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Elizabeth I Amongst the Women

LISA HOPKINS

INTRODUCING HER BOOK ON Queen Elizabeth I (b. 1533; r.1558-1603), which she titles *Elizabeth I: A Feminist Perspective*, Susan Bassnett comments on the striking continuity between readings of Queen Elizabeth produced during her girlhood and those now encountered by her daughter. What strikes her in particular is the way in which Elizabeth is so often perceived not so much as a figure in her own right, but as a counterpart to her more romantic, less successful cousin, Mary Queen of Scots:

Comic-book serials and historical novels plainly took sides; either you were for Mary or you were for Elizabeth. Long before I knew why, I supported Elizabeth's. It was not only that she seemed to be a winner, whereas Mary was the feminine victim incarnate, but because every account I read, in whatever form, gave me an image of a woman who was determined to live according to some private, inner pattern. She was, in short, a model of an independent woman for a girl growing up in the 1950s, long before the Women's Movement had announced itself. Although I was always in the minority, I still found myself standing up for Elizabeth.¹

As someone who learned to read by memorizing the Ladybird book of Elizabeth I as my mother read it to me,² I, too, have always stood up for Elizabeth. But I have also found it impossible not to be aware that as a potential role model for women, she presents considerable ambivalences by her very uniqueness, her effective status as honorary man.³ This is implicit in Bassnett's comments when she points out that in order to be pro-Elizabeth you have almost by definition to be anti-another woman, Mary, and Bassnett later discusses explicitly how:

most recently, yet another version of Elizabeth has appeared, a narrow feminist perspective that accuses her of not having done enough for other women, in much the same terms as Margaret Thatcher might be accused today, but with the difference, of course, that feminist ideology conceived in such terms did not exist in the sixteenth century.⁴

The reference to Thatcher, of course, dates Bassnett's argument, but I think her point is still very much valid for considering the ways in which Elizabeth is largely perceived as an exception, a woman who functioned, in effect, as an honorary man. This is, indeed, the one area in which her reputation has tended to compare unfavorably with that of her half-sister, Mary I (1553-1558), since Mary's tutor, the Spanish humanist Juan Luis Vives, expressly declared his resolve to treat male and female pupils alike. Moreover, Mary's mother Catherine of Aragon had been the formative influence in her life, and Catherine, as the daughter of parents who were both sovereigns regnant, may well be seen as the nearest the sixteenth century could come to an active supporter of women's equality. Ironically, therefore, Elizabeth thus suffers doubly: less feminist than one of the two Marys who dogged her life, and less feminine than another, she too often fails to please either traditionalists or feminists. In this essay, I will argue that the double-bind in which this has placed Elizabeth has subtly but powerfully skewed our perceptions of her. By situating Elizabeth more firmly within her many significant links with other women, I hope to go some way towards redressing this balance.

It is certainly very easy to point the finger at Elizabeth as a woman who not only failed to help but who positively hindered other women. Quite apart from her nineteen-year imprisonment of Mary, Queen of Scots, she was involved in a famous feud with her maternal cousin, Lettice Knollys, whom she never forgave for secretly marrying Elizabeth's own favorite Leicester. She also had a long history of cruelly punishing those of her Maids of Honour and attendants who married without her permission. Early in the reign, Lady Catherine Grey, younger sister of the ill-fated Nine Days' Queen Jane, contracted a secret marriage with the Earl of Hertford. The truth emerged when a weeping Lady Catherine, finding herself pregnant and her husband abroad, made a dramatic late-night confession to the Earl of Leicester, who, terrified that he himself might become implicated, immediately relayed the whole story to the Queen. Lady Catherine was promptly despatched to the Tower, where she was shortly joined not only by her errant lover, duly recalled from abroad, but also by Elizabeth, Lady Saintlow (later better known as Bess of Hardwick), who was considered to have abetted the young couple. Lady Catherine's crime was com-

pounded when she soon afterwards gave birth to a healthy son, and to make matters worse, a failure to apply proper supervision to her meetings with her husband very soon produced yet another baby boy. At this, Elizabeth decided the only course was to separate them altogether, and Lady Catherine was despatched to the country in the care of her uncle. She never saw her husband again, and died young of tuberculosis.⁵

At first sight, the story of Elizabeth's treatment of Lady Catherine can certainly be read as simple vindictiveness, and it has, indeed, often been seen as little more than sour grapes—a woman who had not married showing herself bitterly resentful of one who had. Certain other aspects of the incident, however, prompt a reassessment of such a position. In the first place, there was at that point of the reign no reason to suppose that Elizabeth herself would not marry one day, if she chose; in the second, Lady Catherine was her cousin, and so dangerously close to the succession—as the adventures of her elder sister Lady Jane had all too obviously demonstrated.⁶ For her to marry without permission was thus a political, rather than a personal, offense, and, one might feel, an act of the highest folly on her part. Moreover, the wedding had been solemnized in such strict secrecy that no actual proof of it could be found: the only witness, Hertford's sister Lady Jane Seymour, had died, also of consumption, and the officiating minister was never traced. The union was thus technically illegal, and, in a worst-case scenario, had introduced the taint of bastardy into the descent of Elizabeth's heir-apparent. Elizabeth need not have been unduly concerned about this—she had, after all, been branded a bastard herself, by her own father. But she also knew that it was precisely because of her own alleged bastardy that Mary Queen of Scots could be put forward as an alternative candidate for her throne. Under the circumstances, it is perhaps unsurprising that she felt no compulsion to generosity. Equally, however, she did not resort to savagery: Lady Catherine's house arrest was a comfortable, if depressing, restraint, and both the Earl of Hertford and Bess of Hardwick were eventually restored to full favor—indeed Bess's biographer has written of her that “the relationship between the two women was the closest friendship which Elizabeth allowed herself to have with another woman.”⁷

Even such an unusual note of praise, however, is tempered with caution: friendships with women were something which Elizabeth had to “allow herself.” I would argue that this is not really the case. For all her hostility to her sister Mary I, to Lettice Knollys and to Mary Queen of Scots, for all her harsh treatment of wayward Maids of Honour such as Lady Catherine Grey, her younger sister Lady Mary Grey (who secretly married the Sergeant Porter), Elizabeth Vernon, and Mary Fitton, Elizabeth also enjoyed remarkably good

relations with a variety of other women. Philippa Berry comments that in considerations of Elizabeth which stress her uniqueness "her ties of blood, friendship, and affection with other women are thereby elided,"⁸ and it would certainly be a very poor picture of her court which overlooked the influence of some of its female figures. From her earliest teens, when Elizabeth under questioning resolutely refused to implicate her governess Kat Ashley in Thomas Seymour's treasonable plans to court her, she showed clear evidence that she was capable of firm female friendships. As far as is known, her relationships with all four of her stepmothers were cordial, and to Catherine Howard (her own mother's first cousin) and Catherine Parr she was extremely close. In later life she was devoted to, and loyally served by, her Keeper of the Royal Jewels, Blanche Parry, and her close friend Lady Norris, whom she nicknamed her Crow, and to whom she was later to write touchingly in commiseration on the loss of her son: "My own Crow, harm not yourself for bootless help, but show a good example to your dolorous yoke-fellow."⁹ Other intimates included her cousin Catherine (Kate) Carey, whose husband, Lord Howard of Effingham, was later to be one of Elizabeth's rare promotions to the peerage when she created him Earl of Nottingham, the Countess of Warwick, and the Swedish-born Marchioness of Northampton.¹⁰ Another Swede, the Princess Cecilia, received a day-long visit from the Queen after the birth of her son, to whom Elizabeth proved a generous godmother.¹¹ All these women tend to receive only the most cursory attention in accounts of Elizabeth's reign,¹² yet their friendship and support proved an invaluable resource to her throughout her life.

Perhaps because of her close reliance on these women, she disliked losing them. When the Earl of Hertford, after the death of his first wife Lady Catherine Grey, went on to marry again, Elizabeth was unhappy that his choice of bride was again one of her ladies, Frances Howard,¹³ and tried to dissuade her from the match. As Frances told the Earl, "She said how little you would care for me...how well I was here, and how much she cared for me."¹⁴ While this can clearly be seen as the attempt at emotional blackmail of a lonely old woman, it can equally be taken as sounding a genuine note of concern for the girl's welfare. In any case, Elizabeth made no attempt to enforce her opposition to the marriage, and was on better terms with the Earl afterwards for the sake of the woman she termed her "sweet Francke." In many cases Elizabeth made no opposition to marriage at all: where it was clearly a good match, as when the relatively impoverished Anne Russell was married to Lord Herbert, she cheerfully gave her blessing, and consented to make a fairly difficult journey (she was by then sixty-five years old, and a special litter had to be provided) to be at the bridal party.

What is perhaps most surprising, however, is Elizabeth's frequent generosity to women she knew far less well than these, and who contributed much less to her own life and comfort. In the cases of two extraordinary Irishwomen, she abundantly demonstrated what we would now be very much tempted to think of as sisterly solidarity. The famous female pirate, Grace O'Malley (or, in her own tongue, Grainne ni Maille, also known as Granuaile) found her nefarious seagoing activities considerably interfered with when Elizabeth appointed a new deputy to police Connaught. O'Malley decided to take her case to the top; sailing to England, she sought an interview with the Queen herself. Not only was this granted, but Elizabeth, extraordinarily, went over the head of her own deputy by not only ordering him to release all those of O'Malley's family whom he was currently holding in prison but also, stupefyingly, allowing O'Malley to continue her seagoing activities in the Queen's name—tantamount to a licence for piracy.¹⁵ She was equally generous in her dealings with Eleanor, Countess of Desmond, the wife of the rebel Earl of Desmond. For most of her married life Eleanor Desmond conducted a frantic correspondence with the crown begging for understanding of her husband's difficult position as he struggled to reconcile the loyalties of a Gaelic clan leader with those of an Elizabethan magnate. Even after the catastrophic failure of this attempt culminated in her husband's open rebellion she never ceased to negotiate, and eventually, widowed and poverty-stricken, made a personal visit to Elizabeth during which the Queen promised her both a pension and the restoration of her son, then in the Tower.¹⁶ In each of these two cases, Elizabeth's generosity went well beyond the call of duty. She also showed herself notably considerate to Desmond's first wife when, having committed the Earl to custody, she wrote to the countess "and in a friendly tone explained that 'a little gentle imprisonment' would do her vain young husband the world of good."¹⁷ Although Lady Desmond might well have disagreed with the sentiment, the Queen was at least reassuring her that no more sinister end was intended.

How, then, has the image of Elizabeth as a virtual misogynist arisen? It could, of course, be partly as a result of a certain stereotypical view of women as inherently catty, or of a longstanding tradition of unfavorable representations of the figure of the powerful woman. Equally, however, it can readily be seen as a product of particular circumstances. An unprecedented crop of women rulers and women candidates for crowns meant that the facts of Elizabeth's life both before and after her accession pitted her repeatedly against other women, whom she had to fight for her very survival.¹⁸ First came Lady Jane Grey (under whose rule Elizabeth's own survival prospects would have been extremely poor), against whom Elizabeth took the side of her sister Mary; then Mary herself, to whom

the difference in religion made Elizabeth such a devastating threat. Finally there was her cousin, the other Mary Queen of Scots, who was her rival for the English throne. In all of these cases, the differences were not so much personal—indeed Elizabeth and Mary Queen of Scots never even met—as religious and political. I would argue, too, that it was also political considerations which primarily underlay the Queen's treatment of Lady Catherine and Lady Mary Grey. In only one case—that of Elizabeth's celebrated feud with her cousin Lettice Knollys—is it possible to discern a purely personal motivation; and here it was the very powerful one that Lettice had married the man with whom Elizabeth herself was, quite clearly, emotionally involved. Even so, her dislike of Lettice led her to nothing more sinister than banning her from court; and against this one instance of undoubted animosity can be set many more of friendship, affection, and support.

While it would be absurd to term Elizabeth I a feminist—the very concept, let alone the word, would have been totally alien to the mentality of her age—it is equally impossible not to recognize the extent of the possibilities she offered to other women. In an age when the dissolution of the monasteries had cut women off totally from the only career previously open to them which had not automatically entailed marriage and children,¹⁹ Elizabeth's totally female Privy Chamber offered a genuine opening to three generations of young girls from aristocratic families, some of whom followed the Queen's own example by remaining unmarried and working for her throughout their lives. Perhaps most importantly of all, the Queen provided a role model, for the women of her own centuries just as much as for Susan Bassnett and, to some extent, for me—a poster of the Ditchley portrait is pinned above my computer as I write. Elizabeth I's manipulations of her gender in her marriage negotiations, while refusing to be limited by it in her determination to rule solo, offers a negotiation of the category of gender that can be as enabling for twentieth-century women as for her contemporaries. In her famous ascription to herself of the heart and stomach of a king within the body of a weak and feeble woman, she appears to evoke essentialism only to transcend it by an assertion of gender fluidity, by a welcome acknowledgement of the coexistence of elements of both genders within one biological sex; in her determined exercise of her winner's instinct she, unlike so many of her women relatives, refused to play the woman's socially ascribed role of victim. By the continued ostentation and indeed iconization of her physical self, in her gorgeous, bejewelled dresses and elaborate portraits, she not only publicized but glamorized female success. Since I regard gender as a category which has historically been used to limit the options of women, I see useful work on it as that which destabilizes its apparent certainties and reveals

its structural instabilities. Elizabeth's deconstructive category-mixing achieves this without sacrificing a sense that the ascribed categories of femininity have also included ones which may continue to be attractive to women; as her presentation of herself so consistently proclaimed, she was, precisely, *not* an honorary man, but a woman exploring possible modes of being.

Though no contemporary woman could of course hope to emulate her by aspiring to sovereignty, they could certainly take note that it was possible to operate independently of a man. It is interesting to reflect on how many of the noteworthy women of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries might in fact have been influenced by such an example—Bess of Hardwick, builder *par excellence*, supported by Elizabeth during her messy separation from the Earl of Shrewsbury; Lady Anne Clifford, who battled half a lifetime for the right to succeed her father, and who inaugurated her public life by being a mourner at the old Queen's funeral. It is hard not to posit some connection between the growing mountain of women's achievements in a variety of fields in the seventeenth century and the fact that the century was begun with a Queen on the throne, and that it continued with an ever-increasing wave of nostalgia for her.

NOTES

1. Susan Bassnett, *Elizabeth I: A Feminist Perspective* (Oxford: Berg, 1988), 2-3.
2. Ladybird is a popular series of copiously illustrated English children's books introducing factual, historical, and biographical topics in simple language and large print. They are renowned for their accuracy, clarity, and comprehensiveness.
3. This is most famously argued by Alison Heisch, "Elizabeth I and the Reinforcement of Patriarchy," *Feminist Review* 4 (1980): 45-56. Leah S. Marcus, in *Puzzling Shakespeare: Local Reading and its Discontents* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 56-7, discusses the way in which Elizabeth tended to refer to herself as a prince and to Mary Queen of Scots as a princess.
4. Bassnett, *op. cit.*, 5.
5. The story of Lady Catherine Grey is told more fully in my *Elizabeth I and Her Court* (London and New York: Vision Press and St Martin's Press, 1990), 74-8.
6. See Hester W. Chapman, *Lady Jane Grey* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1962; reissued Grafton Books, 1985).
7. David N. Durant, *Bess of Hardwick: Portrait of an Elizabethan Dynast*, 2nd edition (London: Cromwell Press, 1988), 215.
8. Philippa Berry, *Of Chastity and Power: Elizabethan Literature and the Unmarried Queen* (London: Routledge, 1989), 65.
9. Quoted in Neville Williams, *Elizabeth I: Queen of England* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1967), 242.
10. For all these see Elizabeth Jenkins, *Elizabeth the Great* (London: Panther Books, [1958] 1972), 218.
11. See Elizabeth Jenkins, *Elizabeth and Leicester* (London: Panther Books, [1961] 1972), 145-7.

12. An honorable but very dated exception to this is Violet A. Wilson, *Queen Elizabeth's Maids of Honour* (London: The Bodley Head, 1922). Another book which reveals something of the importance of women in Elizabeth's life is June Osborne, *Entertaining Elizabeth I* (London: Bishopsgate Press, 1989), which touches on the role of women who entertained her as hostesses as she went on progress, particularly Frances Howard at Elvetham.
13. Confusingly, the Earl's second and third wives were both called Frances Howard (they were cousins).
14. Quoted in Christopher Hibbert, *The Virgin Queen* (London: Guild Publishing, 1990), 106.
15. For an account of the facts and myths of this visit, see Anne Chambers, *Granuaile: The Life and Times of Grace O'Malley, c. 1530-1603* (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1979), 143-50.
16. See Anne Chambers, *As Wicked a Woman: Eleanor, Countess of Desmond* (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1986).
17. Chambers, *As Wicked a Woman*, 43.
18. For women rulers in general, see my *Women Who Would Be Kings: Female Rulers of the Sixteenth-Century* (London and New York: Vision Press and St Martin's Press, 1991), and Theodora A. Jankowski, *Women in Power in the Early Modern Drama* (Urbana: Illinois University Press, 1992), chapter 3.
19. See for instance Antonia Fraser, *The Weaker Vessel: Woman's Lot in Seventeenth-Century England* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1984), 137-142.

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