

A Queen for Whose Time? Elizabeth I as Icon for the Twentieth Century

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IN HIS EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY TREATISE *ANECDOTES OF PAINTING IN England*, Horace Walpole gives the following set of criteria for identifying the portraits of Elizabeth I:

A pale Roman nose, a head of hair loaded with crowns and powdered with diamonds, a vast ruff, a vaster fardingale, and a bushel of pearls, are the features by which every body knows at once the pictures of Queen Elizabeth. (150)

And this is how Elizabeth is portrayed when she is presented in the popular media of the twentieth century. The ruff, the hair, the pearls, and the elaborate dresses are the cues by which people recognize her. Indeed, in the British comic television series *Blackadder II*, Miranda Richardson's Elizabeth is never referred to by name; her appearance is more than enough to indicate who she is.

Richardson's appearance, like that of so many other screen Elizabeths, is that of the Ditchley portrait (which fits Walpole's description particularly well). The Ditchley portrait (Figure 1) has in effect become the standard image of her in popular culture. In Shekhar Kapur's film *Elizabeth* (1998), the film ends with Elizabeth transformed by wig, makeup, and costume into a stiff, pale, statuesque icon in white; Kapur's Elizabeth becomes the Ditchley painting even though the film purports to end in 1563, almost thirty years before the painting was completed.¹

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FIGURE 1. Marcus Gheeraerts the Younger, *Elizabeth I* (the Ditchley portrait) (National Portrait Gallery, London).

For Americans, however, the image of Elizabeth is actually even more romantic than it is for the British. For Americans, she represents not just a British Golden Age, but the exotic allure of royalty, Europe, and a history which runs beyond 200 years. Her image, and the Ditchley portrait in particular, has come to denote England itself, rather than the woman presented there. In this respect, she functions in the same way that Julian Barnes argues the current royal family do, “an animated shop-window dummy advertising the unique, the mysterious product of Britishness” (*Traffic Jam* 142). In what might be seen as a

disconnection between signifier and signified, Elizabeth has become a trademark, a logo for England itself. When seen on the cover of the *Norton Anthology* (Abrams and Greenblatt), she conveys Barnes' "Britishness," and attempts to evoke nostalgia for a premodern British golden age. Furthermore, given the literary achievements of her contemporaries, Elizabeth's image also denotes England as center of the literary world; indeed, her visage may be encroaching on that of Shakespeare as one which evokes the alleged triumphant universality of British literature. Just as many television shows and movies quote Shakespeare so as to establish a character or plot line as "literary," publishers may well use Elizabeth to establish their works as authentically and intrinsically British. And indeed, there are some cases, discussed below, in which Elizabeth is presented as the source of British literature itself. Any real link or relation to the actual historical Elizabeth, however, is tenuous at best.

But another trend appears in the use of Elizabeth in the twentieth century—Elizabeth as quasi-feminist heroine. However, when presented in this context, she is most often used as a cipher upon which current views of women are projected. Consider, for instance, Michael Curtiz's 1939 film *The Private Lives of Elizabeth and Essex*, in which Bette Davis plays Elizabeth.² As one might expect, the main focus is the relationship between the title characters, but the story (loosely based on Lytton Strachey's *Elizabeth and Essex*) presents Elizabeth as an aging spinster who is foolish enough to fall in love with a much younger man; the emphasis here is not on politics, but on American prewar ideas of romance and "womanhood." As an unmarried woman, Elizabeth *must* be ultimately unfulfilled and unhappy, since all unmarried women are; thus Davis' Elizabeth can cry at the film's end "Robert! Take my throne, take England! She's yours!" (qtd. in Hodgdon 140) As Barbara Hodgdon notes in "Romancing the Queen," this presentation of Elizabeth

intersects with any number of 1930s films in which a woman might be a resourceful, intelligent event-maker for eighty-eight minutes, but in the last two would realize that it was the love that every woman lives to have, the obsession with physical beauty, youth, and the magic of "the kiss" that she really wants. (145–46)

It should be noted that the subtitle of Strachey's *Elizabeth and Essex* is "A Tragic History." The tragedy, in the view of this quasi-Freudian approach to the queen (as well as in Curtiz's film) is not just that of

Essex, who is executed for treason, but that of Elizabeth, the sexually repressed unmarried queen who was, as *Photoplay* magazine said of Davis, “a woman second” and a queen first (qtd. in Hodgdon 143). Rather than presenting Elizabeth as someone in a unique situation which required new and innovative solutions and imagery, Curtiz’s film presents her as typical of all women (according to the dominant standards of 1939), having the same problems but missing the proper solution: the fulfillment of marriage and the surrender of power to a husband.

A decidedly revised notion of the queen from the 1930s portrayals can be found in Glenda Jackson’s performance as Elizabeth in the BBC’s *Elizabeth R*, produced in 1971. Although she displays vulnerability at times, she is mainly presented as determined not just to survive, but to rule. Although there is considerable attention given to Elizabeth’s sexual desires (or lack thereof), the focus of that attention is Leicester, not Essex (as is the case in the Curtiz film). The series presents Elizabeth’s unmarried status as an important part of her life, but not the overriding passion and obsession of it. There are some nods to Freudian analysis of the queen’s life in this production. Elizabeth tells Leicester of her horror at Catherine Howard’s death, and at a key point during the Alençon negotiations, Elizabeth tearfully admits to Sussex that marriage terrifies her. But rather than being the sole focus, presuming that all women must be obsessed with marriage, *Elizabeth R* presents them as part of a multifaceted life. It is a life where policy is the dominant interest.

Jackson’s Elizabeth is imperious in tone, railing at those around her and often losing her temper. But rather than appearing merely hot-tempered, the series’ directors and screenwriters show her tantrums as largely strategic in tone; the queen always seems in control. She may sometimes be thwarted or out-manuevered, but her aims and purposes are clear. Thus, her manipulations of the various ambassadors’ marriage negotiations do not seem mere indecision but instead calculated attempts to maintain the peace, since a marriage alliance with either France or Spain would have put her at odds with the other. Furthermore, in this teleplay Essex is a relatively minor character. As Hodgdon notes, although he plays a large role in the final episode, he is not presented as Elizabeth’s lover (thus eliminating the stereotype of the sexually repressed spinster who lusts after the younger man, which is the dominant trope of the Curtiz film), nor is his subsequent rebellion

presented as a fatal blow to the queen's will to live (150–51). Instead, he is presented as one of a series of tribulations; Leicester is presented as the queen's only substantive love interest (fittingly, in my view).

The BBC production's length (six episodes, for a total of nine hours) gives *Elizabeth R* a decided advantage over its feature film counterparts; rather than trying to focus on one or two major incidents, *Elizabeth R* is able to put the various incidents of Elizabeth's life into a more complex perspective. Thus this production puts such events as the Armada and the death of Mary Queen of Scots in a broader light than most other films. For instance, rather than trying to romanticize Mary Stuart, or present the struggle between the two women as a type of beauty contest (thus presenting Elizabeth's vanity as the prime motivation for the conflict), *Elizabeth R* shows the execution as a result of political maneuvers by Walsingham, who at the episode's end receives Elizabeth's wrath. This episode presents the struggle over Mary's death as a battle of wits between Elizabeth and Walsingham, with Walsingham the (arguably Pyrrhic) victor.

By 1998, when Kapur's *Elizabeth* is released, it first appears that we have come a considerable distance since Curtiz and Davis. When Cate Blanchett plays Elizabeth in 1998, the major issue is not one of lack of sexual experience or love (Blanchett's Elizabeth is not a virgin) but the postmodern difficulty of a woman trying to "have it all." Again, Elizabeth's image and life are modified to prove that the people of the sixteenth century were "just like us," and therefore had the same concerns, problems, and tribulations. In other words, Elizabeth is presented as a woman who is trying to determine how much her career will interfere with her personal life.

Blanchett's Elizabeth seems to careen from mistake to mistake, and is usually presented as uncertain and helpless; Glenda Jackson's Elizabeth has far more agency than Blanchett's Elizabeth ever exhibits. Even her display of wit and banter when addressing Parliament is undercut when Kapur reveals that Walsingham is the true engineer of her success (he imprisons her most caustic opponents below stairs). Here we see nothing like Glenda Jackson's Elizabeth bullying her Privy Council, swearing at courtiers, and behaving assertively and authoritatively. Instead, this queen is primarily passive. When Jackson's Elizabeth is indecisive, the audience views her behavior as a political strategy: the queen knows what she is doing and what she wants, but has chosen to keep her courtiers guessing; Blanchett's Elizabeth,

however, simply seems indecisive and uncertain. Her attempts to fend off Cecil's demands that she marry are presented as desperate attempts to stall for time and avoid the wrath of her council rather than as efforts to construct a foreign policy which can hold France and Spain at bay and thus avert war. This Elizabeth does not know what she wants, and in the end, she obeys Walsingham's directions for running the country. In the light of the Jackson Elizabeth, Blanchett's portrayal seems to be a backward step, since her Elizabeth seems more damsel in distress than anything else.

For this Elizabeth, the crucial decision is not how to rule, but how to choose which male advisor to lean on for advice, and ultimately the answer is Walsingham.³ What is perhaps more intriguing, and what marks the Kapur Elizabeth as a creation of the late twentieth century, is the dramatic change in Elizabeth's appearance at the film's end. Her one independent policy decision, made without the influence of male councilors,⁴ is one of public and media relations: she must determine what her public image and appearance will be. Once she has determined how to appear, this expressionistic fable seems to say, everything else (the events of the succeeding forty years) will fall into place. Her primary achievement becomes the creation of the image of the Virgin Queen, which in this case is inspired both by Walsingham's comment that the people need to "touch the divine" and by a statue of the Virgin Mary which is conveniently in Elizabeth's line of sight when Walsingham makes his statement. The film thus embraces the view that the popularity and success of Elizabeth's Virgin Queen persona are simply due to her filling the post-Reformation void left by the now absent Virgin Mary.

Presenting a public-relations decision as the film's climax makes the film highly anachronistic, since it implies a level of intention and calculation about the royal image which is unsupported by contemporary sources; Elizabeth was not presenting herself in this manner until years later. But even more than being anachronistic, this ending radically changes the common perceptions of the major events of the reign. The Armada, Mary Queen of Scots, Essex, and the prolonged marriage negotiations with the powers of Europe are all absent; they apparently come under the heading of "happily ever after." Instead the most significant action of her reign (if not her life) is solely one of appearance and image. Kapur would seem to argue that the Ditchley portrait is the reign's true achievement, since it establishes a vision

(literally) of divine queenship. The actual events which take place and political decisions which are made are largely immaterial and can be left to others, Walsingham in this case. And yet, while this tactic is in some ways postmodern given its gleeful anachronism and its self-referential nature, it is also reactionary, for this Elizabeth is concerned solely with love and appearances. The scenes which dominate this film are not stormy council sessions regarding policy but romantic ones dealing with Elizabeth's love for Leicester (in this respect the film recalls *The Private Lives of Elizabeth and Essex* far more than it does *Elizabeth R*). The actual ruling of the country, the process of state decisions, is left in Walsingham's hands; like her twentieth-century namesake, this Elizabeth functions as a figurehead only. A powerful and inspirational figurehead, perhaps, but a figurehead nonetheless. The ranks below her are reassuringly filled by men, who are the ones who actually determine the governing of the state. By the end she is no longer a living, mortal woman but a stiff, statuesque demigoddess, no longer appearing human.

When Elizabeth does eventually make an executive decision, it is not an assertive act but a submissive one, as she acquiesces to Walsingham's desire to rid the court and the country of all possible threats, again denying her any significant agency. The film's penultimate scenes, where Elizabeth kneels in prayer while Walsingham either captures or kills all of her enemies, are basically a retelling of the end of Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather* (1972), in which Michael Corleone participates in his godson's christening while having his remaining rivals murdered. It is as if Kapur wishes to reassure his audience that even lethal power struggles in the 1560s were the same as those in the twentieth century. The difference is that after his murders, Michael Corleone was in firm control of his empire. Kapur's Elizabeth, although giving the appearance of firm control, is in fact primarily a figurehead; she maintains control only as long as Walsingham remains her loyal watchdog, which would seem to put her in a vulnerable state; we are reassured by the film's end credits that Walsingham remained loyal to Elizabeth for the rest of his life, but this does not address the question of what if he had not done so? Nothing we have seen of this Elizabeth indicates that she is capable of dealing with a foe without him; if Walsingham himself (or someone equally formidable) were to become her foe, she would presumably be helpless.

But despite its reactionary depiction of a female authority figure, Kapur's film does shed some light on the question of why the queen's image is still popular. The icon that Kapur and Blanchett create at the end of *Elizabeth* is one that the twentieth century still finds most useful. Those who wish to evoke a Disneyesque view of Renaissance Britain, those who wish to exploit the dramatic possibilities of the "woman on top," and those who wish to proclaim themselves inheritors of a great cultural tradition, have used and probably will continue to use the queen's image to further their goals. She still functions as a symbol of power and authority, ruff, pearls, farthingale, and all.

Consider, for instance, Judi Dench's Academy-Award-winning portrayal of Elizabeth in *Shakespeare in Love*⁵: she functions as an extension of Jackson's Elizabeth, who knows everything which goes on around her, even among the minor (and impostor) figures at court. She is the triumphant post-Armada Elizabeth, who reigns with a confident (albeit slightly bitter) wisdom and regret. She is the antithesis of Blanchett's Elizabeth. There is a hint of sadness when she speaks of love, or when she makes her wry comment about being familiar with women in men's roles, but otherwise there are no indications of any kind of vulnerability. She not only embodies the contradiction of the aging material queen and the immortal divine Gloriana, but she reveals an awareness of that contradiction, as evidenced by the "puddle incident" near the film's end. Elizabeth appears, *deus ex machina*-like, at the film's end to correct the plot's injustices, but as she notes, she cannot correct all of them. Viola's marriage to the Earl of Wessex must remain. Unlike the monarch at the end of a comedy such as *The Shoemaker's Holiday* or *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, she cannot pair off the various characters into the appropriate marriages and social strata. She is, in that respect, bound by the rules and practices of her lifetime, unwilling or unable to transcend them.

It is thus tempting to view Elizabeth I as a prisoner of her own devices, someone who, although powerful within a specific political system, was either uninterested in or incapable of breaking or changing that system in any significant way. The figure of Gloriana has had a considerable hold on the public consciousness. It may occasionally fall from favor (during the Victorian era Mary Stuart appears to have been the sixteenth-century queen of choice), but the images Elizabeth created have endured far beyond what one (or perhaps she) might expect. As a result, our notions of Elizabeth are now trapped within a

web of elaborate dresses and paintings. In all of the films mentioned above, the queen is always presented in what is often proclaimed as “historically accurate” dress, but the result is that viewers may well feel they are taking a tour of London’s National Portrait Gallery. These films’ actual references are not to what the period was like but to the popular conceptions of Elizabethan icons. Thus, Blanchett’s Elizabeth must cut off her hair and wear a wig a mere five years after her coronation in order to refer to the Ditchley portrait in the film’s final scene, sacrificing historical accuracy and logical consistency for image and popular reference. No film about Elizabeth I can end without making reference to the famous Ditchley portrait, so Kapur skips ahead thirty odd years and transforms her into her most recognizable image. The queen is invoked and reinvoked again and again: a rigid, unyielding image trapped in massive elaborate dresses and rendered iconic by the stiff, formalized portraiture which was characteristic of her reign. Even comic presentations of her must bow to this model, since, as noted regarding Richardson’s Elizabeth, the clothing and makeup and wig are how she is recognized, even for ridicule; thus when Graham Chapman portrayed her briefly for a parody of *Elizabeth R* on *Monty Python’s Flying Circus*, he was, as expected, dressed in a copy of the white dress of the Ditchley portrait. Quentin Crisp’s portrayal of an overtly sexual Elizabeth in *Orlando*, despite its parodic nature, also falls well within the accepted criteria for representations of the queen. Those who mock the queen’s elaborate garb and mercurial temperament, and by extension, mock those who use her as a symbol of a golden age that never was, are nonetheless still bound by the same conventions if they wish for their parodies to be recognized and understood.

Shakespeare in Love, despite the brevity of Elizabeth’s role in it, hints at what her function in twentieth-century society is. Dench’s portrayal in *Shakespeare in Love* feeds into an idea of Elizabeth as somehow being the motive force behind the artistic and literary production of the English Renaissance, and behind Shakespeare in particular. Consider the relationship between Elizabeth and Shakespeare in this film; she is in some respects his inspiration (sharing that role with Viola), spurring the completion of *Romeo and Juliet* and commissioning *Twelfth Night*. This makes her at least indirectly responsible for at least two of Shakespeare’s plays; the film does not say where he got his ideas after her death, although it is interesting that the film makes no mention of the queen’s legendary commissioning of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*.

Furthermore, she is shown to be capable of appreciating many different dramatic forms, ranging from the “low comedy” of *Two Gentlemen of Verona* to the tragedy of *Romeo and Juliet* to the “high comedy” of *Twelfth Night*. But this Elizabeth is in some respects intellectually and artistically divine, as she is the final arbiter of a play’s success. Her demand for a play which truly evokes love is incumbent on her role as judge. In other words, Elizabeth is the only one who knows enough about love to determine whether Shakespeare wins his wager with Wessex. The fact that *Romeo and Juliet* wins popular acclaim is irrelevant; the queen’s opinion is what matters. As she says while correcting an overeager Viola, “They [the players] play for *me*” (emphasis mine). Dench’s Elizabeth simultaneously provides both the inspiration and the audience for Shakespeare’s plays; thus it is her power as inspiration and patron which gives her authority as final judge of artistic merit.

However, Dench’s portrayal of Elizabeth hints at another aspect of Elizabeth’s iconic legacy: her rhetorical skills and style. Dench’s Elizabeth is able to resolve the tangled events of *Shakespeare in Love*’s plot through her words alone. In *Elizabeth R*, particular attention is given to the Tilbury speech, in which the queen is able to inspire her troops in the face of the Armada. Even in the strange world of Kapur’s *Elizabeth*, the young queen is shown to be a witty and intelligent orator, debating eloquently with hostile members of Parliament (MPs) following her first address to Parliament.

Consider the following lines taken from a speech given by Princess Elizabeth on her twenty-first birthday:

There is a motto which has been borne by many of my ancestors—a noble motto, “I serve.” Those words were an inspiration to many bygone heirs to the Throne when they made their knightly dedication as they came to manhood. (*Historic Royal Speeches*)

They are stirring, powerful words, resonant with authority and promise. One can easily imagine the young Elizabeth, not yet on the throne, bravely declaring herself devoted and dedicated to England and its people, the strength of her words contrasting mightily with her youth and seemingly frail appearance.

However, this speech was not delivered by Princess Elizabeth Tudor in 1554, but by Princess Elizabeth Windsor in 1947. It is still considered one of the most stirring and moving orations the current monarch has ever delivered, and is the only speech by Elizabeth II

which is included in the British Monarchy Web site's⁶ list of Historic Royal Speeches. She continued:

I cannot do quite as they did.

But through the inventions of science I can do what was not possible for any of them. I can make my solemn act of dedication with a whole Empire listening. I should like to make that dedication now. It is very simple. I declare before you all that my whole life whether it be long or short shall be devoted to your service and the service of our great imperial family to which we all belong. But I shall not have strength to carry out this resolution alone unless you join in it with me, as I now invite you to do: I know that your support will be unfailingly given. God help me to make good my vow, and God bless all of you who are willing to share in it.

(Historic Royal Speeches)

The speech, written by courtier Sir Alan Lascelles,⁷ was enormously popular (Pimlott 115–17). Its tone is such that it almost causes the listener or reader to forget that it was spoken not by a world leader or powerful monarch, but by a virtually powerless figurehead.⁸ The words, in addition to invoking the empire established during Victoria's reign, are also reminiscent of Elizabeth Tudor's oft-used trope of being married to her people. Elizabeth II's life is not dedicated to her actual family, but to a "great imperial" one, in which duty is foremost. The sad irony is that the noble motto and pledge to service refer not to the defense of the realm but to a lifetime of involuntary symbolism: a life of ribbon-cutting, plaque-unveiling, ship-christening, and waving to the crowd.

The fact that a scripted royal speech, even one which was rather stiffly read from a script (as the newsreel footage of the princess clearly shows) could capture the public imagination and inspire admiration perhaps conveys as much about the public desire for royalty, pageantry, and sacrifice as it does for the oratory of then-Princess Elizabeth. The oath, which Pimlott aptly calls a "nun-like promise about a crumbling empire which would soon cease to exist," achieves the rather remarkable effect of according a sense of sacrifice to one of the few people in the British Empire who had no material concerns in the austere economic climate of 1947. But it also harks back to the young woman's namesake's era, laying the foundations for the idea of her reign being a new Elizabethan age.

But what is particularly interesting, as we shall see, is that the archetypes of a woman in power (or soon to be in power) do not appear

to have changed significantly in the four centuries since Elizabeth I. Indeed, if we look again at Elizabeth II's speech, we see that it indicates a certain level of Virgin Queen imagery, and is spoken by a presumably virgin princess, albeit one who would soon marry. Elizabeth II's reign has been very different from her predecessor's, and any overt attempt at Elizabethan symbolism has long since been abandoned. But it is fascinating that in the twentieth century, when an unmarried female member of the royal family must make a speech, the words hark back to the last Tudor queen. The types of symbolism and metaphor that Elizabeth I used still have the power to move people, even when spoken by a ruler whose power is nominal.

And indeed, at the time of Elizabeth II's coronation, there was talk of the new queen ushering in a "new Elizabethan age"; part of this is due to the use of the same name, part to the fact that the queen's ascension coincided with the end of wartime rationing; but the sentiment indicates that Elizabeth I's reign was viewed as a nostalgic, prosperous, golden one in Britain (Pimlott 189).⁹ The problems of Elizabeth I's reign are conveniently forgotten (Ireland, for instance) and her triumphs celebrated. She stands for the beginnings of empire,¹⁰ the defeat of the Armada, the "Golden Speech," and an England without the complications of a fallen empire, postcolonial immigrants, or economic recession.

For Elizabeth II is not a "Warrior Queen," to use Antonia Fraser's parlance. She is a figurehead, which should come as no surprise to anyone. She bears little resemblance to her eponymous predecessor, and in fact displays a considerable contrast. Whereas Elizabeth I eschewed marriage, and is famous for being unmarried, the current monarch is best known for the myriad troubles of her family, especially the heirs which she produced after dutifully marrying shortly after the twenty-first birthday speech. All that is left for the (post-) modern monarch is the domestic sphere. The Queen has no significant political voice, and in fact is not even permitted to vote. Her only official duties are ceremonial. Although she has regular meetings with the Prime Minister, and is informed of the proceedings of the cabinet meetings, her role is always described as an "advisory" one.

The result is that, by the late twentieth century, the monarchy has become an icon not of government, power, and glory, but of domesticity and home life. Unlike her sixteenth-century namesake, whose court added elements of courtly love to the political sphere, thus

making it more sexualized and personal, Elizabeth II's imagery is primarily confined to the domestic sphere, with small, tightly regulated token gestures of political power (opening of Parliament, receiving foreign heads of state, etc.). The *de facto* role of her and her family appears to be to provide a good example of happy family life for the rest of the British people.¹¹ Politically, she is a figurehead, with all of the trappings of power, but none of the agency which normally goes with them.

Interestingly, what threw this particular figurehead into sharp relief was the rise of another female figure who *had* real power. After the Falklands War, it was Margaret Thatcher, not Elizabeth II, who reviewed the victorious troops upon their return to London; the queen, by contrast, was photographed at the docks meeting her son Prince Andrew, who had safely returned from battle: her role was confined to that of worried mother rather than warrior general, a role which she did not enact even symbolically (*The Windsors*). Elizabeth I may have referred to herself occasionally as the mother of her people, but she did not envision her role as that of a mother alone. A ruler with "the heart and stomach of a king" would not have met with family while troops paraded elsewhere. When Thatcher became Prime Minister in 1979, she began a process of assumption (some would say usurpation) of royal imagery and metaphor which was, in many instances, overtly Elizabethan.

Of course, while both Elizabeth I and Margaret Thatcher were women who dominated England, we should not exaggerate the parallels, since Thatcher was a far more enthusiastic warrior than Elizabeth—who hated the risk and expense—ever was, and Elizabeth (ironically given popular notions of both twentieth- and sixteenth-century sensibilities) was never as committed to a single ideology or design as Thatcher was to the ideology which became known as Thatcherism. Elizabeth's great desire was to maintain the precarious balance of the status quo as much as possible rather than to bring in sweeping changes and new ideas, as Thatcher did when she came to power.

But Thatcher's use of the same kinds of speeches, images, and appeals as Elizabeth I indicates the endurance both of those images' appeal to the populace and of the antifemale social prejudices which necessitates them. Nothing of this sort was considered necessary for the current monarch, Elizabeth II, whose role in government is purely ceremonial. Indeed, Thatcher at times seemed arguably more like a

queen than the queen herself did. Toward the latter years of her regime, Julian Barnes notes, Thatcher took to using the pronoun “we” more and more frequently in statements and speeches, a pronoun which ostensibly referred to the Government and the Cabinet, but which was often perceived by critics as an invocation of the royal plural, furthering the notion that Thatcher was not only more of a queen than Elizabeth II, but that she thought of herself that way (Barnes *Mrs. Thatcher* 70). On the popular British television show *Spitting Image*, which used puppets for political and social satire, doppelgangers of Elizabeth II and Margaret Thatcher debated this point in 1986:

Thatcher: Well at least I don't strut around in ludicrous little hats!
 Elizabeth II: [Touching the crown] Yes—but you'd love to, wouldn't you? (qtd. in *The Windsors*)

The interesting point of this fictional exchange is that no one could seriously imagine the powerful Thatcher wanting to trade places with the largely powerless Elizabeth II. The crown which audiences *could* imagine Thatcher desiring, and what gave the satire its bite, is the older, more powerful and autocratic crown of past monarchs like Elizabeth I. It is Thatcher, not Elizabeth II, who fits our popular notion of queenhood.

Thatcher was not a queen, of course; she was an elected official who could be dismissed without a coup or revolution, which is what ultimately happened in 1989. Nevertheless, she is perceived in the same manner as a queen and often compared with them (e.g., Fraser, who includes Thatcher in her book *The Warrior Queens*). Even her opponents recognize this phenomenon, as Labour MP Barbara Castle noted in 1975:

Margaret's election [as Conservative party leader] has stirred up her own side wonderfully: all her backbenchers perform like knights jousting a tourney for a lady's favours, showing off their paces by making an unholy row at every opportunity over everything that the Government does. (330)

As early as the 1970s, then, Thatcher is perceived as a queen, or at least a lady-in-waiting.

After an IRA bombing that killed eighteen in Warrenpoint in 1979, Thatcher went to Northern Ireland “to show the army, police and civilians that I understood the scale of the tragedy and to demonstrate

our determination to resist terrorism” (Thatcher 56). She first traveled to Belfast to “meet with the ordinary citizens of the city,” and then went to visit an army post “in a camouflage jacket worn by a female soldier of the Ulster Defence Regiment” (Thatcher 57). Consider the similarity of this action and its attendant costume to that of Elizabeth’s legendary visit to Tilbury dressed in armor; the story is a very popular and familiar one, and the “Iron Lady” dressing in uniform and flak jacket to inspire her troops in Northern Ireland is a very similar image. That Elizabeth did not actually dress in armor is immaterial. Popular legend has it that the Queen appears in armor in wartime, and that is precisely what Thatcher did.

Indeed, the Iron Lady nickname¹² came into play even more during the Falklands War of 1982, when former Conservative MP Enoch Powell noted at the beginning of the war, “In the next week or two this House, the nation and the Right Hon. Lady herself will learn of what metal she is made” (Thatcher 184). Years later, Thatcher noted with pride in *The Downing Street Years* that after the war, Powell noted that tests on a “certain substance” have found “that the substance under test consisted of ferrous matter of the highest quality” (184 note). But what appears at first to be a mildly amusing political metaphor bears comparison to another political metaphor we have already seen: “the heart and stomach of a king” (Elizabeth I 326). Just as the late Queen’s fortitude was measured by her having “the heart and stomach of a king,” the former Prime Minister’s measure is taken by her ferrous constitution. Both are statements which claim that the speaker is somehow intrinsically different from other women and has become a kind of honorary man, “one of the boys.” Political scientist Peter Beckman suggests that this phenomenon may be a sort of occupational hazard in the world of politics, and that all politicians, male or female, are molded into “iron people” by the pressures and the culture of government (24). Beckman’s theory is worth considering, since those women who are successful in the political realm, whether in the modern era or during the Elizabethan age, tend to be those who most effectively embrace the “masculine” political culture that they inhabit. Note, however, that women such as Elizabeth and Thatcher also use their gender to manipulate the system to their own advantage.

When interviewed during the Falklands War, Thatcher stated, “I’m standing up for the right of self-determination. I’m standing up for our territory. I’m standing up for all those territories and peoples the world

over" (Thatcher 210). The text is democratic rather than monarchist (although Opposition MPs might disagree), but the tone is not that different from someone who thought "foul scorn that Parma or Spain, or any prince of Europe, should dare to invade the borders of my realm" (Elizabeth I 326). It is no surprise that the two sound similar, given that both women were discussing the need of a government to resist invasion. However, the fact that Thatcher chose to portray the Falklands in the same level of dramatic terms as Elizabeth chose at Tilbury, or that Churchill might have chosen during World War II, indicates that the Tilbury speech has become an archetype for British wartime oratory, especially for women.¹³ Of course, Elizabeth and Churchill were talking of the safety of the realm whereas Thatcher was talking about defending a tiny and obscure province of a crumbling empire. But because of Elizabeth's impact on the culture, a "woman warrior" like Thatcher evokes the Tilbury image, whether she wants to or not. Indeed, this notion of Elizabeth seems a particularly apt symbol for Thatcherite Britain, with its definitive defeat of a Hispanic foe (Argentina this time) marking the legend of its female ruler.

Unsurprisingly, Elizabeth I and Thatcher were both subjected to sexist criticism, often being told that women were unsuited to the task of leading a nation. Paradoxically, as Fraser perceptively recognizes in her analyses of the two women, both Elizabeth and Thatcher seemed to agree with this, presenting themselves as exceptions which proved the rule (209, 319). Neither showed any interest in advancing the rights and causes of women in any significant way, and in fact showed a distinct antipathy toward doing so. Fraser notes that when a visitor at court complimented Elizabeth on her linguistic fluency, her famous response was "It is no marvel to teach a woman to talk . . . It were far harder to teach her to hold her tongue" (Erickson 390, Fraser 209). In 1975, during her first press conference as head of the Conservative Party, Thatcher was asked her opinion of feminism. Her infamous response was "What's it ever done for me?" (Cosgrave 4). Thatcher's aversion to advancing other women was borne out by her selection of advisors: during the eleven years of Thatcher's government, the only woman Cabinet minister was Baroness Young, who was head of the House of Lords from 1981 to 1983 (Young and Sloman 307).

However, at least those apologists for Elizabeth's hostility to women can claim that she reflected the contemporary *zeitgeist*; Thatcher's defenders can make no such claim. Note the way she trivialized even the

most basic of women's rights in a speech at a memorial lecture for Margery Corbett Ashby, a prominent British suffragist, in 1982:

Like Dame Margery they had the inestimable privilege of being wives and mothers and they pursued their public work against the background of full and happy domestic lives. They neglected no detail of those lives . . . The home should be the centre but not the boundary of a woman's life . . . The battle for women's rights has largely been won. The days when they were demanded and discussed in strident tones should be gone forever. I hate those strident tones we hear from some Women's Libbers.

(Campbell 235–36)

“Those strident tones we hear” are presumably from the same women who could not be taught to hold their tongues in the sixteenth century. In both cases, the female authority figure is taking steps not just to distinguish herself from other women, but to disparage them in the process. As Campbell points out, in Thatcher's view, the most significant thing about the suffragists is the fact that they could marry and bear children; since Thatcher believes that with suffrage, the battle is won, women—with the apparent exception of herself—can and should return to the domestic sphere (235). It may well be that Thatcher is drawing on the imagery and reputation of Victoria, whose public persona linked her far more with the domestic sphere (e.g. the Grandmother of Europe) than with the political.

Thatcher's policies were very much in line with this view, as programs which were designed to make life easier for working mothers were either dismantled or reduced during Thatcher's government, with the Prime Minister arguing that women should be most concerned with the domestic sphere: “women bear the children and create and run the home” (Segal 208). The fact that many women might not be able to afford to be full-time housewives (even if they wanted to) was irrelevant; Thatcher herself had no such problems, having been able to afford a nanny while she worked as a barrister and as a member of Parliament (Junor 40, Campbell 239).

But again, like Elizabeth I, while Thatcher scorned feminism and other women, she also self-deprecatingly referred to herself as “feminine,” thus presumably disarming her masculine colleagues and critics. Thus, *The Downing Street Years*, her lengthy memoir of her years in office, occasionally discusses her choice of clothing, and several

biographers and critics have noted her use of such “feminine” themes as children, housework, and fashion, which somehow complement rather than contradict the “Iron Lady” image. But we should note that these apparently feminine references were metaphors only. While Thatcher may occasionally have made abstract, metaphorical references to family and housework, she made few references to her actual husband and family; certainly no one has ever suggested that Denis Thatcher had any influence on government policy during his wife’s administration. Thus, despite the public statements which referred to her being a housewife and homemaker, comments which might normally imply that a husband served as breadwinner and dominant marital partner, Thatcher’s imagery was primarily that of someone who ruled alone. She presented herself not as a wife and mother like other women, but as a stronger, iron woman who rose above such banalities to achieve greater things, thus devaluing the achievements of other women rather than celebrating them. If other women were not Prime Minister, then other women did not work as hard or as long as she, and they deserved their fate; society had done nothing to impede their progress, since, according to Thatcher, “There is no such thing as society” (Barnes, *Vote* 129). What we see, then, is that the United Kingdom’s willingness to elect a female Prime Minister was not a move away from sexism; it was, in Thatcher’s case, just the opposite. But Thatcher’s successful merging of twentieth- and sixteenth-century images of female rule was not just an indicator of a powerful reactionary backlash against feminism. It also demonstrates that the image of the Virgin Queen was one which still struck very strong chords in the twentieth century.

It becomes necessary, therefore, to question the claim made by Natasha Walter that Thatcher is “the great unsung heroine of British feminism,” who “normalized female success” (176). Elaine Showalter praises Walter’s argument and takes it further, noting that “it’s about time that a young British feminist [Walter] stood up for Thatcher and acknowledged that a female prime minister, whatever her policies or image, had permanently altered people’s sense of women’s capacity for political power” (137). The impact made by a woman ruler intent on drawing a palpable distinction between herself and other women is debatable at best. The mere presence of a female ruler could conceivably have the effect that Showalter and Walter suggest, but what happens when that female ruler is making a concerted effort to keep other women out of politics and restrict them to the domestic sphere?

None of Thatcher's successors, whether Tory or Labour, have been women, although a few more women have managed to obtain higher positions in the government. But by reinforcing pre-existing stereotypes of women, Thatcher makes her legacy as problematic as Elizabeth's. The success of Thatcher may signal a change in attitudes toward women in authority, but it may just as well indicate that those attitudes have changed alarmingly little in the four centuries since Elizabeth I ruled England.

NOTES

1. The chronology of Kapur's film is vague in the extreme. However, the end credits state that "Elizabeth reigned for forty more years," leading me to conclude that the film is supposed to end in 1563.
2. A role she would reprise in *The Virgin Queen* (1955).
3. Curiously, Richard Attenborough's William Cecil is a timid, even doddering, old man from the start; Kapur's film presents him as well-meaning and loyal, but ineffectual and completely in Walsingham's shadow.
4. Although, as ever, the inspiration for the idea is Walsingham.
5. It is interesting that Dench received an Oscar for what is essentially an extended cameo, but this may reflect her being passed over for her role as Queen Victoria—another female monarch—in *Mrs. Brown* the previous year.
6. Elizabeth I's Tilbury speech is also listed there. (<http://www.royal.gov.uk/history/speeches.htm>)
7. An apparently dour figure whom Pimlott describes as "hard-bitten" and, in Pimlott's view, an unlikely figure to have written a speech with such popular appeal (115).
8. Actually, by the daughter of a virtually powerless figurehead, as George VI was still alive at the time.
9. There was some dispute over the use of the name Elizabeth II in Scotland, where, as the Scots were quick to point out, she was, in fact, Elizabeth I (Pimlott 178).
10. An "innocent" empire in some respects, since it does not yet include slavery, racism, exploitation, and all of the other ugly elements necessary for imperial power.
11. A role which any family would be hard-pressed to fulfill and which the royal family has struggled with in a painfully public manner.
12. Originally given to her by the Soviet Union, ironically enough.
13. Obviously, Thatcher's oratorical style is not derived purely from Elizabethan sources, since she makes a great effort to invoke Churchill whenever possible, and her rhetorical style owes a great deal to him. But there is a distinct debt to Elizabeth I as well.

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