

Macbeth: Historical, Topical and Occasional Concepts

Elizabeth I, the Armada Portrait: Note the Queen's hand on the Globe



When Henry VIII died in 1547, he was succeeded in the first instance by the ten-year-old Edward VI, the son whom Henry's third wife, Jane Seymour, had finally given him. When Edward died in 1553, Mary Tudor, sometimes known as "Bloody Mary", or, more properly, Mary I, who was the daughter of Henry and Catherine of Aragon, came to the throne, but she too died in 1558. Elizabeth, the only surviving child of Henry VIII, succeeded her

half-sister. Although the reign of Mary had set a precedent for the presence of a woman on the English throne, it had not been a particularly successful one: Queen Mary had had to suppress a rebellion by the supporters of her cousin Lady Jane Grey, at the very start of her reign, had been bitterly disappointed not to produce a child, and had eventually died relatively young knowing that her crown would pass to a half-sister who would reverse everything she had tried to do in the matter of religion. Parliament implored Elizabeth to marry, so that she may be "properly" guided by a husband in matters of State, and produce heirs, but there was also great disquiet about this prospect, not least because Queen Mary's husband, Philip of Spain, had been widely unpopular in England.

However, Elizabeth did not marry. She might have if her childhood friend, Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, had been free, but he was already married by the time she ascended the throne. Their union was made even more impossible due to the suspicious circumstances under which his wife died (she was found dead at the foot of a flight of stairs), as the scandal following their marriage would be impossible to contain. So Elizabeth I ruled alone, with the help of her trusted council, headed by William Cecil, Lord Burghley. Thus, if politics in the reign of Henry Tudor revolved around the king's desperate need for a son, politics in the reign of Elizabeth centred on the queen's gender. If a queen was an anomaly in the first place, an unmarried queen— indeed an unmarried woman at all in this period— was even more of one. Elizabeth benefitted, however, from an unforeseen effect of the Reformation. The disappearance of the intercessory role of the Virgin Mary and the Saints, many of whom had been women, had left a psychological and cultural void in the newly Protestant state: a void that a "virgin" queen was strategically well placed to fill. As a result, something of a cult developed around the queen, with a number of mythological personae— most notably various versions of the moon goddess— used to represent her, and these became a crucial part of the queen's public image. Speculations on her marriage, however, continued for the long 45 years she sat on the English throne, even beyond the time when it was obvious the queen was past her childbearing years.