

**John Watkins.** *Representing Elizabeth in Stuart England: Literature, History, Sovereignty.* New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002. xi + 264 pp. \$60.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-521-81573-4.



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## Elizabeth I and the "Idea of Monarchy"

Elizabethan iconography has fascinated cultural analysts for generations. Roy Strong's 1987 study of Elizabethan portraiture, *Gloriana*, parallels English efforts to portray their monarch as the abstract embodiment of kingship to similar efforts by other sixteenth-century countries to glorify their rulers and associate them with the Platonic ideal. In Strong's view, images of Elizabeth I were not merely visual representations of her as an individual; they were also pieces of political propaganda, idealizing both Elizabeth and the English state she personified.[1] This association with the Perfect Form or, in Christian terms, the Divine, had special benefits for a woman monarch. As Carole Levin has persuasively argued, "The position of the monarch and the nature of kingship emerges in the sixteenth century as an office so awe inspiring and powerful it could even encompass a female ruler." [2] In *Representing Elizabeth in Stuart England*, John Watkins traces the seventeenth-century evolution of the idea of monarchy by examining literary and his-

torical characterizations of Elizabeth during the Stuart era.

Watkins, an associate professor of English at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities, contends that both Stuart apologists and critics used (and misused) representations of Elizabeth to support their own political ideologies and preferences. He cites a wide variety of seventeenth-century historical and literary works to show that changes in Elizabeth's representation reflected changes in concepts of sovereignty between 1603 and 1714. Watkins concludes that Elizabeth's "principal cultural function--the satisfaction of a perpetual bourgeois fantasy for a lost age of charismatic absolutism--developed in the century that opened with James I's assertions of divine right and ended with the limitations on the Crown's prerogative that followed the Glorious Revolution" (p. 3). Thus, he warns against using seventeenth-century representations of Elizabeth to explain either Tudor or Stuart political reality.

The earliest Stuart representations of Elizabeth describe her as the phoenix from whose ashes James had risen. This phoenix trope conve-

niently disguised the fact James was a foreigner whose family had been barred from the throne of England by Henry VIII and whose mother had been the symbol of Catholic opposition to Elizabeth. With Elizabeth as his fictitious mother, James could be seen as sharing her divine power and continuing her "legacy" of Protestantism, peace, and prosperity.

The absolutist idea of monarchy shared by Elizabeth and James was transformed in dramatist Thomas Heywood's historical imagination, however. In his two-part play, *If You Know Not Me, You Know Nobody*, "the old absolutist figurations of monarchy fell into disrepute" and "a new kind of sovereign" emerged, one "who, instead of standing mystically apart from the people, epitomized their values and experiences" (p. 53).

Seventeenth-century historians also contributed to the transformation of the monarchical ideal in their descriptions of Elizabethan politics. Robert Naunton, William Camden, and Fulke Greville all used Tacitean narrations to chronicle the Elizabethan past. Although their histories "recognized Elizabeth as an absolutist who was as jealous of her prerogative as her Stuart successors ... they become canonized as early champions of her as a constitutionalist" (p. 57). Watkins attributes much of this transition to intentional misreading, but he concedes that the Tacitean narrative as a genre contributed to the confusion. "[A]ll three were steeped in a Machiavellian, ultimately Tacitean view of the court--any court--as a site of factional strife. Whenever this de-idealizing strain surfaces in their work, it undercuts their loftier vision of Elizabeth as an all-powerful, all-benevolent ruler committed to her people's welfare" (p. 57). Whereas Camden justified Elizabeth's execution of James's mother by blaming it on evil male counselors taking advantage of her feminine trust and Naunton showed Elizabeth's use of faction and parties as a means of maintaining personal control, later writers praised Elizabeth for delegating power to her advisors. Greville used Eliza-

beth's memory to critique specific Jacobean behaviors much as Tacitus had used the ideal of the Roman Republic to criticize developments in the Roman Empire, but later writers would emphasize the inherent problems of monarchy as an institution.

During the Civil War, royalists and parliamentarians alike employed idealized images of Elizabeth to portray themselves as the defenders of traditional English rights and liberties. Supporters of the king used Elizabethan examples to defend the Stuart use of the royal prerogative. Opponents "presented her reign as a period of such pronounced monarchical restraint that it had been, in effect, a proto-republic" (p. 98). After Charles's execution, however, republican politicians shied away from any idealized image of Elizabeth, fearing its "counter-revolutionary potential" (p. 85).

Elizabeth's gender was an important element of the antithetical narratives of her reign. "In absolutist discourse, the monarch was as exempt from natural infirmities of gender as from the constraints of common law. Parliamentarians, on the other hand, preferred an alternative Elizabeth who yielded to masculine counsel" (p. 96). This latter conception of natural female passivity--even among queens--fit well with the "emerging culture of domesticity that limited women's participation in the public sphere and simultaneously aggrandized their identities as wives and mothers" (p. 177).

During the Restoration writers increasingly focused on Elizabeth's private life. Tales of Elizabeth's sexual indiscretions, earlier confined to recusant attacks on her character, were incorporated into popular publications such as *The Secret History of the Most Renowned Q. Elizabeth and the E. of Essex* and *The Secret History of Alancon and Elizabeth*. Originating in France, but soon translated into English, the secret histories paint "a society in which monarchy fosters rather than impedes the course of true love" and "an absolutist order whose tyranny over intimate life

showed no sign of abating" (p. 168). Similarly, Restoration plays by John Banks--*The Unhappy Favourite* (1682) and *The Island Queens* (1684)--transformed Elizabeth "from an exemplary ruler into the subject of extraordinary passion" (p. 173). Watkins believes this Restoration literature "played an important role in dismantling an absolutist image" while at the same time increasing the interest in Elizabeth's personal characteristics and behavior (p. 152). Such works "established the terms through which a popular fascination with monarchs as celebrities could flourish even as their real power as rulers diminished" (p. 173). Ultimately, it was Elizabeth the woman, not Elizabeth the queen, who captured the public's attention.

The Glorious Revolution undermined any residual hagiographic elements in representations of Elizabeth. A divine right ruler whose virginity guaranteed England's Protestantism and liberty was difficult to reconcile with the constitutional realities of William and Mary's reign. Queen Anne attempted to portray herself as a second Elizabeth, even adopting Elizabeth's motto, "Semper Eadem." But the comparison only served to emphasize the difficulty of female rule in a century where "the new myth of Elizabeth as a woman with a troubled and troubling personal history compromised her value as the epitome of public, monarchical virtues" (p. 219). The idea of monarchy had changed so much since the time of Elizabeth that her government could no longer be used as a yardstick to measure contemporary rulers.

Watkins analyzes many sources that have been neglected by other writers. He chooses "works that are either more ambivalent toward Elizabeth or more generous toward her Stuart successors than the works now generally canonized as seventeenth-century tributes" (p. 6). While his exploration of less well-known materials is illuminating, it seems strange to discuss Elizabethan representation in seventeenth-century literature and not to mention Shakespeare, especial-

ly since his plays dealt with political issues and were performed regularly during the Jacobean period. Shakespeare's christening speech in *Henry VIII* (co-authored with John Fletcher) has one of the best-known references to the phoenix trope, for instance. By leaving out Shakespeare and emphasizing less favorable representations, the reader is left to wonder how more canonical works would support or contradict Watkins's thesis.

One problem faced by interdisciplinary writers is that discursive styles tend to be discipline-specific. Watkins's use of first-person interjections (e.g., "I want to suggest"; "I want to explore"; "I want to attribute"; "I have taken issue") will be disruptive to historians used to third-person narratives. The lack of a bibliography makes it difficult to get an overview of the type of primary and secondary sources employed. For classroom use, it would be helpful to have a chronological chart that correlates historical developments and literary publications.

As Morris Dickstein notes in an essay on "Literary Theory and Historical Understanding," the "justification for a historical approach to literature and criticism is that we must know everything--the life, the times, the intricate internal argument, the shape of the language.... We want to know how life feeds into art, not simply how art feeds on itself." [3] John Watkins shows the need to examine both the literary and historical representations of Elizabeth in order to understand the role sixteenth-century symbols played in the seventeenth-century's understanding of sovereignty. For this reason, *Representing Elizabeth in Stuart England* would be a useful text in upper-level undergraduate and graduate classes in British history and literature. Although gender conceptions are addressed in Watkins's analyses, women's studies students interested in gender construction would be better served by looking at works such as Carole Levin's *Heart and Stomach of a King* and Susan Frye's *Elizabeth I: The Competition for*

*Representation* that focus specifically on Elizabeth and her contemporaries' use of gender imagery. [4] It is doubtful that the book would hold much attraction for the non-academic reader because it presumes a basic knowledge of British institutions and individuals that most laypersons do not possess. As Watkins himself concludes, the public is no longer interested in Elizabeth as "a pattern for princes"; instead, they envision her in the role of "a heroine of romance, popular biography, stage, and film" (p. 229).

#### Notes

[1]. Roy Strong, *Gloriana: The Portraits of Queen Elizabeth I* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1987).

[2]. Carole Levin, *The Heart and Stomach of a King: Elizabeth I and the Politics of Sex and Power* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994), p. 12.

[3]. Morris Dickstein, "Literary Theory and Historical Understanding," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 49, no. 37 (23 May 2003), B10.

[4]. Levin, *The Heart and Stomach of a King*; Susan Frye, *Elizabeth I: The Competition for Representation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

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