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John Watkins

Excerpt

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Introduction

In 1759, David Hume set out to extirpate a thriving, posthumous cult of Elizabeth I. He concluded his discussion of her reign in *The History of England* by asking why a nation that had committed itself to constitutional principles continued to revere the memory of a woman who embodied Renaissance despotism? According to the Whig interpretation that prompted Hume's diatribe, the Stuart succession was a tragedy that led the nation to civil war in its effort to restore the constitutional balance it had enjoyed under Elizabeth.¹ Hume dismissed this emphasis on discontinuity between Tudor and Stuart administrations by arguing that Elizabeth had much in common with her Stuart successors. He pronounced her forced loans "an arbitrary and unequal kind of imposition," condemned her court of Star Chamber as "illegal and despotic," charged her ministers with repeated violations of *habeas corpus*, and maintained that their victims "were sometimes thrown into dungeons, and loaded with irons, and treated in the most cruel manner, without their being able to obtain any remedy from law." Elizabeth's inexorable personality complemented the brutality of her regime: "Her imperious temper, a circumstance in which she went far beyond her successors, rendered her exertions of power violent and frequent."²

For Hume, the crucial watershed in English history was not the 1603 death of Elizabeth, but the 1688 Glorious Revolution that created the possibility for an entirely new government unfettered by either political or sentimental ties to an outmoded absolutism. In attacking Elizabeth, Hume asserted that England no longer needed to rest its case for political liberties on fabricated precedents. As long as the consensus of rational men supported the Revolution Settlement, they did not have to pretend that Elizabeth adumbrated it in her imagined deference to Parliament. The time had come to state the truth about her reign in all its ugliness. Once that truth had been announced, Hume felt that reverence for her would disappear.³

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Yet in dismissing Elizabeth's cult as merely a Whig fabrication, Hume underestimated its resilience. As I will argue, Elizabeth's distinctive position as the female head of a patriarchal state encouraged unusually diverse interpretations of her reign and personal character. Her popularity rested less on the "truth" of what she actually accomplished than on competing interpretive traditions, which made her legacy available to constituencies across a wide political spectrum. The sheer contradictoriness of this interpretive field shielded her from posthumous exposé. Despite Hume's assumptions to the contrary, informing an allegedly benighted readership that Elizabeth had really been an autocrat did nothing to lessen her place in the English historical imagination.

In the two and a half centuries that have passed since Hume's diatribe, Elizabeth's popularity continues to rest on paradoxes and contradictions. Biographers, teachers, and screen writers portray her as the monarch *par excellence*, a courageous defender of her nation against foreign enemies, a leader committed to reform in the face of vested interests at home, a patron of the arts, an outstanding orator, and a role model for women determined to overcome the limitations imposed on their lives and careers by a patriarchal order. Yet they simultaneously invest her with the "dark side" condemned by Hume. In their recollections, Elizabeth is often imperious, wrathful, vindictive, bigoted, jealous of her authority, and vain about her looks. Some even present her as pathologically insecure, morbidly obsessed with death, paranoid, susceptible to manipulation by her courtiers, abusive, and murderous. Contradictory representation characterizes writing about Elizabeth as much in the academy as in the popular press and film. While some feminists offer a triumphal account of her ability to overcome patriarchal limitations, new historicists and cultural materialists sometimes outstrip Hume in presenting her as the autocratic head of a brutal regime.⁴ As in films and popular biographies, both views often coexist in an uneasy, unexamined relationship within single historical accounts or literary analyses.

Instead of cutting through these contradictions to find the "real" Elizabeth, my study examines the historical circumstances that made her seem so central to the larger story of the modern state's emergence from absolutism. Throughout the seventeenth century, literary and extraliterary forces transformed Elizabeth, the aristocratic head of an absolutist state, into the subject of a bourgeois fantasy. The contradictions inherent in her legacy came to mirror, and sometimes even reproduce, the contradictions inherent in liberal ideology. English writers recalled her simultaneously as the oppressor and the oppressed, the victim and

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the perpetrator of despotic practices. As the bastardized daughter of the king who murdered her mother, as a princess imprisoned by her equally murderous sister, and as a queen subject to the constant threat of assassination by Philip II's hirelings, she joined her downtrodden subjects in a firsthand experience of tyranny. But this was only part of her story. The seventeenth century also remembered another Elizabeth seduced by corrupt councillors into murdering the individuals dear to her own heart, like her cousin Mary Stuart and her secret lover, the Earl of Essex. For post-Restoration writers in particular, her larger-than-life, operatic sufferings marked her as the perfect model of the tragic individual pitted against a hostile social order.

The history of bourgeois fantasy extends well beyond the death of Queen Anne in 1714, and so does the history of Elizabeth's posthumous cult.⁵ Yet I have decided to focus this study on the seventeenth century for several reasons. The first is expediency. Elizabeth's *Nachleben* is an enormous subject, and the history of her place in later culture could fill volumes. In trying to condense that history into a single book, I would end up perpetuating the vague generalizations that have already distorted the complexity of her place in the Anglo-American imagination and left intact the Whig fantasy that Hume sought to dismantle.⁶

More importantly, the central paradoxes of Elizabeth's political and cultural legacy were fully in place by the end of the Stuart century. Long before Fox, Jefferson, and Adams, political writers like Marchamont Nedham, James Harrington, Algernon Sidney, and Henry Neville spoke out against arbitrary government and illegal imprisonment, defended the rights of property, and maintained that the men who made up the political nation ought to have a voice in its government.⁷ As the components of later Whig and liberal political theory fell into place, so did the historiography that supported it. In the process, Elizabeth came to occupy her strange position as the representative of an absolutist order who simultaneously embodied the libertarian values of an emergent middle class. What I would argue remains her principal cultural function – the satisfaction of a perpetual bourgeois fantasy for a lost age of charismatic absolutism – developed in the century that opened with James I's assertions of divine right and ended with the limitations on the Crown's prerogative that followed the Glorious Revolution.

In exploring the circumstances that cast Elizabeth in this paradoxical role, I organize my discussion around three recurring concerns. The first is a critique of the assumption that nostalgia for Elizabeth was inevitable during the troubled seventeenth-century transition from absolutism to

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constitutional monarchy. Throughout most of the twentieth century, few scholars contested that James I was a singularly unsuccessful ruler, that Charles I subjected the English people to an unprecedented display of arbitrary power, or that James II sacrificed everything to the impossible dream of reconverting England to Rome. By a careful re-evaluation of sources, revisionist historians like Kevin Sharpe and John Miller have exposed the contingent origins of these claims in seventeenth-century polemic.⁸ History is written by the winners, and as long as historians based their views on the writings of the Stuarts' Parliamentary enemies, they were bound to attack Stuart policies. But as the revisionists have demonstrated through an archival project that surpasses their predecessors' both in scope and in depth of analysis, England was far from united in a general hatred of the Stuarts, and nothing in the political situation of 1640 necessarily predicted either civil war or the monarchy's eventual downfall.

My own project challenges a doctrine that has long accompanied belief in the Stuarts' universal unpopularity, the belief that a nostalgia for the supposedly better government of Elizabeth I fueled resistance to her Stuart successors. This nostalgia paradigm rests on several unexamined assumptions. At the most basic, it assumes that discontinuity was more characteristic of the Tudor–Stuart transition than continuity, that the Stuarts departed so dramatically from Elizabeth's example that the differences were apparent to everyone. Secondly, it indicts the Crown for initiating changes in political culture that led to civil war. Despite decades of work on the changing attitudes and administrative practices of the gentry, merchants, urban professionals, and other significant players in seventeenth-century politics, most literary scholars persist in blaming autocratic kings rather than aggressive Parliaments for destabilizing the constitution. According to them, James I and Charles I autocratically enlarged the royal prerogative, and Parliament reacted by defending an Elizabethan balance of power. The reigning interpretation also assumes that nostalgia arises spontaneously as a natural response to perceived political changes. It fails to consider nostalgia as a rhetorical invention that induces rather than reflects a perception of historical rupture.

Revisionist historians have laid the ground for reappraising the first two assumptions. Just as pathbreaking work on the seventeenth century suggests that previous historians have exaggerated the extent of popular discontent with the Stuarts, scholars like Wallace MacCaffrey and John Guy have qualified our claims about Elizabeth's popularity among her sixteenth-century subjects.⁹ The final years of Elizabeth's reign – with

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their increasingly rancorous Parliaments, costly and relatively ineffectual military initiatives, and brutal campaigns against Puritan and recusant dissent – no longer look like a period of idyllic national consensus. If there was less political consensus during the 1580s and 90s than proponents of a mid-seventeenth-century cult of Elizabeth acknowledge, there was also more consensus than they admit during the 1620s and even the 1630s. As a literary and cultural historian, I continue the revisionist project by arguing that nostalgia for Elizabeth was not so widespread as scholars have believed, that it was primarily driven by vested, polemic interests, and that it was not the only available response to the experience of historical change. Much of what we think of as nostalgia for Elizabeth could be described more accurately as defensive writing that arose in the context of such polemics as the debate over Catholic toleration in the opening months of James I's reign.

My second organizing concern is to expose the contingency of a commonplace contrast between Elizabeth and her Stuart successors. Both in classic, liberal historiography and even in more radical writing about the seventeenth century, the assumption of a pervasive and inevitable nostalgia for Elizabeth complements the charge that the Stuarts departed drastically and significantly from her example. Scholars have developed a catastrophic narrative of the Tudor–Stuart transition around stark binary oppositions distinguishing Elizabeth's competence from her successors' alleged incompetence, her commitment to fundamental English values from their penchant for foreign innovations, her constitutionalism from their absolutism, her sensitivity to her subjects' needs and interests from their fatal disregard for public opinion, her thrift from their lavishness, her Protestantism from their dalliance with Catholicism, her determined opposition to Habsburg hegemony from their Spanish and later French appeasement, her choice of wise councillors like Burghley from their infatuation with unreliable favorites like Buckingham, her virginity from their promiscuity. When contrasting Elizabeth with her Stuart successors, otherwise circumspect historians and literary critics resort to outrageously xenophobic, anti-Catholic, homophobic, and nationalistic canons of judgments.

In denouncing the Stuarts, historians have narrated the Tudor–Stuart transition through the lenses of the parties who first introduced these oppositions in the seventeenth century not as supposedly neutral descriptions but as open attacks on the Stuart monarchy.¹⁰ The argument for discontinuity between the Elizabethan and Stuart regimes competed with a now occulted argument for continuity. Only in the last few years

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have British historians begun to see once more what many seventeenth-century writers asserted, that James I and Charles I were following directly in Elizabeth's footsteps in undertaking many of the policies that their Parliamentary opponents denounced as foreign innovations. As Hume realized, Elizabethan precedents existed for the Stuarts' use of the prerogative courts, their arbitrary taxation, their insistence on ecclesiastical conformity in the face of Puritan hostility, and even their conciliatory attitude toward France and the Catholic continent.

My interest in challenging the belief that most Stuart writing about Elizabeth was nostalgic and oppositional has guided my selection of primary texts. Certain aspects of Elizabeth's posthumous reputation have been especially well studied. I am indebted to scholars like C. V. Wedgwood, David Cressy, D. R. Woolf, Thomas Cogswell, and Michelle O'Callaghan, who have traced a tradition of incontestably oppositional appropriations of Elizabeth's legacy.¹¹ Because of their efforts, some seventeenth-century works about Elizabeth are now relatively familiar to specialists in the period, including the neo-Spenserian literature that arose in response to Prince Charles's ill-fated trip to Madrid, laudatory references to Elizabeth in Parliamentary speeches, and polemically charged reprintings of her "Golden Speech" on the eve of the civil wars. Susan Frye has broken important ground by describing the seventeenth-century contexts that inspired the popular representation of Elizabeth as a cross-dressed Amazon. In a series of articles on tombs, memorial inscriptions, and other visual images, Julia Walker has suggested that popular nostalgia competed with a court-driven effort to diminish Elizabeth's centrality in English history.¹² Several literary critics have offered rich and provocative readings of major seventeenth-century texts in terms of their apparent nostalgic content.¹³ Instead of focusing on sources that have been treated by these scholars, I have examined works that are either more ambivalent toward Elizabeth or more generous toward her Stuart successors than the works now generally canonized as seventeenth-century tributes to "the Queen of famous memory."¹⁴ Recovering these alternative representational traditions has allowed me in turn to detect critical undercurrents in some of the period's most complimentary treatments of Elizabeth, such as Camden's *Annals*, Naunton's *Fragmenta Regalia*, and Greville's *Dedication* of his collected works to Sir Philip Sidney.

This book's final organizing concern is with Elizabeth's gender and the role it plays in imagined accounts of her private life. As I have already suggested, Elizabeth's persistent popularity rests on the fact that

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writers have retold her story in diverse ways for multiple audiences. Theoretically, any other early modern monarch could have enjoyed the same contradictory reception history. People have disagreed enormously, for example, in their assessments of Charles I and James II. But no one has ever tried to deny that either of these men ruled as an absolute monarch. Because Elizabeth was a woman, however, many seventeenth-century writers were quick to argue that she could never have really ruled with the authority wielded either by her father or her male successors. Her gender supposedly made her naturally deferent to her Privy Councillors and to Parliament. This became a particularly common argument during the Interregnum, when some writers argued that England had effectively been a republic under Elizabeth, who ruled less as a queen than as the governor of a commonwealth.

The mirror opposite of this position was the charge that Elizabeth had ruled as an absolute sovereign, and in doing so had transgressed natural hierarchies of gender. During the 1640s, a few royalist writers offered a non-pejorative version of this argument by appealing to Elizabeth's example as proof that hereditary right suspends all other considerations, even a woman's natural subservience to men. By the end of the century, Edmund Bohun wrote glowingly of Elizabeth's "Masculine, Heroick Soul" as an inspiration for William III's wars against Louis XIV. In general, however, observations about the anomaly of Elizabeth's position as a virgin queen mastering a nation of men formed part of a more extensive attack on her character. As I will later argue, for example, a recusant discourse that enlisted a range of misogynistic stereotypes against the queen went underground during the civil wars and Interregnum only to resurface in such Restoration bestsellers as *The Secret History of the Most Renowned Q. Elizabeth and the E. of Essex* and *The Secret History of the Duke of Alancon and Q. Elizabeth*.

My discussion of the role that Elizabeth's gender played in seventeenth-century treatments of her reign is especially indebted to recent work on early modern women writers. Scholars like Barbara Lewalski, Ivy Schweitzer, Carol Barash, and Mihoko Suzuki have documented how Elizabeth's heroic example inspired individual women to challenge patriarchal restrictions on both their writing and personal conduct.¹⁵ Throughout this study, I try to offer new light on individual women by placing their treatments of Elizabeth in the broader political and historiographic context of other writing about her by men and women alike. Anne Bradstreet's homage to Elizabeth, for example, acquires a special polemic urgency when it is read against other

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non-conformist works that downplayed Elizabeth's historical significance by attributing her greatest achievements to her male advisors. Writers like Bradstreet responded not only to Elizabeth, but to figurations of her by previous writers sometimes inspired, and sometimes repelled by her identity as the female head of a patriarchal society.

Finally, I am indebted to an enormous amount of scholarship both on the historical Elizabeth and the royal image that she and her encomiasts crafted in the sixteenth century.¹⁶ The Stuart writers that I discuss drew extensively on Tudor materials; the first ones, of course, were surviving Elizabethans who framed their opinions about the queen when she was still alive. Some knew her personally, and even more remembered the pageantry of her public appearances. Throughout the entire Stuart century, Elizabeth's portraits were still hanging, many of her statues were still erect, and versions of her speeches were available in Foxe, Holinshed, Camden, and later Sir Simonds d'Ewes's *Journals of All the Parliaments During the Reign of Queen Elizabeth* (London, 1682). Seventeenth-century writers did not produce their images of Elizabeth *ex nihilo*, and it is often very hard to tell whether a given author's opinions about Elizabeth are indebted to Stuart or to surviving Tudor sources.

At the same time, Stuart writers did not simply copy the images first conceived by their Tudor predecessors. As John King has shown, for example, the cult of Elizabeth as a virgin queen wed to her realm owes more to Camden's seventeenth-century recollections of her words than to anything the queen herself said, at least during her reign's opening decades.¹⁷ In general, my own emphasis throughout this study is on aspects of Elizabeth's image that mattered most to seventeenth-century English men and women in their thinking about sovereignty, and on completely new views about her that would have shocked the queen and her Tudor subjects.

Although Elizabeth appeared in political discussions throughout the entire Stuart century, she did not always figure in them as an independent agent. In some of the period's most openly nostalgic writing, memories of Elizabeth as a great queen blur into memories of the Elizabethan age as a great moment in the nation's past. Especially during the civil wars and Interregnum, writers attributed the achievements of her reign at least as much to her councillors and to the nation's representatives in Parliament as to the queen herself. This discursive tendency accounts in part for the readiness with which seventeenth-century writers sometimes lauded Elizabeth for instituting policies that she had actually opposed. The fact that some of her Privy Councillors and many members of her

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House of Commons advocated an interventionalist foreign policy, for example, allowed them to commemorate her as a Protestant belligerent, even though the historical Elizabeth managed to keep her country out of war for three decades. Seventeenth-century polemics often depended on the imprecision with which writers located their nostalgic sentiments sometimes in Elizabeth and sometimes in the collective actions of her subjects.

My book opens with the dawn of early Stuart absolutism and closes with the emergence of a new constitutionalism following the Glorious Revolution. My first three chapters trace the conflicted, even halting emergence of Elizabeth as an icon of anti-Stuart opposition during the decades preceding the civil war. My first chapter examines how eulogists and encomiasts tried to dampen the shock of a foreign succession by presenting James as Elizabeth's metaphorical son, a committed Protestant, and a descendant of Henry VII who would rule in the proud Tudor tradition. Their topoi glossed over the awkward fact that Elizabeth's government had executed James's actual mother, Mary Stuart. James's pre-accession hints about Catholic toleration made their work even harder by jeopardizing his credentials as Elizabeth's heir in defending the Protestant faith. But the Gunpowder Plot quickly resolved the question of James's maternal loyalties by casting him in Elizabeth's role as the target of papist assassination attempts. The government took full propagandistic advantage of the Plot by pairing James's triumph over the Gunpowder conspirators with Elizabeth's victory over the Armada. History seemed to repeat itself, with Providence guiding James even as it had guided Elizabeth.

As I argue in the following chapter on Thomas Heywood's historical drama, generic conventions sometimes gave works an oppositional political value despite the authors' avowed intentions of honoring James as her successor. Heywood wrote his two-part Elizabeth play *If You Know Not Me, You Know Nobody*, for example, in the first flush of enthusiasm over a peaceful succession and well before the conflicts with Parliament that dominated the later years of James's reign. But the conventions of citizen comedy created a lasting impression of Elizabeth as a compliant monarch who yielded to her subjects' desires, and the play became especially attractive to the opposition that emerged in the next two decades. *If You Know Not Me* enjoyed more reprintings and revivals than almost any other early Jacobean play in the years preceding the civil war.

None of the three historians that I examine in Chapter 3 – William Camden, Robert Naunton, or Fulke Greville – ever doubted Elizabeth's

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identity as an absolute monarch. But they too adopted genres like the Theophrastan character sketch and the Tudor chronicle that had acquired a constitutionalist, and even republican edge that ultimately contributed to the charge that James and Charles had violated Elizabeth's memory. All three writers were profoundly indebted to the Roman historian Tacitus and to his de-idealizing critiques of the *imperium*. A Tacitean skepticism toward any absolute ruler infects their ostensible compliments to Elizabeth as an example for later rulers.

In Chapter 4, I turn to Elizabeth's presence in civil war and Interregnum propaganda. Previous scholars have noted how Parliamentary leaders like John Pym, John Eliot, and Oliver Cromwell used Elizabeth's excellences as a foil to expose alleged Stuart corruptions. But Elizabeth also figured prominently in Royalist propaganda as an upholder of the Crown's prerogatives. The historiographic contest between these rival interpretations of her legacy helped to script the nation's political and military contest between divergent models of sovereignty. The death of Charles I, however, signaled a startling decline of interest in the Queen of famous memory. Especially for writers committed to the dream of an English republic, posthumous homage to any monarch, even Elizabeth, carried the threat of counter-revolution. Less was written about Elizabeth during the Interregnum than during any other decade of the Stuart century.

The revival of interest in Elizabeth on the eve of the Stuart Restoration confirmed the radicals' anxieties about her conservative potential. Not only old cavaliers but even erstwhile republicans like Francis Osborne looked to Elizabeth for an alternative to what struck them as the failures of republicanism. Written on the eve of Charles II's return from exile, Osborne's *Traditional Memoirs of Queen Elizabeth* canonized her as the exemplar of moderation in all things. After his book appeared and passed through multiple editions, Elizabeth would always be identified with a judicious *media via* in diplomacy, religion, and other domestic affairs. As I argue in Chapter 5, exalting Elizabeth as a champion of moderation and sound common sense opposed her reign to the autocracy of her first two Stuart successors and to the perceived chaos of the Interregnum. Yet proponents of a restored *media via* never got around the problem that one party's moderation was another party's extremism. Shortly after the Restoration, the political consensus that formed around Osbornian recollections of Elizabeth disintegrated. Once more, the political nation divided into opposing camps organized around competing interpretations of what made her government succeed.