
Reviewed by Regina Buccola (Department of English, Roosevelt University)
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A New View of the Stuart Response to Old Bess

This year (2003) marks the four hundredth anniversary of the death of Queen Elizabeth I. Scholars of literature and history the world over are taking the opportunity afforded by this auspicious event to reassess the Queen of Famous Memory, an enterprise abetted in no small measure by three major exhibits devoted to the Queen over the course of this year, at the National Maritime Museum in England, and the Folger Shakespeare Library and the Newberry Library in the United States. The twenty-first century opened with, incredibly, the first publication of a representative collection of Elizabeth’s copious and wide-ranging writing over the course of her reign.[1] Elizabeth is, arguably, one of the world’s most readily recognizable monarchical figures given the ubiquity of her brocaded and bejeweled image. However, the Virgin Queen remains as elusive a figure today as she did for the hosts of princes and potentates who courted her in the sixteenth century.

In *Representing Elizabeth in Stuart England*, John Watkins undertakes the task of interpreting the interpretations of Elizabeth mounted over the course of the fraught Stuart monarchy, from the accession of James I through the reign of Queen Anne, who self-consciously cast herself in Gloriana’s image. Watkins is an associate professor of English at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities, a fact which renders the achievement here the more impressive. He pays homage to Carole Levin, Willa Cather Professor of History at the University of Nebraska, in the acknowledgements as well as in bibliographic notes throughout the text.[2] Like her, a historian who has demonstrated a formidable command of literary texts, Watkins emerges here as a literary scholar with an expansive knowledge of both Tudor and Stuart history and their attendant political nuances.

In chapters devoted to each of the significant political shifts from the absolute monarchy of the early Stuarts to the English Civil War and Restoration and, ultimately, the last gasp of the Stuart line in William III, Mary II, and Anne, Watkins combats the longstanding view that the Stuarts as well as the subjects they ruled regarded Elizabeth with reverent nostalgia. Instead, Watkins offers a persuasive reading of a variety of surviving materials, including popular pamphlet literature, commemorative verses, and diary entries, to demonstrate that Elizabeth’s image was quite incongruously deployed on both sides of Stuart oppositional politics. In this analysis, the august Alexander Pope rests between the sheets with scurrilous seventeenth-century romances such as The Secret History of the Most Renowned Q. Elizabeth and the E. of Essex. Royalists and their opponents both champion Elizabeth, the former as a shining example of the orderly rule sent spinning into chaos by the regicide of 1649, and the latter as an instance of a monarch who knew how to beat the Catholic menace out of the bushes in which it was presumed to lurk.

The approach throughout the book is unique, but the originality of Watkins’s contribution reaches its zenith...
in chapters 6 and 7, “‘Under the name of a vergin or maiden queen’” and “Gloriana’s Secrets.” The former begins by noting that we typically only know about those who spoke out against the sanctioned notions of Elizabeth’s person and polity by virtue of negative accounts of them in court proceedings pursued against the offenders. For the first time, Watkins presents and analyzes an exception to this rule, the “Riddle misterey or parable” [sic] sent by the Cheshire magistrate to the Privy Council in 1675, allegedly by an illegitimate great-grandson of Elizabeth rising up to lay claim to the throne. In the latter chapter, Watkins points out that historians typically ignore the socio-cultural riches buried in the slime of the “secret histories” of the Virgin Queen’s necessarily secret sexual life, and proceeds to mine them. Watkins’s readings of the highly implausible lesbian love scenes between Elizabeth Tudor and Mary Stuart in John Banks’s plays are particularly fascinating, and certainly pave the way for further research into the early modern literary articulation of lesbian desire.[3]

Watkins’s literary interest in Elizabeth as monarch grows quite cogently out of his earlier work on Spenserian epic. In this book, her very life becomes an epic, repeatedly reread and rewritten over the course of the seventeenth and long eighteenth centuries. With the availability of resources such as the *Collected Works*, there is sure to be increasing attention paid to Elizabeth and the voluminous literary/historical detritus she left in her wake.[4] *Representing Elizabeth in Stuart England* constitutes an excellent resource not only for scholars, but also for students. Reading this book, one is immediately aware of being in the capable hands not only of an excellent scholar, but also of a stellar lecturer. The argument is consistently lucid, rendering this work valuable for not only the scholarly library, but equally for the classroom, a rare and commendable accomplishment.

Notes


[4]. Indeed, should one be seeking a more chronologically expansive treatment of Elizabeth’s posthumous career, see Michael Dobson and Nicola J. Watson, *England’s Elizabeth: An Afterlife in Fame and Fantasy* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

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