Writing about Elizabeth I is not easy. This statement may seem absurd given the seemingly never-ending production of biographies of the Queen and studies of her reign. Nonetheless, it is true that any attempt to get behind royal decisions and to uncover the beliefs, attitudes, character and influence of Elizabeth encounters serious problems, not least because of the nature of the source materials. Unlike William Cecil, Lord Burghley, Elizabeth did not leave behind a wealth of memoranda that can reveal her thinking about the political issues of the day. Compared to her father, Henry VIII, her annotations on documents were few and sparse, so again it is difficult to separate her own views from those of her counsellors. Drafts of her letters were often in another person’s hand, and we cannot know how far they represent her own or her secretary’s work. Similarly, when amendments were made to drafts, and a final letter emerged in a different form, it is impossible to tell whether her wording or that of an adviser had prevailed. Elizabeth’s letters were clearly a collaborative venture, but the process of co-production eludes, and sometimes divides, historians.

When it comes to Elizabeth’s own literary productions – her poems, prayers and translated prose and verse – questions also have to be asked about authorship. Of the poems ascribed to Elizabeth, only two survive in her handwriting. Consequently, some scholars do not accept the remainder as her compositions and understandably dismiss them as unsafe indicators of her inner mind or literary talents. Attempts to uncover the nature of the Queen’s religious belief and form of piety by studying the prayers she is thought to have composed have been subjected to similar criticisms. Because very few of the manuscript copies are definitely in her hand, many scholars consider it unwise to assume that the residue were royal compositions. Even those prayers in French, Italian, Greek, Latin and English that were copied out and contained in a tiny girdle book of devotions are not incontestably in the Queen’s own hand and so are not incontrovertibly her own compositions. As a result, some scholars, such as Steven May and Henry Woudhuysen, question whether the prayers can indeed be treated as ‘a glimpse, not otherwise readily available, into the inner life of Elizabeth’ as W. P. Haugaard claimed some twenty-five years ago. \(^1\) The status of the various devotional books that were printed under the Queen’s
name or using her authorial persona is equally problematic. Take the 1569 Christian Prayers and Meditations. Although the frontispiece depicts Elizabeth as its author by showing her in private prayer kneeling before a prie-dieu with her crown resting above an open prayer book (see Figure 3.1), she did not compose many (possibly any) of the prayers in the collection. Some were drawn from the 1559 liturgy while most were taken from Henry Bull’s 1568 version of John Bradford’s Private Prayers and Meditations, which in turn translated Juan Luis Vives’ Preces et meditaciones diurnae.

Although Elizabeth’s speeches are some of the best known of her writings, they too require careful scrutiny and interpretation. As Leah Marcus has pointed out,
there are several different extant versions of them, some of which may have been drafts for set speeches, that Elizabeth then delivered extemporaneously or from notes; others appear to have been written by auditors; still others were revised after their delivery, possibly by Elizabeth herself, for a particular audience in mind before they were printed or circulated. A couple of the most quoted passages – her 1559 assertion that she would want her epitaph to read ‘A virgin pure untill her death’ and the 1588 oration delivered before her troops at Tilbury – have reached historians from seventeenth-century printed adaptations and differ (in some places significantly) from contemporary manuscript versions. Once again, we cannot be certain about what exactly Elizabeth brought to the process of composition or what her listeners actually heard.

Moving from what Elizabeth wrote herself to what her contemporaries wrote about her creates another set of problems. So much of the contemporaneous literature is either sycophantic, self-seeking, propagandist or epideictic that it is often difficult to judge how much if any of its content is reliable: should we question, for example, the essence of Roger Ascham’s seemingly overblown description of Elizabeth’s linguistic talents – ‘they be feewe in nomber in both the universities or els where in England, that be tonges comparable with her Majestie’? His praise has usually been accepted uncritically, but, as modern scholars observe, Elizabeth’s juvenile Latin shows ‘she was an enthusiastic but hurried grammarian’, while her mature writings in French, Italian, Latin and Greek ‘are recurrently patterned on the form and word order of English’.

Similarly, how are we to interpret descriptions of Elizabeth’s conduct? After all, not only was she was always performing ‘upon a stage for all the world to behould’, as she herself admitted, but, even more problematically, her performance was written up and framed by writers with their own particular outlook and agenda. What are we to make, for example, of Elizabeth’s behaviour during the pre-coronation procession of 14 January 1559, as described in the pamphlet that was printed nine days afterwards by Richard Tothill and is thought to have been written by Richard Mulcaster? Some scholars (including John Neale and more recently Kevin Sharpe) treat the text as an accurate account of the pageants, the Queen’s conduct and her reception by the crowd, while others (notably William Leahy) dismiss it as an utterly unreliable text because of its ‘ideological positioning’ as a work of governmental propaganda.

In part because of a growing awareness of these kinds of difficulties with the sources, scholars have recently tended to focus on the ‘Elizabethan regime’ rather than the Queen herself, concentrating on its structure, politics and personnel. As Patrick Collinson recently noted, ‘the essence of this new approach . . . is to be less Queen fixated’. The writers of the other chapters in this section of the book do just this and examine the personnel and institutions of government, but this essay is unfashionably and unashamedly ‘queen fixated’. I try to locate Elizabeth’s views on some key matters of state, in particular those on which she had views clearly distinct from many within her government. I then go on to discuss issues related to the question of her image, as projected by herself and her subjects. Because space is short, I have chosen to assume rather than demonstrate that Elizabeth retained the prerogatives of royal power and that her views and actions were essential to the policy-making process.
Despite the problems outlined above, Elizabeth’s statements and actions are sufficiently consistent to allow us to say something meaningful about her religious beliefs, policy and style of piety. All historians now recognise that she was a committed Protestant. Of course, as the daughter of Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn, she had a vested interest in denying papal authority, but as a young princess she had also seemed comfortable in the atmosphere of evangelical piety at Edward VI’s court, where she presented herself as a devout Protestant princess, dressing modestly, translating psalms and reading the vernacular Bible. Edmund Allen, the evangelical catechist, was her chaplain, and Johannes Spithovius, a pupil of Melanchthon’s, became a member of her household during this period. Like many other high-profile Protestants, Elizabeth attended mass under Mary, but she conformed with public bad grace and turned a blind eye to her servants’ non-attendance. Furthermore, while under house arrest at Woodstock, Elizabeth demanded an English bible, even though such devotion to ‘the Word of God’ at that time was associated with heresy. Consequently, Catholics at home and on the Continent were elated when Elizabeth succeeded to the throne, believing that she would bring the ‘days of darkness’ under her predecessor to an end. During the period of the Marian persecutions, ‘we wisht for our Elizabeth’, Thomas Brice repeated some seventy-two times in his verse register of the Marian martyrs printed in 1559 (once at the end of each stanza), until eventually ‘God sent us our Elizabeth’.6

Despite these expectations, during her first few weeks on the throne, Elizabeth revealed little about her future intentions concerning a church settlement. In the proclamation announcing her accession, for example, she ordered her subjects ‘not to attempt upon any pretense the breach, alteration, or change of any order or usage, presently established within this our realm’.7 Consequently, Catholic masses continued to be celebrated in England’s churches, while a requiem mass was held for the departed Mary at Westminster Abbey on 13 December. The Catholic bishops who had survived the epidemics of 1558 were left undisturbed in their sees, while some eleven ex-Marian councillors, including Archbishop Nicholas Heath of York, were reappointed to Elizabeth’s Privy Council. So, although the heresy trials had ceased and accused heretics were released from prison, there was no immediate public sign that Elizabeth would re-establish a Protestant church in England.

Yet, a closer look at the composition of her Privy Council indicates that Elizabeth favoured religious change from the outset. Of the ex-Marian councillors reappointed, nine had served for a time under Edward VI and were therefore thought not to be Catholic ideologues; of the remaining two, the Catholic Earl of Derby was unlikely to attend meetings regularly but too powerful to ignore, while Heath was thought (albeit mistakenly) to be a moderate who would conform to the royal will. The nine new council members were all Protestants, and most of them had previously sat on Edward VI’s council. Two (Francis Earl of Bedford and Sir Francis Knollys) had gone into exile under Mary while two others (Sir Edward Rogers and William Parr, now restored to his title of Marquess of Northampton) had spent time in prison during the Marian years.

Towards the end of December, Elizabeth signalled her intention to introduce a new reformation. Probably, by that time, she felt more confident that no rival
Catholic claimant to the throne would materialise. Furthermore, there was good reason to expect that the Habsburgs would not abandon their alliance with England, provided that she did not move her church in too radical a direction. After all, the Holy Roman Emperor had recently agreed to a political settlement (the 1555 Peace of Augsburg) that recognised the right of the German princes to organise their own churches along Lutheran lines, so why should the Habsburgs not accept her right to do the same?

Elizabeth’s earliest public action came on Christmas Day 1558 when she famously ‘rose and departed’ from the chapel royal straight after the reading of the Gospel and before the adoration of the sacrament, because the officiant refused to follow her instructions not to elevate the host. Two days later, Elizabeth issued a proclamation which not only ordered that the Litany, Lord’s Prayer and Creed should henceforth be recited in English, but more importantly intimated that a parliament would soon be held to discuss and introduce changes in ‘matters and ceremonies of religion’. Then, at her coronation on 15 January 1559, the eucharist service was taken by the new dean of the chapel royal (George Carew) who almost certainly consecrated the host in English and did not elevate it for adoration. Elizabeth’s coronation oath, moreover, closely followed the novel one devised by Archbishop Cranmer for Edward VI, and, if Dale Hoak is correct in his analysis, Cecil inserted an extra line in the oath whereby the Queen swore to act ‘according to the Laws of God, [and] the true profession of the Gospel established in this Kingdom’. This new form of words had a distinct Protestant flavour. Meanwhile, the previous day’s coronation pageants – arranged by the citizens of London but approved by the Queen and council – were full of Protestant imagery and conveyed a clear message to the audience about the government’s future plans; as one observer (the Mantuan Il Schifanoya) explained, the pageant held at Conduit purported to show ‘that hitherto religion had been misunderstood and misdirected, and that now it will proceed on a better footing’. According to Mulcaster’s pamphlet, the other pageants were equally Protestant in their message. Whether or not his text was totally accurate does not matter greatly; what is important is that a semi-official account of the procession printed in January 1559 presented Elizabeth as a Protestant queen and signalled that her government intended religious change.

But what kind of change would Elizabeth introduce? Here historians are uncertain. Today, few, if any, accept Neale’s interpretation that Elizabeth wanted to establish a Henrician rather than an Edwardian church in 1559. As already shown, Elizabeth gave every indication that she intended more substantial change and that her personal religion was not simply reformist or evangelical. Unlike her father, she clearly accepted justification by faith alone and rejected transubstantiation. However, it is less apparent whether Elizabeth wanted a religious settlement based on Edward VI’s 1549 Prayer Book, which was Lutheran in tone, or one based on the 1552 Prayer Book, which reflected the doctrines and liturgy of the Swiss Reformed churches. In 1982, Norman Jones argued that she always intended to have the second Prayer Book. However, more recently, Roger Bowers claimed that she originally wanted the restoration of the 1549 liturgy but had to change direction sometime in late March 1559 when she realised that she could not command the political support for a more Lutheran settlement. The evidence to support Bowers’
interpretation is now pretty much discredited, and historians think it improbable that the settlement that emerged in April 1559 was any different from that proposed to parliament the previous February. Nevertheless, it does seem likely that Elizabeth favoured the ceremonial of the 1549 liturgy and the theology of the corporeal presence that informed its communion service. Furthermore, Elizabeth was aware of the obvious political advantages in associating her church with the Lutheran Confession which was internationally the more acceptable face of Protestantism. At any rate, early in 1559, the German Lutheran Margrave Albert of Brandenburg believed that Elizabeth intended ‘to profess the Confession of Augsburg’, while the Lutheran reformer, Paulus Vergerius, informed Duke Christopher of Wurtemburg that she ‘is minded to institute and restore religion iuxta Confessio

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with only minor modifications, the changes in the communion service harked back to 1549 in three important respects: the new words recited by the minister on delivering the bread and wine allowed the possibility of belief in a corporeal presence; the omission of the ‘black rubric’ removed the disclaimer that kneeling at communion implied adoration; and ministers were expected to wear copes. It would be perverse not to accept that these changes were the result of Elizabeth’s direct influence, especially as the royal injunctions of July 1559 reinforced the conservative features and retained other practices present in the 1549 liturgy that were evidently dear to her heart. In the injunctions, the corporeal presence was implied in the reference to ‘the communion of the very Body and Blood’ and in the order that wafers rather than ordinary bread be used in the service. The injunction on images moved away from the total ban of the late Edwardian years and only prohibited those that encouraged ‘all superstition and hypocrisy’; as a result, Elizabeth could continue to have a silver crucifix in her chapel during the 1560s, to the dismay of many Protestants.13 There is some evidence that the Queen also wanted to retain altars but, if so, she had to give way on this point. She proved better able to protect liturgical music in the injunction that made provision for choirs in collegiate churches and cathedrals. Her conservatism on all these matters did not mean that she was either sympathetic to Catholicism or seeking to persuade Catholics that she was. Again, we can see her in tune with the Lutheran Confession. For Luther, altars, images, music and ornaments were adiaphora (non-essential matters of faith) and were consequently retained in many Lutheran churches of Scandinavia and North Germany.

Elizabeth was confident and outspoken about her Protestant credentials. She justified her church to Catholics abroad on the grounds that its doctrine and liturgy were based on the Scriptures, while she portrayed herself to her subjects as the enemy of ignorance and superstition (code for Catholicism). For example, the royal preface to the first Book of Homilies issued in 1559 explained that the sermons should be read to drive away ‘erroneous and poynoned doctrines tending to superstition and Idolatry’.14 Similarly, in the preface to the 1559 royal injunctions, she spelled out that the orders were intended for ‘the advancement of the true honor of Almighty God, the suppression of superstition . . . and to plant true religion’.15 However, that particular statement displayed, and accurately revealed, a set of priorities that distinguished her from her later Protestant critics, for it mentioned the honour of God both separately from, and positioned before, the removal of superstitions. Elizabeth was thus able to defend practices that other Protestants deemed superstitious, such as kneeling at times of supplication, bowing at the name of Jesus and using wafers at communion – all on the grounds that ‘Almighty God is at all times to be honoured with all manner of reverence that may be devised.’16

The importance of showing reverence before God was a common theme for Elizabeth and seems to have been a deeply felt dimension to her personal piety. She enjoined it in special sets of prayers authorised for use in times of emergency, and it was probably through her influence that ‘reverence’ to God was strongly emphasised in the revised Book of Homilies produced in 1563. While the reformers in convocation overruled her objections and included a condemnation of all images
as idolatrous in the third homily, the Queen apparently left her mark on the book with the introduction of the first and second homilies which dealt with ‘the right use of the Church or Temple of God and of the reverence due unto the same’. Irreverence in church, as defined in the second homily, was not just unseemly chatter during the service but included a parishioner’s failure or refusal to participate in communal worship properly; reverence to God, it explained, required silent and diligent attention to the minister reading from the Book of Common Prayer, ‘which cannot be when every man and woman ... prayeth privately, one askyng, another gevyn thankes, another readyng doctrine’. Reverence also involved taking communion appropriately and not as if one was eating and drinking at home; in other words, according to the Queen, it should be taken kneeling rather than sitting or standing.17

In addition to the emphasis on reverence, Elizabeth’s own brand of Protestantism, as expressed in her writings, tended to repeat certain themes: her belief in justification by faith alone, but suspicion of predestinarianism; a preference for the reading of set prayers or passages from scripture over preaching; her providential right to rule and her subjects’ obligation to obey; her wish to sustain peace, charity and harmony within her realm and her corresponding dislike of division and disunity; and an unwillingness to open up debate over matters of doctrine that ‘some thinks a thing, some other, whose judgment is best God knows’.18 While there is no reason to doubt Elizabeth’s spiritual commitment to these principles, they unquestionably had a political dimension too, sitting easily with the royal supremacy, the divine right of kings and a culture of obedience, including conformity to the Book of Common Prayer. No wonder Elizabeth found herself at odds with the ‘godly’ and that she was prepared to tolerate Catholics, provided that they externally conformed and displayed loyalty to the Crown.

MARRIAGE AND SUCCESSION

Scholars remain divided over whether or not Elizabeth deliberately chose to remain single. Relying largely on some of her own statements, many biographers are convinced that the Queen resolved from the outset of her reign (and possibly even earlier) that she would never marry, either as the result of a psychological reaction to childhood traumas or because she believed that marriage for a female ruler was incompatible with power. However, other scholars, including myself, judge Elizabeth’s position to have been more flexible, and we interpret her statements as far more provisional in their tone. In her famous 1559 speech to parliament, where she asserted that she was well contented with her unmarried state and declared that she would be content for her tombstone to say that she ‘lived and dyed a virgin’, she nonetheless admitted the possibility that ‘it may please God to encline my harte to an other kynd of life’. After this, it took another twenty-seven years before Elizabeth again referred to herself as a virgin in a public setting. By that time, the question of her marriage was no longer a live political issue, and in the speech she was simply voicing her concerns about ordering the execution of Mary Stuart: ‘What will theie not now say, when it shall be spread, that for the safetie of her life, a maiden Quene could be content to spill the blood even of her owne kinswoman?’ she asked her parliament on 24 November 1586.19
Otherwise, Elizabeth announced that she was prepared to marry in order to satisfy her subjects and to safeguard the succession. On 10 April 1563, in her draft speech to parliament, she wrote:

And by the way, if any here dowte that I am, as it wer, by vowe or determination bent never to trade that life, pute oute that heresie; your belefe is awry, for as I think it best for a privat woman, so do I strive with my selfe to thinke it not mete for a prince, and if I can bend my wyl to your need, I wyl not resist suche a mynde.\textsuperscript{20}

Similarly, in November 1566, she announced:

I saye ageyn, I wyll marrye assone as I can converyentlye, yf God take not hym awaye with whom I mynde to marrye, or my self, or els sum othere great lette happen. I can saye no more exept the partie were presente. And I hope to have chylderne, otherwyse I wolde never marrie.\textsuperscript{21}

In addition to expressing her willingness to marry for the good of the realm, Elizabeth convinced observers at court that she \textit{wanted} to marry on at least two occasions: the first was between late 1560 and early 1561, when the favoured suitor was Lord Robert Dudley; the second was between 1578 and 1581, when a dynastic marriage alliance with François, Duc d’Anjou, was discussed. Elizabeth was obviously attracted to Dudley and hoped that marriage to him would produce a Protestant heir. However, the harm that this marriage would do to her reputation finally scuppered the match, since not only was Dudley’s lineage undistinguished, but, more importantly, scandalous rumours circulated that he had murdered his wife so that he could marry the Queen. As for the Anjou match, although the need for an heir was raised by its supporters, the succession issue did not motivate the Queen. She initially wanted the marriage to sort out an intractable set of international problems arising from the revolt of the Netherlands against Spain; and then in 1581 she resumed the match in order to forge an alliance with France against Spain. In fact, the prospect of Elizabeth becoming pregnant was a serious drawback to the match, as the danger of a woman over forty-five dying in childbirth was considerable.

Elizabeth pushed hard for the Anjou marriage; in addition to its perceived political advantages, she liked Anjou when they met and probably believed that she could control the much younger man. However, strong opposition in the Privy Council, the court and the country at large eventually convinced her that marriage to a French Catholic who insisted upon access to a private mass would erode her popularity and endanger her security. Although Elizabeth always asserted that her choice of husband was her own private decision, she ultimately could not ignore her subjects’ feelings on the matter. Wyatt’s rebellion of 1554 and the deposition of Mary, Queen of Scots, in 1567 had supplied recent and alarming lessons about the dangers of making an unpopular marriage.

Throughout the royal matrimonial negotiations during her reign, Elizabeth’s behaviour was remarkably consistent. She quickly dismissed those candidates in whom she had no interest: the Duke of Savoy, Philip II, the Duke of Holstein,
Prince Eric of Sweden, the Earl of Arran and more besides. Those candidates whom she considered more suitable were told that she needed to see them in person, and, while this demand may have been a delaying tactic, it is just as likely that Elizabeth was determined to avoid a disastrous and humiliating marriage such as her father’s brief union with Anne of Cleves. Once negotiations for a marriage proceeded, the discussions centred on the terms of Mary I’s matrimonial treaty with Philip of Spain, and Elizabeth would not budge from the 1553 articles that totally excluded the royal consort from political power and made him responsible for the payment of his household. On the question of religion, Elizabeth was adamant that her husband should attend Protestant services and be denied the mass in England; only in the case of François d’Anjou was she prepared to waive the latter condition. All the negotiations with foreign Catholic princes, however, foundered on the rock of religion.

Elizabeth considered the topic of her marriage to be an *arcana imperii* (a mystery of state) that was consequently outside the competence of parliament or public debate. As a result, she was incensed when John Stubbs published his pamphlet *The Discoverie of a Gaping Gulf* against the Anjou match in 1579. Apart from railing against its content, she condemned the book as a popular libel that gave ordinary subjects ‘authority to argue and determine in every blind corner at their several wills of the affairs of public estate, a thing most pernicious in any state’. The punishment Elizabeth meted out to Stubbs and his associates was draconian; each lost a hand. By contrast, she took no action against Philip Sidney, even though his manuscript ‘Letter to Queen Elizabeth’ against the Anjou marriage was equally unwelcome. Her forbearance towards Sidney was because his ‘Letter’ was deferential in tone, limited in circulation and dressed up as a courtier’s private counsel to the Queen.

Like the marriage issue, Elizabeth considered the succession to be a matter for the royal prerogative and outside the arena of public debate. She consequently reacted angrily when a pamphlet on the succession was published in 1563 and even considered indicting its author, John Hales, for initiating a debate on the issue. On the grounds that ‘yt ys monstruous that the ffeete sholde dyrecte the hed’, she forbade parliament to discuss the succession on its own initiative, petition her to name an heir or attempt to exclude certain candidates. If there was ever a good time to tackle the succession, she told the 1566 Parliament, ‘I wyll deale therein for your saftye and offer it unto yow as your prynce and hed withowt request’. Nonetheless, Elizabeth could not deny that parliament had the right to authorise the line of succession; after all, her own title to the throne was so dependent upon parliamentary authority. For this reason she assented to the 1571 Treasons Act that made it high treason during Elizabeth’s lifetime, and a lesser offence once she was dead, to refute the right of the Queen in parliament to decide upon the succession.

But Elizabeth would not settle the succession. She consistently gave the same reasons for her refusal, sometimes to parliament and, on two occasions in 1561, to the Scottish ambassador. In the first place, she contended, nominating a successor would encourage political instability: ‘it is to be feared that if they [my subjects] knew a certain successor of our crown they would have recourse thither’. Drawing on her own experience during her half-sister’s reign, she feared that an heir...
presumptive might become the focus of plots or the centre of an alternative court while she was still alive. Second, ‘there be so manye competytors’ that it would not be easy to decide between them. Disputes would arise and errors might be made – as indeed, she pointed out scathingly, they had been in 1553 when doctors of divinity had ‘openly preached and sette forthe that my systere and I were bastardes’. Third, ‘princes cannot like their own children, those that should succeed unto them’. This fact would make life very difficult for any heir who was Elizabeth’s own subject and would trouble her relationships with a foreign ruler, such as Mary, Queen of Scots, or her son James. Then, because it ‘is hard to bind princes by any security where hope is offered of a kingdom’, these two Scottish monarchs might well carry out independent policies that were against England’s interests or provide assistance to Elizabeth’s enemies in the hope of obtaining the throne before her death. Finally, there was no assurance at all that Elizabeth’s nomination would resolve the succession issue. Henry VIII had tried and failed to end debate about it in the 1544 statute and his will, while Edward VI’s attempt to exclude his sisters had fallen through. Ultimately, ‘when I am dead, they shall succeed that has most right,’ Elizabeth stated confidently, presumably (she thought) through the agency of a divine providence that had secured her own position on the throne.24

Nonetheless, although Elizabeth refused to name her heir, she did endeavour to ease the way for a Stuart succession. Indeed, her strong objections to parliament discussing the issue during the 1560s arose in part because of the Commons’ hostility to Mary, Queen of Scots. Unlike her Protestant subjects, Elizabeth believed that Mary had the best claim to the throne; as she confessed to the Scottish ambassador in 1561, ‘I here protest to you in the presence of God I (for my part) know none better, nor that myself would prefer to her.’25 Elizabeth accordingly did her utmost to protect the Stuart claim. Apart from refusing to listen to parliamentary petitions that she exclude Mary from the succession, Elizabeth put obstacles in the way of rival claims. In 1561, she sent Katherine Grey, Mary’s main competitor, to the Tower after she was found to be pregnant, and later Elizabeth exerted her influence so that an ecclesiastical commission would judge Katherine’s clandestine marriage invalid and declare her two sons bastards. In 1564, Elizabeth tried to make Mary’s eventual succession more acceptable in England by proposing (albeit unrealistically) that she marry Robert Dudley, newly raised to the earldom of Leicester. While Mary was imprisoned in Lochleven Castle on July 1567, Elizabeth even thought of adopting her infant son and having him educated in England where he would learn about his future kingdom. Admittedly, this plan was a desperate device to prevent James from being conveyed to France, but it again demonstrated Elizabeth’s recognition of the strength of the Stuart claim by right of primogeniture. After James remained in Scotland and took on Mary’s kingship, Elizabeth would have no talk of the succession; excluding Mary, as her parliament and most of her ministers wanted, threatened the principle of the divine right of kings.

Once Mary had been executed, Elizabeth could have named James VI her heir without inciting serious protest at home; as a Protestant male, James was an acceptable future king to many in England despite his nationality and upbringing. However, Elizabeth thought it better to keep everyone in suspense for she trusted neither James nor her subjects. The latter might be attracted to the rising sun, while the former displayed too independent a mind for her to feel safe. So Elizabeth
dangled the prospects of the succession before James to encourage his good
behaviour towards her and the realm but refused to name him heir notwithstanding
his repeated requests. Besides the political dangers involved, such a volte-face would
not be easy for a monarch who so highly prized the virtue of constancy and whose
personal motto was *semper eadem* (always the same).

**IMAGE**

Today’s scholars generally doubt the existence of a ‘cult of Elizabeth’ and dismiss
E. C. Wilson’s view (as developed in his influential 1939 publication, *England’s
Eliza*) that the many flattering portraits and lavish poetical praise of the Queen
amounted to spontaneous expressions of adoration. We are now only too aware
that a narrow elite commissioned these works and usually for self-interested ends.
Furthermore, they do not tell the whole story, for criticisms of the Queen were
voiced by many of her subjects whether courtiers, preachers or members of the
commons that were often dressed up and disguised as praise.

Scholars today also question Roy Strong’s argument that the Queen and her
government developed a personality cult around Elizabeth as part of its propaganda
‘to buttress public order’ and to ensure her subjects’ loyalty and obedience in the
absence of a standing army and police force.\(^2\) We now recognise that multiple and
sometimes contradictory images of the Queen existed rather than a uniform ‘cult’
stimulated or fashioned by the regime. The royal image was created by people with
different purposes and audiences in mind. The creative process, moreover, was often
a collaborative exercise; for example, the manuscript and printed texts of courtly
entertainments had input from patrons, actors, musicians, the Queen and the court,
not to mention the individuals who wrote up the spectacles which they observed.
The different, and sometimes divergent, personal and political purposes of these
individuals all influenced the image of the Queen that finally emerged.

Since the 1980s, most discussions about Elizabeth’s image have highlighted issues
relating to her gender; there is a huge body of work on this subject, some of it
produced by historians but much by scholars of Renaissance literature. Their central
concern is how gender construction and expectations influenced both Elizabeth’s
self-representation and the image of the Queen projected by her subjects. In the
words of Louis Montrose, the representations of the Queen and her power ‘not
merely were consequences of the ruler’s gender but were themselves particu-
lar constructions of it’ because the Queen embodied an anomaly in a patriarchal
society, ‘a challenge to the homology between the hierarchies of rule and gender’\(^3\).
A number of literary scholars such as Leah Marcus and Lisa Hopkins have suggested
that this contemporary anxiety about female rule resulted in the imaginative
association of Elizabeth with troubling female characters such as Joan La Pucelle
in Shakespeare’s *1 Henry VI* or Titania in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Other
scholars, meanwhile, have focused on the strategies that Elizabeth herself employed
to bolster a monarchical authority potentially weakened by the Queen’s gender.
Carole Levin is but one who focused on her self-fashioning as the Virgin Queen
and mother of her people, while Mary Beth Rose argued that Elizabeth created a
‘heroic persona by monopolizing all gendered positions’ in her speeches.\(^4\)
None of these interpretations is uncontested, however. Some historians remain deeply sceptical about the validity of such gender analyses of Elizabeth’s image, not least because they are often based on theory and sometimes expressed in impenetrable language. While these historians (including myself) accept that Elizabeth’s gender was obviously relevant to her image, they question how far representations of the Queen reflected or were designed to combat gender anxiety about female rule in a patriarchal society. Equally, although they acknowledge that her representation was clearly affected by her gender, they point out that it also mirrored that of contemporary European kings and her male Tudor forebears. So, like her Continental counterparts, Elizabeth was often represented as a classical deity, but in her case it was usually Venus, Diana or Pallas Athene rather than Hercules, Apollo or Mars; and, like previous English monarchs, Elizabeth continued to perform the sacred royal Maundy Thursday ceremony of washing the feet of poor people, but in her case she was surrounded by women not men. To explore this issue further, I shall examine Elizabeth’s representation as a providential monarch, virgin queen, ‘political hermaphrodite’ and a mother of her people.

Elizabeth’s representation as a providential ruler certainly arose in part as a response to her gender. John Aylmer, for example, played the providential card in his *1559 An Harborowe for Faithfull and Trewe Subiectes* to puncture the arguments of John Knox, whose *The First Blast of the Trumpet against the Monstrous Regiment of Women* had appeared the previous year. Arguing that God sometimes elevated women to leadership roles for his own mysterious reasons, Aylmer claimed that God placed Elizabeth on the throne to cut off the Roman headship of the English church and to uproot idolatry from the land. In this providential role, he explained, the Queen followed the precedent of Old Testament heroes, including Deborah, who had been called upon to judge, and Judith and Esther, who had been used to save God’s chosen people from idolatrous enemies. Knox took on board this argument when, after Elizabeth’s accession, he tried to wriggle out of his earlier blanket condemnation of female rule; he wrote a letter to the new queen explaining that divine providence allowed her the exceptional right to rule provided that she did so as God’s instrument.

Nonetheless, the representation of Elizabeth as a providential monarch was not always gendered nor simply or primarily used as a device to justify the rule of a woman. For one thing, Elizabeth was as often associated with Old Testament male figures as female ones. The dedicatory epistle in the Geneva Bible of *1560*, for example, called her a Zerubabel ‘for the erecting our spiritual Temple in planting and maintaining his holy word’ and a Josiah for destroying idolatry. Preachers compared her to Moses for delivering the English people from slavery under the Pope, to David for defeating the enemies of true religion, to Solomon for bringing prosperity to the realm, and to Josiah for cleansing it of idolatry and restoring God’s word. A ballad of *1585* likened her deliverance from the Throckmorton Plot to the preservation of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednigo from the fiery furnace kindled by Nebuchadnezzar.

Furthermore, Elizabeth’s providential status had at least two other purposes. First, it was often employed to parry the challenge of those Catholics who denied Elizabeth’s right to rule on the grounds of her illegitimate birth and false religion.
James Pilkington took on the Catholics in this way in a sermon preached in 1561, printed with additions in 1563. Like Aylmer, Pilkington maintained that God had chosen to work through Elizabeth – a weak vessel – in order to demonstrate his power. Preaching a few years into Elizabeth’s reign, Pilkington could also argue that the prosperity of England under her rule was further testimony of her right to the throne and the legitimacy of her religious policies. Second, fashioning Elizabeth as a providential ruler allowed Protestants to dispense advice and to deliver warnings to their queen. To take one of many examples, in a book of psalms, printed in Geneva in 1559 and dedicated to Elizabeth, the anonymous translator and editor likened the Queen to the providential ruler David. Elizabeth had been saved miraculously, he wrote, ‘from the furie of suche as soght your blood’, while David had endured ‘perils and persecutions’ before ‘he came to the royal dignitie’. So now Elizabeth had to follow the model of David and carry out God’s purpose. Like David in the Psalms, she had to put her faith in God ‘so to be zealous of his glorie, obedient to his wil, careful and diligent to suppress all papistrie, vice & heresie, and to cause the light of God’s holy worde speedely to shine throughout all your dominions’. If Elizabeth did this, God ‘will honour you and make your kingdome stable, he wil blesse you with a godlie prosperitie and mainteine you in perfect peace and quietnes’ just as he had preserved David from his enemies once king and enlarged his dominions.  

Elizabeth herself was uneasy about this form of representation, because it had the potential to undermine her absolute right to rule by ‘Inheritaunce, statutes, and law of the realme’. Her objections are laid out in marginal notes written on a copy of the letter from John Knox that had grudgingly accepted Elizabeth’s position as providential ruler. They included: ‘God hath made her our prince by due title of birth and law and not by extraordinarie miracle without former right’; ‘if you take from her God’s meane of of lawfull descent, ye abuse providence, and do wrong to her and her issue’; and the emphasis on divine providence was ‘Perilous to a well settled state’ as it meant that subjects could remove their allegiance to their monarch at will as well as select whomsoever they chose to succeed her. Despite these understandable reservations, Elizabeth used the providential image whenever it suited her and on her own terms. Early in her reign, she acknowledged that she had God to thank for delivering her safely from her enemies during her sister’s reign and allowing her to take the throne. Later on, she attributed the successes of her reign to divine providence, so when justifying her policies to parliament in 1576, she said in one version of her closing speech:

And as for those rare and speciall bennefitte’s which have manie years followed and accompanied my happie raine, I attribute to God aloane the prince of rule and count my self no better then his hand maide . . . Thease 17 yeares God hath both prospered and protected you with good success under my direction, and I dought not but the same maintaining hand will guide you still.

Presenting herself as God’s instrument was for Elizabeth not so much an answer to those who challenged a woman’s right to rule as a defence against criticisms of her actions, or non-actions.
The image of Elizabeth as an Old Testament figure and providential ruler endured throughout the reign in pageants, plays, prayers, sermons and devotional works. However, during the second half of the reign, Elizabeth was also portrayed as a Virgin Queen. But was she lauded as a second Virgin Mary? A number of art historians and literary scholars have argued that the imagery traditionally used to describe the Virgin Mary – including virgin mother, bride, ancilla (or handmaid), merciful intercessor, a walled garden and a thornless rose – were applied to Elizabeth in literature, drama and the visual arts. A few have also suggested that the adulation of the Queen expressed in the Accession Day celebrations resembled the earlier cult of the Virgin Mary; indeed, this was a criticism levelled at the 17 November celebrations by contemporary Catholics seeking to make a polemical point. However, there are dissenting voices, including my own. We point out that the symbols associated with the Virgin Mary had other meanings: the rose, for example, was connected to the Tudor dynasty; the pearl to virginity in general, as well as to uniqueness (based partly on the pun of perles with peerless); hence, a ballad of 1584 could refer the Queen as ‘the peerles pearle of princes all’ whose like on earth was never seen. If anything, as Helen Hackett explains, Elizabeth was portrayed as the polar opposite to the Virgin Mary: while the Queen represented the true church and nurtured it with the spiritual food of the Bible, the Madonna represented the ‘false’ one, administering poison. This polarity was brought home in an incident that occurred during the Queen’s stay at Euston Hall, the home of the Catholic Edward Rookwood in 1578. According to Richard Topcliffe, an ‘idol’ of the false virgin was found and burned by the order of the Virgin Queen.

It was in 1578 that the language and iconography of perpetual and powerful virginity made their first appearances in representations of the Queen. Before that year, Elizabeth was depicted in paintings as a chaste and marriageable queen; after it, portraits represented her virginity as both a source and expression of her power. The series of Sieve Portraits, produced between 1579 and 1582, were amongst the first paintings to link Elizabeth’s virginity to England’s imperial power; in each of them, a globe was positioned in a spatial relationship with a circular sieve – a symbol of virginity because of the well-known story of the Vestal Virgin, Tuccia, who carried water in a sieve to prove her virginity. During the same period, Elizabeth also came to be lauded as a virgin queen in poetry, masques and entertainments. At Norwich in the summer of 1578, she was addressed as an ‘Unspoused Pallas’ and ‘a Virgine pure, which is and ever was’ in one of the masques performed before her. Edmund Spenser’s *April Eclogue* licensed in December 1579 represented Elizabeth as the Venus Virgo of Virgil’s poetry. I have argued elsewhere that the emergence of the iconography of the Virgin Queen at this time was part of the weaponry employed by opponents of the Anjou matrimonial negotiations. Thereafter, it caught on and gained currency as a courtly fashion with an intent both to flatter and also, in many cases (including that of Edmund Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*), to criticise the Queen. Courtiers and poets were the main creators of the image, though certainly Elizabeth helped to foster it in her entertainments at court (such as the ‘Four Foster Children of Desire’) and in the miniatures she commissioned, where she was portrayed as the goddess Diana or Cynthia. Whenever Elizabeth was depicted or addressed as the Virgin Queen, it is very rare indeed to see any
unambiguous allusions to the Virgin Mary. Far more common were the direct iconographic or poetic references to the classical goddesses Diana, Cynthia and Astraea or to Petrarch’s chaste maidens, Laura and Tuccia.

It was Christopher Haigh who first called Elizabeth a ‘political hermaphrodite’. By this he meant that Elizabeth adopted a rhetoric that presented her in traditional male and female roles and with masculine and feminine attributes and characteristics; in the ‘Golden Speech’ to parliament in 1601, for example, Elizabeth referred to herself as king, prince and queen, sliding easily from one gender to another. Linked to this hermaphrodite rhetoric was Elizabeth’s exploitation of the legal theory of the king’s two bodies, namely that a monarch has both a natural body, which reflects its gender, age and eventual mortality, and a political body, which is untouched by biology, and that these two bodies are united through the sacred ritual of anointing at the coronation. As Carole Levin explained, Elizabeth presented herself as ‘both woman and man in one, both king and queen together, a male body politic in concept while a female body natural in practice’. In her first recorded speech, Elizabeth alluded to this idea when she told her lords: ‘I am but one body naturally considered, though by His permission a body politic to govern.’ In several speeches delivered in the 1560s, she developed it by portraying herself as ‘feminine’ in her natural body but with a male authority and ‘masculine’ virtues that she had acquired as a result of her divine kingship and royal inheritance from her father. In one well-known example, she told a parliamentary delegation that was urging her to marry:

\[
\text{thoughe I be a woman yet I have as good a corage awnswerable to mye place as evere my fathere hade. I am your anoynted Queene. I wyll never be by vyolence constreyned to doo anye thinge. I thanke God I am in deed indued with suche qualytyes that yf I were turned owte of the realme in my pettycote I were hable to lyve in anye place of Chrystendom.}
\]

The reference to a ‘weak woman’s body’ and to the ‘heart and stomach of a queen’ in the Queen’s celebrated Tilbury speech was therefore a long-held and central part of Elizabeth’s self-representation. The notion of the Queen’s two bodies also pervaded her subjects’ representations of Elizabeth. The doubled body trope could offer reassurance not only that a queen had the valour to lead her nation successfully against foreign foes but also that her very success would not subvert existing gender hierarchies. So, after the defeat of the Spanish Armada, James Aske could triumphantly proclaim:

\[
\text{Although she be by Nature weake,} \\
\text{Because her sex no otherwise can be;} \\
\text{Yet wants she not the courage of her Sire,} \\
\text{Whose valour wanne this Island great renowne.}
\]

Nonetheless, the rhetorical device of the king’s two bodies had purposes that went beyond addressing issues specific to her gender. During the last two decades of the reign, the difficult subject of the Queen’s mortality and an uncertain succession could equally well be tackled through reference to the Queen’s two bodies.
Figure 3.2 Queen Elizabeth I (the Siena ‘sieve’ portrait, c. 1580–3). Pinacoteca Nazionale, Siena, Italy/Alinari/The Bridgeman Art Library.
As Helen Hackett has shown, poets of the 1590s used a range of imaginative metaphors to express the idea that the monarchy and body politic would survive intact, despite the death of Elizabeth’s natural body and the lack of a biological or named heir. In her later portraits, her age was dealt with by the ‘masque of beauty’ whereby the Queen ceased to be painted as a relatively naturalistic woman and instead became simply a representation of monarchical power. Surrounded by symbols of monarchy, she was projected first and foremost as an expression of the body politic.

In the ‘Ermine’ portrait, for example (see Figure 3.3), her natural body virtually disappears, as her clothes merge into the background and her face is untouched by age. Most prominent in the painting are emblems reflecting her descent (the jewel hanging from her collar known as the Three Brothers, once the possession of the Duke of Burgundy, that was acquired by her father); her sovereignty (the sword of state); her virginity (the ermine); and her preferred policy of peace (the olive branch). Elizabeth here is an icon not a person. When Isaac Oliver attempted to paint her natural body, with her face marked by time, the miniature was left uncompleted and the artist received no further commissions from the Queen or her government (see Figure 3.4).

Elizabeth’s double body also came to be identified with the land of England. This sometimes had a gendered aspect such as when metaphors in the courtly

Figure 3.3 Queen Elizabeth I (the ‘Ermine’ portrait, c. 1585).
Image from Hatfield House, reproduced courtesy of the Marquess of Salisbury.
entertainments held in the summers of the 1560s and 1570s linked the potential fertility of her body with that of the English countryside which was then in flower. Similarly, after 1585, Elizabeth’s virginal body was allowed to stand imaginatively for the realm with its territorial borders intact despite the aggression of its male foes. However, at other times, the association of Elizabeth with the land is recognisably just a device to assert the Queen’s sovereignty over her territory. Christopher Saxton’s 1579 atlas of England does just this by stamping the royal coat of arms prominently on the maps of each of England’s counties and by providing an engraving of the Queen on the book’s frontispiece. In full royal regalia and flanked by the figures of cosmography and geography, Elizabeth is represented as the sovereign ruler of all the land she surveys.

Elizabeth’s summer progresses also enacted her sovereignty over the realm. Unlike her father and siblings she made a point of travelling in great state through the southern half of her kingdom, taking over her hosts’ homes as royal palaces and entering cities in ceremonial. The ‘Ditchley’ portrait – probably commissioned by Sir Henry Lee to commemorate Elizabeth’s visit his manor of Ditchley in Oxfordshire in August 1592 – expressed her possession of the land symbolically, with her body towering over the realm and her feet placed on the parts of England where she went on progress, leaving in shadow the north, the area she never visited (see Figure 8.1, p. 143).

Figure 3.4  Queen Elizabeth I, miniature portrait by Isaac Oliver, c. 1590–2. Victoria & Albert Museum, London, UK/The Bridgeman Art Library.
Progresses were important to Elizabeth. For much of the reign, she insisted on going on them despite the expense and the burdens they imposed on the organisers and her hosts. As seen, they had a value in asserting her sovereignty; equally, travelling through the realm – like royal entries into cities – provided her with opportunities to display, and reinforce, the bonds of mutual love between herself and her subjects that was another fundamental facet of her self-representation. So, while she maintained a distance during the proceedings to enhance the sense of mystery in her presence, she also introduced a note of intimacy into her contacts with her subjects. In this behaviour she was very different from her Continental counterparts, though not dissimilar to that of her father, who could also combine majesty with familiarity. The Spanish ambassador commented with some disapproval how in the summer of 1568 she ‘ordered her carriage sometimes to be taken where the crowd was thickest and stood up and thanked the people’. On other occasions she reassured nervous speakers, gave profuse thanks to her hosts and entered into dialogue with performers of the entertainments. Through these interactions, Elizabeth aimed to project a caring and loving relationship with her subjects.

Elizabeth as a loving princess, the mother of her people, was a topos that permeated much of the panegyric surrounding her. Whatever their motives, in this respect all the manufacturers of Elizabeth’s positive image told the same story. Mulcaster’s account of the coronation procession maintained:

she did not only shew her most gracious loue toward the people in generall, but also priuately if the baser personages had either of ferred her grace any flowres or such like, as a signification of their good wyll, or moued to her any sute, she most gently, to the common reioysing of all the lookers on, & priuate comfort of the partie, staid her chariot, and heard theyr requestes.

Twenty-five years later, a ballad of 1584 described how Elizabeth on her entry into London greeted spectators graciously:

And bowing down on every side,
most lovingly unto them all:
A poore man at the length she spied
which down before her grace did fall
And curteously she then did stay
To heer what he had then to say.

Not all her subjects accepted this image. Many Protestants criticised Elizabeth for not taking the Reformation further, not securing a Protestant succession nor pursuing a more aggressive Protestant foreign policy. Yet, even these detractors projected the image of Elizabeth as a caring prince with the best interests of her people at heart; it lay at the heart of the genre of epideictic literature that used praise as a mask for criticism.

Elizabeth had multiple images, far more than have been discussed here or than was usual for English monarchs before her reign. The malleability of her image owed much to her gender and her status as an unmarried woman, but it was also
the outcome of a Renaissance culture that adored emblems and conceits and embraced chivalry and classicism. The image was widely transmitted in a range of media from portraits to poetry, from sermons to civic entries, from miniatures to medals, some of which were confined to court although much was disseminated in the public domain. Without the development of a print culture during her reign, most of the representations would be lost to historians.

CONCLUSION

Many historians – and notably John Neale – were unable to separate parts of the image from the reality, and they uncritically portrayed Elizabeth as a heroic figure, the caring mother of her people and the embodiment of the English nation. Some twenty years ago, the Neale panegyric came under attack as scholars attempted to strip away the image from what they saw as the reality of a queen who put her own personal and political interests before those of her subjects and who was far less successful than her admirers and own propaganda asserted. One amongst the new generation of critics is Christopher Haigh, whose cold, hard and unsentimental look at the Queen has rightly won many admirers. ‘Elizabeth had deliberately chosen the role of a loving queen’, he wrote, ‘and she played it throughout her reign – but it was only a role.’ Nonetheless, there is good reason to believe that Elizabeth believed she was projecting a political truth. As far as she was concerned, she devoted herself to wearisome public affairs, was forced to make personal sacrifices (including rejecting marriage and executing a kinswoman) and had been subjected to assassination threats and threatened with deposition, all for the sake of her realm and religion. Mistakes had been made – and she was the first to admit that she was not infallible – but the mutual love between herself and her subjects seems to have been one of her enduring convictions – if not, she was a consummate actress!

So, despite the difficulties in writing about Elizabeth, there is a great deal to say, far more than can be done in a mere 9,000 words. As will be evident from other essays in this section, the Queen was at the centre of England’s political and cultural life. Other essays will also discuss her influence in the debates about foreign policy and war. Here, the emphasis has been on those aspects of the Queen’s policies that fell within the royal prerogative and on the subject of her representation, all issues that have absorbed historians’ attention whenever they have been ‘queen fixated’.

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**NOTES**

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6 Thomas Brice, A Compendious Register in Metre Containing the Names, and Patient Sufferings of the Members of Jesus Christ . . . (London, 1559).
9 Hughes and Larkin, Tudor Royal Proclamations, pp. 102–3.
12 CSP For., 1558–9, pp. 109, 221.
13 Hughes and Larkin, Tudor Royal Proclamations, pp. 117–32; especially Injunctions 20 (communion) and 2, 23 and 35 (images).
15 Hughes and Larkin, Tudor Royal Proclamations, II, p. 165.
20 Marcus et al., Elizabeth I, pp. 36–8, 78; British Library Lansdowne MS 94 fol. 30r.
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25 Marcus et al., Elizabeth I, p. 63.
28 Christopher Haigh, Elizabeth I (Harlow, 1988), p. 25; Mary Beth Rose, Gender and Heroism in Early Modern English Literature (Chicago, Ill., 2002), p. 27.
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37 Harrington, *A Famous Dittie*. 

— Susan Doran —