].” Since my project extends past Elizabeth’s portraits to her reign and era, Pomeroy’s discussion of portraiture as encompassing multiple fields of study has been highly beneficial to my determination to do the same. The historian Carole Levin works with both propaganda and women’s studies and has published works on Elizabeth’s public image, particularly the essay “John Foxe and the Responsibilities of Queenship” which analyzes “ways in which patriarchal sexual ideology informs the consciously constructed public identity” of Elizabeth I.\(^{21}\) This article has been essential to my incorporation of gender studies, society, politics, and imagery in Elizabeth’s public identity. I will by no means be the first to analyze Elizabeth’s portraits and her reign, nor will I be the first scholar to look at them from a gendered sphere. However, I will argue that Elizabeth’s portraits enabled her command over her image, through which she controlled perceptions of her gender and performed the balancing act she was forced to maintain between woman and monarch. It was her decisive and exhaustive self-fashioning which allowed

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\(^{21}\) Rose, *Middle Ages and Renaissance*, xv.
Elizabeth I to become one of the most powerful, effective, and beloved monarchs in English history.

I will use Mary Tudor’s portraits and reign as a means of comparison to her sister’s. Studying Elizabeth I and Mary I in relation to one another will better allow modern scholars to understand the differences and similarities between these two historical women and the role their genders played in their respective reigns. I will argue that a great deal of Elizabeth’s reign was influenced by her awareness of being a woman in a man’s world. Both Elizabeth’s and Mary’s identities as women were central not only to their personal development in a patriarchal society, but to their experiences, decisions, depictions, and interactions. My research will go beyond previous research in my assertion that it is that fact which made them the Queens that history remembers them as: one a tyrant and the other a saint.²²

This research is important because today, when we study famous women throughout history, we tend to take for granted how important and influential their gender was in every single aspect of their lives, especially those that determined how history remembers them. Queen Elizabeth I and Queen Mary I of England cannot be considered just two more English monarchs; from the simplest aspects of their lives to their most important decisions as leaders, their identities as women played a role and shaped the country that they ruled. Had either Queen been

²² After the reign of Henry VIII, the majority of the English people both feared and hated Catholicism. Mary Tudor was a very unpopular monarch for many reasons, but religion was the most powerful factor. Mary was an avid Catholic who married Phillip II of Spain—Spain was not only a catholic nation, but home to the Spanish Inquisition, which only furthered Protestant England’s fears. During her reign, Mary sought to return England to Catholicism and executed hundreds of Protestants under the Heresy Acts. In the seventeenth century, Mary came to be known as Bloody Mary, and Protestant writers and historians depicted Mary as an exceptionally violent tyrant who terrorized the English people during her reign. In reality, though Mary persecuted primarily Protestants as Queen, the deaths during her reign were far exceeded by countless other monarchs. However, Mary’s legacy, even history today, is largely colored by demonized, Protestant accounts of her monarchy. So while history does remember Mary Tudor as a tyrant and Elizabeth as a saint, their legacies are not strictly historically accurate.
a man, they would not be nearly as historically significant. It was important that they were women, and it influenced their portraits as much as their reigns and legacies.

Methodology

Feminist art history is a relatively new concept. Prior to the late twentieth century, women in the art world were extremely limited and underrepresented; women had fewer opportunities to be artists, patrons, and viewers and appeared in a narrow display of subject matter. Feminist art history will be directly relevant to my project as I work to understand how Elizabeth’s portraits and self-representations were shaped by her gender and society’s idea of gender. This method is referred to as the “subject effect” which recognizes “that the subject isn’t natural or whole but is produced through discourse, always gendered and shaped by power relations in society.” The questions I ask reflect this awareness and seek to comprehend the influence it had on her portraits. By using primary sources from Elizabeth’s reign, including the writings and speeches of Elizabeth herself as well as contemporary sources which communicate the state of gender roles, politics, and religion at the time. I will compare Elizabeth’s portraits to those of other female and male portraits created at the time as well as studying the changes and consistencies in Elizabeth’s portraits throughout her reign in relation to the policies and circumstances of her monarchy at that time.

I will examine portraits of Queen Elizabeth I throughout her reign, studying the ways in which she is presented, the symbols and motifs included and their significance, and the historical

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23 The term “Art History” tends to bring to mind a cohesive study of art from every part of human history. However, art history has comprised myriad approaches to the study of art that ask what is a valuable topic of study and how should one approach it?

Among the broader types of analysis, there are more specific types of art historical methods of analyzing them. Feminist art history is one such method. (61) See Anne D’Alleva, Look Again! Art History and Critical Theory (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2005).

24 Ibid., 64.
context of England at the time the portrait was painted. Through the cross-referencing of portraits and the state of political, cultural, and societal issues at the time they were created, I will be able to determine what the portrayal of the Queen was intended to accomplish beyond honoring her Majesty. What issues were being addressed? How were they being addressed, and how did her gender influence them? To what extent were portraits of both women concerned with their gender and male ruler-ship? To what extent was the influence of their gender acknowledged in their public portrayals? Though vastly different figures, both women spent their lives fighting for the right to rule. I am interested to see if the same parallels and divergences of their lives and reigns are present in their respective portraits; how uniquely or uniformly did each of them address their gender in regards to their sovereignty and the aspects of their leadership, divine right, and politics which each of them focused on? I am also interested to discover if there are continuities between the symbols employed by each woman and their meanings. I will explore the implications of changes and the deeper shifts which would lead to those changes. How did each woman address her gender and what reactions were they meant to illicit?

Symbolism is a deeply rooted aspect of the visual arts, and images would have been widely recognizable in 16th century England as representations of specific ideas, qualities, or issues. Through visual rhetoric, a painter can create a complicated narrative which addresses dozens of different aspects of a subject. By incorporating certain images, Elizabeth I and Mary I would have been understood to be making explicit claims about themselves and their sovereignty. Through visual cues, we can assess the personality of each Queen in each portrait, how it was communicated, and how it shaped their reigns.
Historical Background

Henry VIII, King of England from 1509 to 1547, was pivotal in England’s response to the swiftly shifting world of the sixteenth century.\textsuperscript{25} Henry was married to his brother’s widow, Catherine of Aragon; however, after fifteen years of marriage and six pregnancies, their only surviving child was a daughter named Mary.\textsuperscript{26} In 1525, Henry unsuccessfully petitioned the Pope for a divorce—Henry argued that Catherine had consummated her marriage to his brother, making her marriage to Henry illegitimate in the eyes of God. The Pope refused and, desperate for a male heir, Henry separated from the Catholic Church. He established the Church of England, with himself as the Supreme Ruler, and granted himself a divorce.\textsuperscript{27}

In 1533, Henry VIII married his mistress, Anne Boleyn, who gave birth to a daughter named Elizabeth. Mary was declared illegitimate and made a lady in waiting to her half sister. After Anne gave birth to a stillborn son, Henry was again convinced that his marriage was condemned by God and in 1536, Anne was found guilty of adultery and incest; she was beheaded four days later. Elizabeth too was declared a bastard. Jane Seymour, Henry’s third wife, finally gave birth to a son, Edward. His fourth marriage was annulled after just three days and his fifth wife was accused of adultery and beheaded. Henry’s sixth and last marriage was to Catherine Parr who was very influential for Henry’s three children, uniting them as a family for the first time in their lives. Henry died in 1547 at the age of fifty five. His final will reinstated both Mary and Elizabeth in the succession.\textsuperscript{28}

\textsuperscript{26}W.M. Ormrod, \textit{The Kings & Queens of England} (Stroud: Tempus, 2001), 196.
\textsuperscript{27}See Williamson, \textit{National Portrait Gallery}, for all biographical information on Henry VIII.
\textsuperscript{28}Watkins, \textit{In Public and in Private}, 18.
At the age of nine, Edward became King Edward VI.\textsuperscript{29} Thirteen years old, Elizabeth moved in with her stepmother, and the young widow’s new husband, Thomas Seymour. Wildly inappropriate, Seymour flirted heavily with Elizabeth and allegations and rumors quickly spread. Too late, Elizabeth left her step-mother’s house to protect her reputation.\textsuperscript{30} In 1549, Seymour was arrested and executed on charges of high treason. It was suspected that a marriage to Elizabeth had been part of his plan, and Elizabeth’s supposed flirtation with him suggested that she was complicit. Several members of Elizabeth’s household were arrested and questioned, but without a confession, she was allowed to resume life as normal.\textsuperscript{31} Edward removed both Mary and Elizabeth from the succession and named Lady Jane Grey his successor upon his death in 1553. Lady Jane Grey was proclaimed queen at the behest of her new father-in-law, the Duke of Northumberland and the latest Protector of the Realm.\textsuperscript{32}

Mary quickly gathered an army of loyal subjects and gained the throne.\textsuperscript{33} Once queen, Mary quickly acted to return England to Catholicism, declaring her parent’s marriage and therefore her birth, legitimate.\textsuperscript{34} Mary’s fear and hatred of Protestantism caused her to persecute several hundred Protestants during her reign, which led to her being deemed ‘Mary, Bloody Mary.’\textsuperscript{35} Mary’s greatest fear was that she would die childless, leaving the Protestant Elizabeth to inherit the throne.\textsuperscript{36} Mary quickly decided on the Catholic crown prince of Spain, Phillip, as her husband, a decision which caused fear so great that it incited a rebellion—though it was short

\textsuperscript{29} Williamson, \textit{National Portrait Gallery}, 94.
\textsuperscript{30} Ormrod, \textit{Kings & Queens}, 20-24.
\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 26-27.
\textsuperscript{32} Williamson, \textit{National Portrait Gallery}, 95-96.
\textsuperscript{33} Ormrod, \textit{Kings & Queens}, 210.
\textsuperscript{34} Williamson, \textit{National Portrait Gallery}, 99.
\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 100.
\textsuperscript{36} Ormrod, \textit{Kings & Queens}, 212.
lived and easily defeated. Though it is unclear to what extent Elizabeth was complicit, if at all, in the rebellion, there was a plot to place her on the throne once Mary had been overthrown. Elizabeth was placed in the Tower of London for several months. Mary determined that to execute Elizabeth or keep her a prisoner in the tower would anger the English people, however setting her free could prove too dangerous for the Queen; decidedly, she kept her under house arrest in the country. Elizabeth spent the rest of Mary’s reign in fear that she would be implicated in a plot against the queen or determined too dangerous to be kept alive. 

During the course of her marriage, Mary thought herself to be pregnant twice, both times it was a false pregnancy and Mary suffered great physical and emotional distress. Sickly her entire life, Mary fell ill at the realization that her second pregnancy was false, and resignedly made Elizabeth her successor. Mary died on November 17. Elizabeth was crowned Queen of England two months later, finally safe after over a decade of fear and insecurity at the hands of her siblings.

From Woman to Monarch

In 1558, at the age of twenty-five, Elizabeth succeeded her sister Mary I as Queen of England, becoming Elizabeth I. Mary’s death and Elizabeth’s coronation marked the end of an era of danger and fear for Elizabeth and she didn’t take that fact for granted. Highly aware of how narrowly she escaped her sister’s reign with her life intact, Elizabeth ascended to the throne.

[^39]: Ormrod, *Kings & Queens*, 211.
[^41]: Ibid., 103.
determined to survive. During the Middle Ages, gender was a very strict and limiting concept, particularly for women. Women were confined to their sphere of submission and modesty, which was separate from the male sphere in almost every aspect; this was true socially, religiously, and politically, even for women of royal status. Politics were an explicitly male endeavor and were comprised of everything that the female sphere was not. Elizabeth I not only witnessed her sister’s mistakes, but saw how the people of England responded to her; those observations were invaluable to Elizabeth. Her reign was largely a response to that of her sister’s and she endeavored to define herself in opposition of her sister in all manners. Elizabeth strove to embody the virtues and favored characteristics of her sex while simultaneously presenting herself as strong, independent, competent, and in all ways beneficial to English prosperity. However, she was forced to balance between dismissing stereotypical weaknesses and maintaining her place as a woman. In the 16th century, it would have been just as detrimental to Elizabeth’s image if she were to cross too far into the male sphere and appear to reject her femininity altogether.

In the early years of her reign in particular, Elizabeth I’s portraits stood as both statements and reassurance of her ability to rule both competently and fairly. Symbols referred to her chastity—celebrating her lack of a husband and youth which portrayed her as pure as well

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43 Ibid., 48.
44 Mary Beth Rose, ed., Women in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance: Literary and Historical Perspectives (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1986), xxi (introduction).
45 Loades, Elizabeth I, 132-133.
46 Before Elizabeth took the throne, England had been a relatively weak European power, with very little influence beyond the shores of the British Isles. However, during the Elizabethan age, Britain achieved religious and economic independence, and economic dominance internationally. Elizabeth’s England was a new and better England. Her supporters and she used this powerful hope from the beginning of her reign to overcome her gender by depicting Elizabeth “as an instrument of God chosen to usher in a new age of faith.” (xxi) Women in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance: Literary and Historical Perspectives, edited by Mary Beth Rose, is a key source in the discussion of gender, and Elizabeth’s reign in particular.
as more than capable of producing an heir, which Mary had failed to achieve. In the wake of Mary I’s reign of religious persecution, Elizabeth denoted peace and religious tolerance, politically allowing more religious freedom than England had seen in decades. Elizabeth I was the antidote to everything that Mary I had been, and she would lead England through the quickly shifting world of the sixteenth century. The day before her coronation, Elizabeth made the traditional progression through the streets of London on the way to the Tower of London where she would spend the night. An account of that day records a prayer that Elizabeth made before entering the Tower:

O Lord, almighty and everlasting God, I give Thee most hearty thanks that Thou hast been so merciful unto me as to spare me to behold this joyful day. And I acknowledge that Thou hast dealt as wonderfully and as mercifully with me as Thou didst with Thy true and faithful servant Daniel, Thy prophet, whom Thou deliveredst out of the den from the cruelty of the greedy and raging lions. Even so was I overwhelmed and only by Thee delivered…. 

She not only acknowledges how lucky she was to survive the early years of her life, but attributes her survival to divine favor. Even before she is crowned queen, Elizabeth establishes her reign as the will of God and aligns herself to a biblical figure.

In her nearly three decades, Elizabeth had witnessed the manipulation and destruction of countless women—not least of whom, her mother and sister—largely at the hands of men. She herself had been placed in danger by the schemes of men countless times and had spent much of her youth as a prisoner, including a spell in the Tower of London. She learned a great deal as both witness and victim, and as Queen, she did not intend to be compliant to anyone, except for to her people. The same account of Elizabeth’s Coronation procession relates the speech she made to the crowd in response to their support and gifts:

...And whereas you request is that I should continue your good lady and queen, be ye ensured that I will be as good unto you as ever queen was to her people. No will in me can lack, neither do I trust shall there lack any power. And persuade yourselves that for the safety and quietness of you all I will not spare, if need be, to spend my blood. God thank you all.50

It was largely because of her widespread and enthusiastic popularity among the English people that Elizabeth was spared during Mary’s reign; it did not help Mary that she lacked both the love and loyalty of the people.51 Elizabeth committed herself and her sovereignty to the good of the people and the prosperity of England. Already popular as a woman, her reign was welcomed as a relief from the fear and instability of Mary’s administration—a period full of violence and unrest which angered many and pleased few.52

Almost certainly the first portrait of Elizabeth as Queen, the Coronation Portrait was painted in circa 1559, capturing the beginning of her reign. [Figure 1] The original has since been destroyed, but a copy dated to circa 1600 still exists.53 The first painting commissioned of Elizabeth as Queen was a powerful and essential step in her strategy as a public figure.54 As most individuals only sat for a portrait once or twice in their lives, an initial rendering was not only permanent in the form of a single painting, but in all succeeding portraits which would have

50 Marcus, Collected Works, 54.
52 Ibid., 48.
53 Pomeroy, Reading the Portraits, 8.
54 Elizabeth W. Pomeroy (see above) remarks that the Coronation Portrait was “long believed to be contemporary with the coronation itself, and has been dated about 1559.” (8) However, it has been confirmed that the Portrait hanging in the National Portrait Gallery was painted circa 1600, almost certainly copied from the original which is now lost. Few official portraits were painted of Elizabeth during the first decade of her reign. Those commissioned by the court were generally sent abroad as part of marriage negotiations with foreign courts. Dozens of representations of Elizabeth were created in the first few years of her reign depicting inaccurate resemblances. The demand for royal portraits surpassed the availability of authentic works. In 1563, a proclamation was made to ensure that the production of portraits was limited to the copying of a skilled likeness, commissioned by the Queen. In addition to the poorly painted copies circulating England, exiles abroad who had fled Mary’s reign began to depict Elizabeth as a sacred and mythical figure—the savior of the Protestant people.
used the piece as reference, rather than the subject themselves. Therefore, how Elizabeth was depicted in her Coronation Portrait had the power to dictate how she was seen for the rest of her reign. Highly intelligent and exceedingly adept at ensuring her own survival, Elizabeth produced a public image which was extremely calculated and symbolic from the beginning.

The oil painting measures 50 1/8 in x 39 ¼ in; the three-quarters figure of Elizabeth dominates the painting more so than in most other portraits of her, but not in an imposing way. Painted in what would become a popular composition for Elizabeth, she rises from the lower corners of the painting, with the tip of her crown nearly meeting the top of the panel. The triangular figure of Elizabeth is the majority of the painting, leaving only the top two corners unimpeded. Dressed in robes of gold and ermine, Elizabeth embodies the Monarchy. Though by no means as opulent as she is later depicted, the details of the painting all suggest wealth and prosperity. Ermine fur would have been expensive and laborious to construct an entire robe out of—a fact which contemporary viewers would not have missed. The jewels adorning her crown and dress were additional symbols of Elizabeth’s wealth and status. Her dress is embroidered in silver thread with Tudor roses and fleur-de-lis. The first representing the Tudor dynasty that she is continuing, and the latter a motif of the English claim to French soil, her claim as the monarch of England. Both illustrate her power—her birthright and her God-given


In his introduction, Strong gives an extensive explanation of how “portrait patterns” were created and used, both officially and unofficially. An entire section is dedicated to the production of portraiture.


Ermine is a small rodent, the fur of which was highly valued in Medieval and Renaissance Europe. It would have taken a number of animals to create a coat made entirely or largely of ermine and was therefore associated with royalty and nobility. Each black spot on a cloth of ermine is the tail of one animal.

57 Ibid.
right. Marking the event as her coronation, Elizabeth wears a crown and holds the scepter in her right hand and the orb in her left, all symbols of her authority: “the crown, the personal vesting of authority in an individual: the orb, the ruler’s hand upon the world or her kingdom; the scepter, justice to be combined with power.” The background of the portrait is a simple, dark blue which simultaneously highlights the pigments of her figure and focuses the attention of the viewer on the painting’s subject. While the portrait is filled with symbolic imagery, Elizabeth appears as a young woman, royal, but very human. She meets the viewer’s gaze with a combination of command and softness. Elizabeth never sought to appear threatening or unloving toward her subjects, especially in the early days of her rule when she was barely out of danger from her sister. Her early speeches, like the one made the day before her coronation, emphasized Elizabeth’s love and gratitude toward her people, and communicated her determination to serve them well and to honor the role that was divinely given to her.

With the adoration of the English people in mind, Elizabeth cleverly constructed an image of herself which was at once both extremely powerful and widely successful. Known throughout her reign as the Virgin Queen, a title which is still widely recognized today, the reference continuously served Elizabeth in several ways. At the beginning of her reign, her image was focused on her reputation as a maiden. The pearls adorning her crown and robe in the Coronation Portrait, a frequent motif in images of Elizabeth, appealed to her desired reputation among her people. In their iconographical study, *Pearls: Ornament and Obsession*, Kristin

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58 Elizabeth propounded the understanding that she was Queen of England by God’s hand. While not gods themselves, monarchs promulgated the concept that they were semi-divine, hand chosen by God to communicate his will to the people.


62 The scandal with Thomas Seymour when Elizabeth was a young woman, stained Elizabeth’s reputation as a chaste and proper young woman, as well as endangering her. Rumors spread about Seymour’s
Joyce and Shellei Addison found that “[p]earls created an air of power and, through their
traditional association with the notions of purity and chastity, reminded the world of the queen’s
unsullied virtue.” Further emphasizing her purity, Elizabeth wears her hair long and loose in
the style of a maiden. She projects a figure of youth and incorruptible innocence. While
Elizabeth never married, her youth and purity also promised an heir in the early years of her
sovereignty. Not only had Mary failed to produce an heir as Queen of England, but she had
been preceded by the reign of their father, Henry VIII, who in thirty-eight years as King and six
marriages only succeeded in producing three legitimate heirs, only one of which was male.65
Elizabeth was a welcome contrast to her much older sister and there was no reason for the
English people to believe she would fail to produce several heirs.

However, while Elizabeth presented herself as a young maiden, she was simultaneously
beginning her life-long, cautious negotiation between the male and female spheres. In her first
moments as Queen, she embraced the traditional roles of both male and female monarchs.
Elizabeth was only the second female Monarch in English history to ascend to the throne in her
own right.66 She had witnessed Mary navigate the altered, yet traditional, Coronation Ceremony
as the first Queen Regnant and chose to alter it even further. Elizabeth began the ceremony
dressed in white, the color traditionally worn by the Queen consort on Coronation Day, but “was

64 Watkins, In Public and in Private, 46.
65 For a brief biography of Henry VIII of England, see Williamson, The National Portrait Gallery History
66 For a history of the Kings and Queens of England, see Ibid.
reclothed in purple-velvet coronation robes,” the traditional attire of the King on Coronation Day, part-way through the ceremony.\(^{67}\) Thus Elizabeth chose neither male nor female monarch, but combined the two, establishing herself as both King and Queen of England in her own right, even as she accepted the crown.

To act in the role of the Queen consort would not have been correct as an unmarried woman; however, instigating her rule in the role of the King would not have been appropriate either.\(^{68}\) Her actions allowed Elizabeth to avoid being confined to one half of the throne, but in a way that didn’t offend anyone or overstep her status as a woman. She was a Queen, but she was not the Queen of a King and she would not be seen as a woman rather than a Monarch. Like an expert chess-player, Elizabeth had begun to maneuver her way to complete power without raising widespread suspicion, and she did it to the cheers of the English people.

**Establishing Authority**

The first allegorical portrait of Queen Elizabeth I was painted in 1569 and acts as a bridge between the early portraits of a young queen and the later paintings of a deity, barely recognizable as the same woman. Queen Elizabeth and the Three Goddesses “is a celebration not of a triumphant virgin queen but of a ruler who was still expected to marry.”\(^{69}\) [Figure 3]

Yet, even this first allegorical depiction of Elizabeth is a powerful representation of her legitimacy and capability as a queen in her own right. The painting illustrates the classical story of the Judgment of Paris in which the goddesses Hera, Athena, and Aphrodite request that Paris, a mortal, bestow an apple to the most beautiful of the three. In return for the most beautiful woman in the world, Helen of Troy, Paris awards the apple to Aphrodite, setting in motion the

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\(^{68}\) Camden, *Elizabethan Woman*, 270.
\(^{69}\) Strong, *Gloriana*, 65.
Trojan War in which mortals and immortals alike were involved. However, in this version instead of Paris, Elizabeth stands in judgment of the three goddesses and rejects both the choice and the resulting violence and misfortune that Paris wrought on the world.

Elizabeth stands in the foreground of the painting, standing atop a set of steps and gazing at the three goddesses slightly below her in various stages of response to her decision. Elizabeth is deemed the most beautiful and worthy choice as is communicated by the orb she holds in her outstretched hand. The orb—the imperial apple, can be read with two meanings: not only does it declare Elizabeth the winner, but it suggests that she has been chosen. Elizabeth Pomeroy reasons that “Because the apple has become the orb, we conclude that divine right has chosen and affirmed her to be Queen.” The implication is that where Paris’s choice led to destruction and violence, Elizabeth’s choice will lead to peace and stability. Again we see that it is not enough for Elizabeth to be the rightful queen by birth, her reign is further defended and strengthened by her claim to divine right—she did not simply come to the English throne, but was hand-picked by God to lead the nation.

Elizabeth’s defeat of the classical deities is established by her position standing slightly above them, physically superior, and her effect on them. Hera, goddess of Heaven, turns away from Elizabeth as if to flee from her superiority with one hand raised. Roy Strong suggests that her hand points to the sky “indicating that this reversal of the traditional judgment has been decreed by heaven.” Athena’s body is turned away from Elizabeth while her right hand is held up, perhaps in defense. All three women’s attention is steadfastly on Elizabeth and their symbols lay abandoned on the ground at their feet: the scepter of Hera, Queen of the gods, Athena’s

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70 Pomeroy, Reading the Portraits, 37.
71 The cross atop the orb suggests a religious element in the message of peace and stability in the wake of the Mary Tudor’s reign and the persecution of Protestants.
72 Strong, Gloriana, 66.
quiver of arrows as goddess of war, and the bouquet of roses which represent Aphrodite, goddess of love. One layer of meaning is that Elizabeth is superior to the classical beings: greater in beauty and authority, capable of agitating goddesses, benefiting the realm rather than plunging it into years of war and chaos and acting as a just ruler. However, the meaning of the allegory is deeper than her superiority over the women.

The three goddesses represent qualities of kingship: power, strength and courage, and love. Rather than determine one more important than the others, Elizabeth embodies all three aspects. As Pomeroy states, Elizabeth’s “symbolic routing of them [the goddesses] does not mean their banishment but rather her supremacy in their traditional qualities.”73 Whereas history provided a plethora of male iconographic figures to represent kings, Elizabeth and her sister before her, as queens in their own right, presented a problem when it came to iconography and the lack of preceding female figures to whom they could be compared. Lisa Hopkins, a Professor of English, remarks that “[a]s a result, it was the classical world which tended to be most extensively plundered for modes of imagining and figuring the queen.”74 Not only are the three goddesses powerful female figures, but they personify three essential traits of kingship, making a strong argument for the ability of a woman to possess the same legitimacy and capability as any king.

The defense of Elizabeth’s gender and position in a typically male role of monarch is further strengthened when the most obvious aspect of the narrative reversal is examined. Elizabeth’s replacement of the male judge is perhaps more significant than her relationship with the females of the narrative. Not only does Elizabeth replace Paris as the judge, but she brings peace and stability where he brought chaos, acting as the antithesis to everything that history

73 Pomeroy, *Reading the Portraits*, 32.
remembers in association to Paris. Where Paris chose love at the price of the well being of two kingdoms, Elizabeth places her nation and her people above her own heart, referencing her common claim of marriage to England. Strong remarks that it is “perhaps of significance that the true polarity [of the painting] is between the Queen, upon who pressure to marry was to continue throughout the next decade, and Venus, goddess of Love.”

Elizabeth does not simply replace another classical character however; she significantly alters the narrative by dismissing a man as the judge. In the original tale, despite being about female deities, women are neither independent nor capable. The narrative begins with the three figures fighting amongst themselves over who is the most beautiful and therefore worthy of the apple, and failing to choose a winner. The male god Hermes intervenes and leads the goddesses to the mortal male Paris. The three divine beings willingly allow a human man to judge and define them, depending on their respective bribes to win them a gesture of superficiality. Aphrodite is declared the winner only after she has promised Paris the most beautiful woman on Earth as his wife, Helen. Helen is merely a pawn without any say in her fate and Paris, despite being an insignificant human, is given the power to influence men and gods alike. These three powerful immortals are reduced to the inferiority of their sex. Elizabeth’s role as both judge and recipient powerfully distinguishes her from her classical counterparts as an independent woman who embodies all three qualities and rules in her own right, divinely ordained and not submitting to anyone.

In this narrative, Elizabeth both marks herself as a powerful and capable ruler chosen by God to lead England into a new era, and makes a significant statement about her gender and her refusal to submit to male judgment as Queen of England. This rendering of Elizabeth does not

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75 Strong, *Gloriana*, 66-68.
76 Pomeroy, *Reading the Portraits*, 31.
so much navigate between the gender spheres as claim Elizabeth’s womanhood as a benefit and strength of her reign, aligning her with powerful female deities and setting her against the consequences of Paris’s choice. As a woman and as a queen, Elizabeth is unique and powerful, ready to commit her reign and life to the prosperity of the nation and backed by divine will.

**Gender and Empire**

Perhaps the most vital and iconic aspect of Elizabeth’s reign was her status as a pure and chaste virgin. What began as a response to the dangers she faced as a princess, became Elizabeth’s strongest and most pivotal tool as a ruler, and more importantly, as a woman. From her first speech to Parliament, she began to plant the idea that she would die a virgin queen and that she had already entered into a marriage—that of a ruler to her country and people. Not only was she an ideal of womanhood, but she was more committed and more loving as a ruler than anyone previously. She was a divinely ordained Queen of England above and beyond all else.

Around 1579, a portrait pattern emerged, the resulting works of which came to be known as the Sieve Portraits.\(^\text{77}\) Strong suggests that the series “marks a new departure in Elizabeth’s portraiture, for it combines the earliest manifestations of imperial aspirations with Petrarchan motifs in celebration of her chastity” and introduces the relatively new concept of British imperialism.\(^\text{78}\) The most famous of these is thought to have been painted in 1580 by painter

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\(^{77}\) Around 1579, three nearly identical paintings appeared of the Queen holding a sieve. Only two of the three remain and introduce for the first time in her portraiture the idea of British imperialism. Within the next few years, a second set of “Sieve portraits” was produced resulting in an unknown number. This set elaborated on the symbolism and iconography of the original series; only three paintings of this second set have “most of the allegorical attributes.” (101) The most famous and the highest quality of these three is the “Siena Portrait” which was discovered in the attic of a Medici palace late in the 19th century and is now in the Pinacoteca at Siena. While the painter’s artist is not known for sure, it is attributed to Cornelius Ketel, a northerner. Roy Strong gives an extensive study of both the first and second series of “Sieve Portraits” in *Gloriana: Portraits of Queen Elizabeth I.*

\(^{78}\) Strong, *Gloriana,* 95-96.
Cornelius Ketel.\textsuperscript{79} [Figure 4] The allegorical portrait is heavy with symbolism referencing both her maiden state and her imperialism. Elizabeth stands in the foreground, dominating the scene, dressed in black, seriously, but not severely, gazing out at the viewer. Her gown is simple, black with white trim creating a high contrast. There is almost no color in the portrait except for the auburn of her hair which is subtly echoed throughout the portrait.\textsuperscript{80} In her left hand, she holds the namesake for the series of paintings, a sieve referring to the “Roman Vestal Virgin, Tuccia, who, on being accused of impurity, filled a sieve with water from the River Tiber and carried it without spilling one drop to the Temple.”\textsuperscript{81} The story echoes the events of Elizabeth’s youth and her triumph over both her enemies and her trials, literal and figurative. Inscribed around the rim of the sieve is the Latin motto: “A terra il ben mal dimora insella,” which translated means “The good falls to the ground while the bad remains in the saddle.”\textsuperscript{82} This could refer to the Queen’s wisdom and perception. However, Constance Jordan suggests that the symbolism goes deeper. She argues that the use of the word saddle represents both sexual power and political power, that Elizabeth’s “power as a fictional male is represented as including the kind of power to control and possess her suitors that is entirely at her discretion, a power that her contemporaries saw as proper to male sexuality functioning in a patriarchal culture.”\textsuperscript{83} Elizabeth’s claim to two bodies: one a mere woman and the other a ruling prince, is central to this argument that she could be at once sexually and politically in control. Her black dress (Elizabeth’s favored color) is adorned with pearls, furthering her claim to purity and reinforcing her reputation as the Virgin Queen.\textsuperscript{84}

\textsuperscript{79} Ibid., 101.
\textsuperscript{80} Pomeroy, Reading the Portraits, 46.
\textsuperscript{81} Strong, Gloriana, 96.
\textsuperscript{82} Ibid., 97.
\textsuperscript{83} Constance Jordan, “Representing Political Androgyny: More on the Siena Portrait of Queen Elizabeth I,” in Renaissance Englishwoman in Print: Counterbalancing the Canon, ed. Anne M. Haselkorn (United States of America: University of Massachusetts, 1990), 168.
\textsuperscript{84} Reference footnote 93 on the iconography of pearls.
Elizabeth’s chastity was no longer simply a defense of her person and a womanly attribute, but had taken on the promise of commitment to her people. As both a pledge of her love and loyalty to her people above all else, and as a political maneuver to assuage her councilors’ and parliament’s pleas and demands that she marry and produce an heir, Elizabeth proclaimed her marriage to her people and England, painting herself powerfully as both a loving wife and mother, and a selfless martyr who placed her duty before her heart.

Echoing this theme, the pillar in the background on which Elizabeth rests an arm references yet another Roman tale. As Strong notes, “Inset into the pillar is a series of medallions which further interconnect imperial destiny and the spurning of human passion.” The story is that of Dido and Aeneas, the founder of Rome. Again, Elizabeth draws on Roman sources where she lacks recent historical figures to emulate. Whereas a male monarch had centuries of kings to reference, the few female monarchs available to Elizabeth were not very positive examples, none having been very successful rulers. Elizabeth was forced to find classical and biblical figures who highlighted the strengths of her reign without suggesting any downfalls.

The ancient Roman story tells of the falling of Troy and of Aeneas’s divinely ordained quest to found the legendary city of Rome. On his journey, Aeneas crosses the path of Dido, the widowed Queen of Carthage, who offers Aeneas aid and the kingship of Carthage. However, spurred on by his destiny and the gods, Aeneas leaves Carthage and Dido. In response to Aeneas’s perceived betrayal, Dido throws herself onto a burning pyre. The allusion is that marriage is a temptation that would prevent destiny from being achieved, and that Elizabeth is reenacting Aeneas’s choice by seeking her destiny rather than following her heart. In this

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85 The pillar became another icon of her reign, though the Sieve Portrait is the first time that it appears.
scenario, Elizabeth does not play the feminine role of temptation, but the more commonly male role of fortitude and self-control. Elizabeth is making the statement that she is a queen first and a woman second. It was essential to Elizabeth’s success as an independent monarch that she not be forced into either traditional role of wife or mother other than where she could stay in control. She often made this distinction in her speeches, isolating herself from other women as a divine ruler. In response to a petition from the commons that she marry in 1563, Elizabeth stated:

The weight and greatness of this matter might cause in me, being a woman wanting both wit and memory, some fear to speak and bashfulness besides, a thing appropriate to my sex. But yet the princely seat and kingly throne wherein God (though unworthy) hath constituted me, maketh these two causes to seem little in mine eyes… and boldeneth me…

While she is physically a woman, Elizabeth embraces her divine character and her masculine spirit—rejecting the passions of the heart for the sake of her destiny. Strong notes that “[f]ulfillment of prophecies of empire is…interlocked with the maintenance of the Queen’s maiden state. They are inseparable.” England’s future is therefore dependant on her not marrying, in opposition to her councilor’s arguments and beliefs that it is just the opposite. Elizabeth’s successful rejection of marriage is one of the most significant aspects of her reign as a female monarch because she was refusing more than marriage; she was effectively refusing to be confined by the feminine sphere. The conflict lay in the fact that “If a queen were to demonstrate the strong attributes of kingship, she would not be acting in a womanly manner; yet, approved womanly behavior would ill-fit her for the rigors of rule.” The obvious and easiest solution to this issue would have been for Elizabeth to marry, like her sister. However, by glorifying her virginity, Elizabeth maintained complete control of both her person and her

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87 Marcus, *Collected Works*, 70.
Not only does she defend herself against the strongest tool of her enemies, but she wields it herself, turning it back upon them, and making her sexuality her greatest strength rather than weakness.

This strength and its imperialistic implications are highlighted in the column. Emphasizing not just her chastity and determination, but her imperial goals as well, at the base of the column is the crown of the Holy Roman Empire. Historian Carole Levin remarks that a “single column, usually crowned, was used to celebrate her chastity, constancy and her imperial destiny.” Referencing the Roman Empire was a powerful maneuver. Ancient Rome represented strength, honor, determination, power, and culture at a level that few things compared to. The Roman Empire was one of the most powerful and most successful kingdoms in human history and in the sixteenth century, the Holy Roman Empire was still a force to be reckoned with especially considering the might of the Papacy and Catholic Europe.

Continuing the theme of imperialism, Elizabeth’s left arm partially hides a globe standing behind her with “a shining highlight on the British Isles, surrounded by ships.” The globe is also inscribed with a motto—“tutto vedo e molto mancha,” meaning “I see everything, and much is lacking.” This phrase could reference Elizabeth’s literal connections and networks, represented by her ships beyond the shores of England, or as Art Historian, Elizabeth Pomeroy, suggests, “the text may refer to a kind of manifest destiny, not so much for territory as for influence—roles the Queen had yet to play, which she could in broad outline foresee, as Aeneas knew his own destiny perfectly well.”

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90 Ibid., 104.
91 Pomeroy, Reading the Portraits, 46.
92 Ibid., 52.
93 Ibid., 52.
Elizabeth’s imperialism marks her masculine determination and ability, countered by her feminine chastity. Again, she can reject either one, but instead manipulates and intertwines the two genders, omitting the negative aspects, balancing them, and allowing them to build on one another. Through her careful use of gender, she not only safeguards her reign, but establishes a unique rule, marked by its success and prowess. It was a woman, gifted and maneuvered by God, who lead England into imperial glory, and she did it without a man by her side—or perhaps, because she did not have a man by her side.

Conclusion

Throughout her reign, Elizabeth I was portrayed as an object of worship, historical and biblical heroes, England itself, surrounded by symbols and motifs, prophecies and plots, a woman and a belief materialized of and consumed by legends, beliefs, and allegories.\textsuperscript{94} Many historians argue that it is the level of fiction and fantasy present in her rule that allowed Elizabeth and her reign the popularity that they received both while she was alive and for centuries after, including our own. It is commonly accepted that Elizabeth manipulated her persona to avoid being limited by her gender. I argue that through her self-fashioning, both visual and rhetoric, Elizabeth I executed the balancing act she was forced to maintain between woman and monarch and it was that life-long navigation which allowed her to become one of England’s most important and powerful monarchs and opened the doors to the prosperous era which took her name. Where I differ from other historians is in my suggestion that it was Elizabeth’s gender

\textsuperscript{94} During her reign, Elizabeth was represented (either personally or by her subjects) as Astraea, a Queen of Shepherds, a new Deborah, Cynthia, Diana, a mother and wife to the nation, but also as a firstborn son, a prince, St. George, David, Moses, Solomon, Alexander, and Aeneas. Leah S. Marcus’s article “Shakespeare’s Comic Heroines, Elizabeth I, and the Political Uses of Androgyny,” is an excellent study of Elizabeth’s many self-representations.
and her response to the conflict that it presented which made her such a successful and historically significant queen.

Roy Strong called it the “Cult of Elizabeth,” this creation of an idea that went far beyond the reality of the woman that sparked it. The allegory and symbolism which surrounded Elizabeth cannot be denied, what is less clear however, is the extent to which she played a role in the development of her legend.

Based on her portraits, speeches, and self-fashioning, Elizabeth had a great deal to do with not only how the world perceived her, but what became of those perceptions. From her wardrobe to her title, Elizabeth was acutely aware of how she presented herself and to whom. Elizabeth’s portraits enabled her command over her image and therefore her public persona, through which she controlled perceptions of her gender and performed the balancing act she was forced to maintain between woman and monarch. It was her decisive and exhaustive self-fashioning which allowed Elizabeth I to become one of the most powerful, effective, and beloved monarchs in English history. From the first decisions of her reign, when she accepted the queenship but rejected being inferior to a king by wearing both colors, she was conscious of the narrow and treacherous path that she would have to walk if she wanted to succeed as a queen in her own right, and not merely as a woman.95 She drew strength and credibility from Roman iconography and figures in order to anchor her reign in history, and flamed England’s hopes for the future by promising success as God’s chosen instrument. Her manipulation of her gender and status were subtle enough not to enrage the deep set beliefs of gender roles during the Renaissance, but determined enough to allow her her own category, both a woman and a queen, but also a man in the eyes of God and therefore worthy of an independent throne. She carefully

95 See the section From Woman to Monarch for a discussion of the Coronation Ceremony and Elizabeth’s dress.
and patiently carved a path to success, gradually moving from a pure, worthy young woman to an idyllic and untouchable divine being, more than human, barely less than a divinity, but worthy of being represented as both.

Had Elizabeth allowed herself to be confined to being a woman, she would have followed in the footsteps of any number of female rulers who were cast into the shadows of history by stronger, more prominent and powerful men. It was her determination to survive which drove Elizabeth throughout her life and reign. After the uncertainty and danger of her youth, Elizabeth never wanted to fall victim to the plots or schemes of others, or be controlled by anyone, and so she sought the protection provided by the people’s love and loyalty. Elizabeth marked herself as the ideal of youth and femininity, the salvation and hope of her people. She claimed the favor and protection of God, and established herself as a ruler in her own right.

However, even when widely accepted as an independent queen, the question of the succession led her councilors and Parliament to continue urging a marriage. Elizabeth, though not blind to the issue of not having an heir, was wary of what marriage would mean for her. She had witnessed the plots attempted during both of her siblings’ rules, a number of which revolved around placing Elizabeth on the throne, and during her own reign, she suffered the plots aimed at placing Mary, Queen of Scots, on the English throne in her stead. Marriage could mean a loss of control, a level of subordination to another individual, and an established heir had the potential to be just as dangerous to Elizabeth as the unanswered question of succession. Continuing as the “Virgin Queen” provided Elizabeth a source of control that would be lost with marriage, a loss which would affect her monarchy in multiple ways.

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96 See Historical Background for a history of Elizabeth’s youth and the dangers that she faced and overcame at the hands of individuals around her. See the section From Woman to Monarch for further analysis of how she responded to these events and her attitude upon taking the throne and having survived her sister’s reign.
Establishing an unbreakable link between Elizabeth’s virgin state and the destined success of the British Empire created a fiercely powerful image while also protecting the human woman behind it. By both embracing the qualities of her gender and marking them as fundamentally unique and divine, Elizabeth first shaped herself, and then dictated an era in which she was essential, as she was. Those that would have controlled and weakened her were faced with the seemingly insurmountable combination of a woman and a nation, one representing the other, and unsure of where either ended.

Elizabeth’s earliest images as a queen sought to establish her power and right to rule. A large part of that argument was based in attention paid to her gender—claiming the virtues of being a woman while simultaneously defending her presence in a male role. I expect to see a shift in how Elizabeth was rendered during the last decades of her reign. Whereas her early portraits established power, portraits produced later in life were aimed at maintaining that power in the face of Elizabeth’s impending mortality and the permanent lack of an heir.

**Postscript**

This paper stands as the initial findings of this project. There are numerous portraits, sources, and studies that I will consult and evaluate in further research but which, for the purposes of this grant, would have been too much. I chose to dedicate more space and energy to a few sources for this length of a paper. I will continue my research this fall when I complete my Honor’s Thesis. I will incorporate several more portraits and primary sources, as well as broaden my analysis and discussion of Elizabeth’s self-fashioning throughout her rule.
Figure 1:
Queen Elizabeth I
Unknown English artist
Circa 1600
Oil on panel
50 1/8 in. x 39 1/4 in. (1273 mm x 997 mm)
National Portrait Gallery
Figure 2:
Queen Elizabeth I: The Ditchly Portrait
Marcus Gheeraerts the Younger
Circa 1592
Oil on canvas
95 in. x 60 in. (2413 mm x 1524 mm)
National Portrait Gallery
Figure 3:
Elizabeth I and the Three Goddesses
Hans Eworth
1569
Oil on panel
62.9 x 84.4 cm
Royal Collection Trust
Figure 4:
Portrait of Elizabeth I: the Sieve Portrait
Attributed to Cornelius Ketel; also attributed to Federico Zuccaro; attributed to Quinten Metsys II
Circa 1580-1583
Painting on Canvas
124.5 x 91.5 cm
Pinacoteca Nazionale in Siena
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