

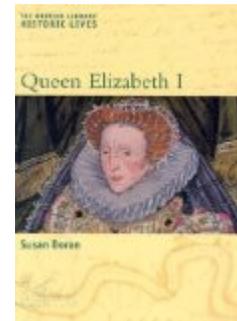
# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Susan Doran. *Queen Elizabeth I*. New York: New York University Press, 2003. 144 pp. \$21.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8147-1957-2.

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## The Heart and Stomach of a King

Susan Doran, Stipendiary Lecturer at Christ Church, Oxford, has written extensively on the Elizabethan era. Several of her works are directed at British students preparing for their A-level examinations, and as a consequence, are designed to provide both a narrative overview and an analytical synopsis of the historiography. Although this volume, published by New York University Press in partnership with The British Library, is aimed at a wider audience, it too reflects Doran's exceptional ability to incorporate tomes of historical documents and interpretive studies into a highly readable, academically solid, beautifully illustrated, and concisely written monograph.

In an essay on "Elizabeth I: Gender, Power and Politics" for *History Today* (May 2003), Doran notes that the BBC television poll of Great Britons rated Elizabeth as "the best known and most admired English monarch." But what is particularly interesting to Doran about this twenty-first-century admiration for the sixteenth-century queen is its association with "Elizabeth's ability as a woman to exercise power successfully in a man's world." Doran contends that the difficulties of female rule in a male world have been exaggerated and that "Elizabeth's gender had less impact on political life than is generally assumed." In *Queen Elizabeth I*, Doran expresses similar skepticism about gender-based explanations of Elizabethan polity.

Much ado has been made by historians about parliament's refusal to grant Elizabeth the title "Supreme Head

of the Church" held by her father and brother before her. Elizabeth's use of "Supreme Governor" may have "appeased those Protestants who were deeply uncomfortable with the notion of a woman acting as the head of a Church in which only men were called to be apostles, evangelists and ministers" (p. 63), but in the Queen's view the change was appropriate on theological grounds totally unconnected to the sex of the ruler: "this honour is due to Christ alone and cannot belong to any human being soever" (quoted on p. 63). Elizabeth I, Doran argues, did not see gender as limiting her ability to oversee the Church of England and "was determined to exercise the royal supremacy as forcefully as her father had done" (p. 63). Doran disagrees with historians who wish to deny the queen agency by attributing Elizabethan religious policies to the Privy Council or Convocation; the church settlement instead reflected Elizabeth's "personal beliefs and ceremonial preferences" (p. 63).

As a ruler, Elizabeth was expected to marry and produce an heir. If there was one area where gender made all the difference, it was marriage. Convention held that a wife should be subject to her husband, and Elizabeth's marriage—as Mary Tudor's before her—could bring the English ruler under the thumb of a foreign prince. Thus, whom a queen married was more important than whom a king married. Doran disagrees with historians who argue that Elizabeth, having no intention to share power with a husband (or anyone else, for that matter), made a firm decision, early in her reign, never to marry. Nor does she think that the queen's marriage negotiations were merely

“part of a diplomatic game” (p. 72). She believes that the queen seriously considered marrying both Robert Dudley and Francis of Anjou, but that she sublimated her own desires to the wishes of the court and public. Ironically, it was not Elizabeth, but the opponents of her marriage to Anjou, who “commissioned or executed art and literary works idealizing Elizabeth’s virginity as part of their publicity campaign against the matrimonial project” (p. 117).

Doran’s analysis of Elizabethan iconography also downplays the role of gender. She thinks modern-day historians overemphasize the compensatory use of virginal analogies. In her view, the dominant image in the popular representation of Elizabeth was that of a Protestant ruler. Literary and artistic symbolism recalled not so much the pure and blessed Virgin Mary of Medieval Europe as the powerful goddesses of Classical Greece. References to Diana, Cynthia, and Phoebe, all associated with the moon, emphasized Protestant England’s sea victories over Catholic Spain. And references to Elizabeth’s virginity were not always worshipful. Often they concealed worries about the succession or criticisms of her policies. When Elizabethan iconography is considered as a whole, “the popular assumption that there was a ‘cult of the Virgin Queen’ calls for renewed discussion” (p. 125).

Elizabeth was as brave as any king. As Doran notes, “Guarding the queen was difficult because of her careless approach to personal safety” (p. 98). She was not afraid to mingle with her subjects or to meet with strangers. Thus, extraordinary efforts had to be taken to protect her from assassination—a very real threat given the fate of William of Orange in 1584 and later King Henry IV of France in 1610. To early biographers such as Camden, her appearance before the troops at Tillbury was yet another example of her “courage and success as a war leader” (p. 121). Elizabeth might “have the body but of a weak and feeble woman,” but she had “the heart and stomach of a king” (quoted on p. 121). However apt it might be to Elizabeth’s situation, this oft-cited reference was not published until 1654. Because the language of politics was historically gendered, it is hard to gauge the extent to which Elizabeth intentionally employed—or needed to employ—androgynous terminology.

Elizabeth’s greatest difficulties with gender came at the end, not at the beginning, of her reign. This Doran at-

tributes to a new generation of politicians such as Robert Devereux, the 2nd Earl of Essex, who preferred war to diplomacy, and blamed Elizabeth’s parsimony on her sex. But given the economic conditions and political realities of the times, Elizabeth’s hesitancy to spend the crown’s limited funds on expensive military adventures (and adventurers), whose success was by no means guaranteed, was not as foolish as hawks then and now have maintained. Doran concedes that “Temperamentally Elizabeth was unsuited to the kind of bold decision-making and risk-taking strategies associated with great war leaders” (p. 128), but this frame of mind was not unique to women. Her successor, James I, prided himself on his pacifist initiatives, and one of his first actions upon becoming King of England was to negotiate peace with Spain.

Doran also disagrees with historians who attribute the reign’s successes to individuals around the queen. Elizabeth listened to and respected the advice of men such as Cecil and Walsingham, but ultimately the decisions were hers, not theirs. Despite her faults and limitations, Elizabeth “was a charismatic and hands-on ruler, who proved a steady pair of hands during a period of political and religious ferment and helped save England from the religious civil wars that plagued her neighbors” (p. 137). Queen Elizabeth I, as English monarchs before her, ruled not reigned.

Except for a statement in the final paragraph (“I do not share this negative view of the queen; nor do I see her on the periphery of decision-making” [p. 137]), Doran’s opinions of Elizabethan historiography have to be teased out of this volume. She does not refer directly to the works of Christopher Haigh or Susan Brigden, for instance, whose less-favorable appraisals of Elizabeth she has critiqued elsewhere. Nor does she take on Carole Levin or Susan Bassnet (although both are cited in suggestions for further reading) who have presented more consciously feminist analyses of Elizabeth’s rule. Without the detailed explanations of art historians such as Roy Strong, the novice may find the nicety of her arguments about Elizabethan iconography, which is developed much more fully in Doran and Thomas Freeman’s *The Myth of Elizabeth*, unconvincing. Nonetheless, the book does a superb job of discussing Elizabeth within the context of the times. Doran’s sympathetic portrayal of the queen and her reign will resonate well with readers in both the United States and the United Kingdom.

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