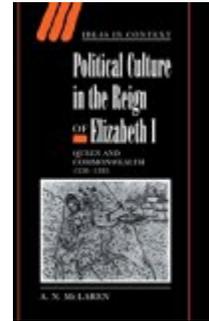


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Anne McLaren. *Political Culture in the Reign of Elizabeth I: Queen and Commonwealth 1558-1585*. New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999. ix + 272 pp. \$54.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-65144-8.

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## The Theory and Practice of Female Monarchy

Dr. Anne McLaren, Lecturer in the School of History at the University of Liverpool, has written a fine analysis of the intersection of some of the major themes in Elizabethan history. Her book draws together the topics of religious change, gender, political theory, and court politics, and the result is a most helpful and satisfying work on the governance of Elizabeth I. She offers a compelling argument about the nature of female monarchy in the sixteenth century by exploring how the council and counsellors of Elizabeth attempted to legitimate the rule of a woman who, according to prevalent attitudes, was condemned by God and by nature to an inferior position in Tudor society and the family. While her half-sister Mary Tudor “side-stepped some of these issues (and raised others) by marrying” and by accepting papal authority, Elizabeth would rule without the masculine imprimatur of husband or pope (p. 16). Recognizing the role of hierarchy and patriarchy in that era, McLaren is intrigued by the accession of Elizabeth I as a queen regnant. Her book, *Political Culture in the Reign of Elizabeth I*, provides an illuminating discussion of the tensions arising from the accession of a single female ruler and the accommodations, both in theory and in practice, that such an anomalous monarchy required.

McLaren focuses on the first half of the reign of Elizabeth and its relationship to the dynastic upheavals generated by her father’s political reformation. Henry VIII’s break with Rome led to generations of conflict between Catholics and protestants and fueled English fears of foreign invasion, a concern rendered more threatening by

the political disability of minority rule followed by female monarchy. This set of circumstances provided the background to Elizabeth’s accession, the starting point of this study, and McLaren explores their impact through the “watershed” of the 1580s, when the “radical potential” of the Bond of Association concerning Mary Stuart inaugurated a shift into a more “authoritarian” era in the 1590s (p. 9). The changed discourse characteristic of later Elizabethan rule, McLaren argues, contributed to the difficulties encountered (and generated) by James I and Charles I. In this regard, her book speaks to the causes of conflict between kings, counsellors, and parliament that presaged the Civil Wars of the 1640s.

The first chapter, “To be Deborah,” addresses the ways that Elizabeth cultivated her authority within the parameters of her privy council’s and subjects’ expectations of female behavior. In the debate over her use of the title Supreme Head or Supreme Governor, humanists and godly protestants favored the latter because of the perceived inability of a woman to rise above Biblical strictures and the limitations of her own nature to wield the imperium attached to the former title, Supreme Head, that Henry VIII had enjoyed. Elizabeth accepted the role of governor but used both phrases depending on her audience and context of the conversation. She also embraced the role of Deborah, one appealing to her advisors, for its symbolic legitimization of her female authority and its emphasis on providentialism, the divine guidance that shaped her actions in accordance with the goals of a godly reformation. In the clear prose that enlivens

the entire book, McLaren writes of queen and counsellors that “if her role was to serve as an instrument for God’s grace, theirs was to mould the instrument to be receptive to His will – with the strong implication that this would be an uphill battle” (p. 38).

Her analysis of the famous dialogue between John Knox and John Aylmer forms the second chapter, “Announcing the godly common weal: Knox, Aylmer and the parameters of counsel.” In his *First Blast of the Trumpet*, Knox criticized the several ruling European queens from a classical, humanist, and protestant perspective. But the distinction he made regarding Elizabeth I was that despite her female failings, she ruled because God ordained it and so acted on earth through counsellors in a providentially sanctioned realm. As long as the queen “humbled herself” to receive the illumination from God, expressed by her advisors, she would be a legitimate, effective ruler (p. 56). McLaren, more than some historians, finds Aylmer’s response to share common ground with Knox. Aylmer defends Elizabeth’s monarchy by noting how God rules through paradox (the weak inherit the earth, the wise are foolish), by asserting that female rule is not divinely prohibited, and by stressing the role of providence. “When God has so clearly manifested His will in terms of the succession, we must,” in Aylmer’s words, “honor His choice, rather than ...prefer our own” (p. 64). The centerpiece of his defense, which becomes the heart of McLaren’s argument, is the creation of a “mixed monarchy.” The way to ensure godly rule from Elizabeth, who as a woman would be subject to excess passion and, therefore, likely to slide into tyranny, was to emphasize the constitutional power of her advisors and privy council, whose godly counsel would bridle her.

The theme of mixed monarchy shapes the remainder of the book. In Chapter 3, “Feats of incorporation: the ideological bases of the mixed monarchy,” McLaren looks at the writings of Knox, Aylmer, Thomas Elyot, Thomas Starkey, Christopher St. German, and Thomas Smith for their theoretical limitations placed on female monarchs. She traces the evolution of the idea of Henry VIII as a mere –supreme – monarch, through Elizabeth’s mixed monarchy that incorporated the queen into the commonwealth, to the divine right to rule asserted by James I, who distinguished sharply his absolute authority from the constraints of gender that had limited his predecessor. There is an excellent discussion of Mary Tudor and her husband Philip of Spain and their role in the religious-gender divide, which McLaren then contrasts with the virginity of Elizabeth that allowed her to be

more incorporated into her kingdom. Her unmarried status called for male, “husbandly” advice from council and parliament that would check her tyranny and guide her in the path of the godly. The godly guidance came from the growing role of conscience in political discourse.

McLaren draws upon the writings of John Ponet, Laurence Humphrey, and Christopher Goodman to advance the significance of mixed monarchy. Her nuanced analysis allows her to suggest how the earlier bridle of “queen-in-parliament” placed on Elizabeth because of her gender “was finally deemed to be applicable to an English male incumbent of the imperial crown” in the seventeenth century (p. 133). This godly tradition of giving advice to guide or restrain the sovereign did not vanish with the accession of a king in 1603. Along the way, McLaren interprets the king’s two bodies from a female perspective: if a woman could not be the head, then did the body politic become acephalous? Not if the godly, patriotic counsel of her parliaments and council continued to guide the queen’s actions. But when queen and advisors diverged, as happened in particular concerning Mary Stuart, then how was the mixed monarchy to operate? McLaren points to the increased tension that characterized the later reign of Elizabeth, as the queen grew more autocratic and independent of her traditional coterie of male bridlers. The balance between the three estates forming the mixed monarchy (queen, parliament, and counsellors) shifted in favor of her royal prerogative and found its expression in an enhanced cult of Elizabeth in the 1590s.

The chapter on Thomas Smith’s *De Republica Anglorum* concludes the book with a discussion of the humanist view of citizen as an advocate of the good of the common weal, a godly counsellor of virtue and rank, and, by definition, a man. The fate of Mary Stuart split the queen from her advisors, as she urged the private assassination in opposition to their public trial by the godly. This dispute, McLaren proposes, led to a redefinition of mixed monarchy. Elizabeth advocated her prerogative and sovereignty exercised through the nobility, while men like Peter Wentworth pushed for an increasingly political godly reformation of the state in preparation for the return to male rule. In a powerful and succinct conclusion, McLaren argues that “Far from persuading Englishmen of the acceptability of queenship, Elizabeth’s reign actually made the exercise of imperial kingship, even by a fully adult male, intensely problematic.... [T]he problem of kingship that emerged under the Stuarts was very directly related to the solutions to the problem of queenship explored during Elizabeth’s forty

years on the throne” (p. 242).

As a work of political theory, this book draws upon printed primary sources and provides appropriate, well-chosen quotations from them throughout each chapter. McLaren smoothly integrates her historiographical arguments without digressing, and her notes are especially helpful. As might be expected from the above commentary, she is revising the works of J. E. Neale on Elizabeth’s character and court and G. R. Elton on the issue of commonwealth men during the reign of Edward VI, while being influenced in her political and religious analysis by the works of John Guy, Patrick Collinson, and J.G.A. Pocock. McLaren’s analysis of the gender constraints

Elizabeth faced draws profitably from the recent studies by Merry Weisner, Susan Frye, Susan Amussen, and Helen Hackett. This book is well organized, and McLaren writes in a lucid and engaging style. Her argument is ambitious, sustained, and far-reaching in its implications for our understanding of how Elizabeth I ruled a nation of male citizens predisposed ideologically to resist such female monarchy. What a pleasure it is to read this significant book that belongs in every college library.

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