

Elizabeth and a weakened historical sense

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Elizabeth, directed by Shekhar Kapur, written by Michael Hirst

The story of Elizabeth I of England (1533-1603) is a remarkable one. Here is a woman not merely surviving in a cruel and treacherous age, but leaving her mark on one of the most extraordinary periods in English and modern world history. While the social struggle is the driving force of historical development, human beings are not thereby turned into ciphers, passive and anonymous "expressions" of class interests. What individuals do at critical moments has consequences. So Elizabeth intrigues us. It is natural that artists, as well as historians, should desire to explore her motives, her interests, her feelings.

And there is the more general fascination with the English Renaissance and its exceptional array of personalities: Elizabeth's longtime adviser William Cecil (later Lord Burghley), the philosopher and statesman Francis Bacon, the adventurer and poet Walter Raleigh, the admiral and explorer Francis Drake, the poet, courtier, soldier and statesman Philip Sidney, the dramatist and poet Ben Jonson, the dramatist and poet Christopher Marlowe, and countless others--scientists, mathematicians, composers. And, above all, in the latter part of Elizabeth's reign, William Shakespeare. Each exploration of this age is at least in part an attempt to come to terms with, if not offer an explanation for, Shakespeare's personality and genius.

Elizabeth was the last of the Tudors, the most outstanding dynasty in British history. Of Welsh descent, Henry Tudor, Earl of Richmond and heir to the House of Lancaster, ended the fratricidal Wars of the Roses--which saw a good portion of the feudal nobility wiped out--by defeating Richard III at the Battle of Bosworth in 1485 and proclaiming himself Henry VII. He was succeeded by his son, Henry VIII (reigned 1509-47), and the latter's three children (by three different wives), Edward VI (1547-53), Mary I (1553-58) and Elizabeth.

Henry VIII initiated the Reformation in England by breaking with the Catholic Church in the early 1530s. The decisiveness of Henry's act indicated the growth of economic forces incompatible with feudal social organization and the emergence of a national consciousness. In 1534 he replaced the Pope's authority by his own Act of Supremacy, creating the Church of England. This church became distinctly Protestant under his son, Edward VI. Mary officially reestablished Catholicism, married Philip II of Spain and persecuted Protestants as heretics, but she died childless, and the crown fell to her half-sister.

Elizabeth's father had her mother, Anne Boleyn, executed when she was a child. She was later imprisoned in the Tower of London by Mary, for suspected Protestant sympathies. For a period of time she feared for her life. Upon becoming queen, Elizabeth broke the ties with Rome and restored Henry's independent Church of England. One historian has observed that "perhaps no young woman of twenty-five has ever taken personal decisions having consequences so momentous."

A great deal has been written about Elizabeth, much of it intended to inspire nationalist sentiment. Historians seem to agree on a number of things. She was intelligent and shrewd, fluent in a variety of languages--at a time when many females even of the most privileged classes were not taught to read and write--and endowed with a cool temperament matched by a "cool humanism." She was a Protestant, but hostile to the Puritans,

and attracted to many elements of Catholic ceremony. She proceeded, as befits someone whose mother and various other relations had lost their heads, with considerable caution and even procrastination, to the point of apparent indecisiveness. Nonetheless, she reportedly "exuded an air of authority." The Spanish ambassador noted that she seemed "incomparably more feared than her sister and has her way absolutely, as her father did." She obviously took to and thrived on the tense political atmosphere. All sources agree, in addition, that she was, appropriately enough, a consummate actress.

For some 30 years Elizabeth, aided by Cecil and others, successfully played off the two great Catholic powers, France and Spain. The defeat of the Spanish Armada by English naval forces in 1588 played no small part in determining the eventual fortunes of the two nations. Industry and trade flourished during Elizabeth's reign. Some researchers argue that the rate of economic expansion in England during Shakespeare's lifetime was not reached again until the Industrial Revolution of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Coal mining, shipping, sugar refining, salt-, paper- and glass-making, metal fabrication and, above all, the textile trade, prospered, strengthening the position of the bourgeoisie and those sections of the aristocracy aligned with it or that had themselves entered into business ventures.

In the affair of Mary Stuart, Queen of Scots, in whose person Catholics identified Elizabeth's successor and their salvation, a process which assassination could hasten, the English queen acted with considerable self-restraint. Whatever her motives, including quite possibly the belief that the execution of a queen--any queen--would set a dangerous precedent, Elizabeth permitted her dangerous rival to go on living for decades after Mary's first conspiracies and those of her supporters were uncovered.

Elizabeth's decision not to marry seems to have been bound up primarily with political considerations, the extraordinary balancing act she was carrying out, at home and abroad, and the personal independence it required. One historian, for example, asserts that "her fundamental intention was to remain master and not to give herself a master." What seems most remarkable, and perhaps raises Elizabeth to the level of greatness, is that so many of her personal and political decisions seem consonant with the general course of human progress.

The English bourgeois revolution erupted 37 years after her death.

Shekhar Kapur's *Elizabeth* chronicles the period from her imprisonment in 1554 through the first years of her reign. At the time of her ascension to power, England is bankrupt, has virtually no army and faces threats from France and Spain. The Spanish press Elizabeth (Cate Blanchett) to wed her dead sister's husband, Philip, or some other figure acceptable to them. France has a foothold in Scotland in the person of its regent, the warlike Mary of Guise (Fanny Ardant). Within the country the Catholic party, headed by the Duke of Norfolk (Christopher Eccleston), conspires against her. Elizabeth loves Robert Dudley (Joseph Fiennes), later Earl of Leicester, but Cecil (Richard Attenborough) urges her to abandon personal matters and attend to the affairs of state.

At first tentatively and then with greater confidence, Elizabeth sets out to stabilize the political situation. Her policy of moderate Protestantism and relative tolerance for Catholicism proves successful in calming

immediate passions. After she rejects proposals of marriage from both the courts of France and Spain, however, an attempt is made on her life. She turns to Dudley for comfort, only to discover that he is married. She grows more and more reliant on Francis Walsingham (Geoffrey Rush), her Master of Spies. When Mary of Guise, angry over Elizabeth's rejection of her nephew's hand in marriage, sends her a poisoned dress, Walsingham travels to Scotland, lures Mary to bed and murders her.

Finally, as the conspiracies mount in and around the court, Walsingham asserts that the moment of truth has arrived. It is necessary to wipe out Elizabeth's enemies with one blow. Walsingham sees to the arrest and execution of Norfolk and the others. Her throne finally secure and her personal relations with Dudley at an end, Elizabeth deliberately transforms herself into a living legend, a secular object of worship, the Virgin Queen.

The film's principal positive feature is that directs the spectator's attention to the figure of Elizabeth and to her age, and perhaps arouses curiosity about them. And it directs attention to *history* as a fact and a problem. If *Elizabeth* encourages anyone to wonder, how did we come to be the way we are?, it will have done something useful. The film is lively enough and written and organized with sufficient intelligence to do that.

It's relatively pointless to enter into an argument over the accuracy of this or that plot element. Does it matter that Mary of Guise died of dropsy or that Dudley's marriage was well known? That Walsingham became a significant figure considerably later in Elizabeth's reign or that Norfolk was not arrested until 1571? The screenwriter and director have compressed time and rearranged events to suit their purposes.

If accuracy of detail is not a critical issue, the conceptual framework might well be. *Elizabeth* strikes one as intellectually thin. Its theses that political power hardens and inevitably dehumanizes an individual, that the decision to sacrifice a satisfying emotional life in the interests of the state and the nation is a harsh one, that everyone perhaps--in one way or another--makes difficult choices to survive and pays the price for those choices, are not terribly original ideas, nor, perhaps more importantly, presented in a particularly fresh fashion. In general, the film shows evidence of a great deal of thought about brocades and wall hangings, but not enough about the relations between people.

And *Elizabeth* is dependent on too many contemporary film genres and too many clichés. We have seen much of this before: the wily Spaniard, the sensual Frenchman or -woman, the Machiavellian (and all-knowing) chief of security gliding silently through hallways and corridors, the wise but aging adviser, the passionate but weak-willed lover. As with a great number of films today, so many of the characters possess the same easily identifiable features from their first moment on screen till their last. How many times, in this film, did the Duke of Norfolk stride angrily up the halls of one palace or another, or glare angrily at his enemies? Did the real Duke never stroll? Or laugh at a joke?

Filmmakers and screenwriters argue, publicly or privately, that this sort of homogenizing, this smoothing out of contradictory behavior is necessary because contemporary audiences are incapable of grasping difficult and challenging material. First, this is a notion one-sided to the point of untruth; second, insofar as there has been a decline in the intellectual abilities of the modern audience it represents a problem that the artist should urgently tackle.

Elizabeth is presented as a somewhat more complex character. The scene in which she confronts, cajoles, wins over an audience of hostile bishops in the first days of her reign seems convincing. Cate Blanchett does a fine job, as well as a performer could be expected to, but the film rarely rises above well-intentioned mediocrity.

A historical sense is lacking

Political and social vicissitudes have little or no impact on the five biological senses, but in our day they have temporarily at least damaged artists' historical sense, the ability to imagine a distinct world with distinct sensibilities and interests.

A number of the comments of *Elizabeth*'s creators reveal this disappointing tendency.

Co-producer Alison Owen explained that the production company, Working Titles Films, had wanted to make an historical film for some time. "We settled on Elizabeth I and her early life," she said, "a period that hasn't been particularly well documented on the screen, and one which would give us more dramatic life. We also wanted to stamp a contemporary feel onto our story, and with the early part of her reign being filled with such uncertainty, we decided to structure it as a conspiracy thriller.... We were a lot more influenced by films like *The Godfather* than by previous historical dramas."

Owen continued: "Her story seemed to have lots of parallels with modern twentieth century women who are often faced with that choice between career and personal life. It is a dilemma many contemporary women are trying to resolve in their own lives that Elizabeth had to face. She had to give up the chance of marriage and children to achieve stability in the country."

This is pretty banal stuff.

Indian director Shekhar Kapur (*Bandit Queen*, 1994) told an interviewer that it was "ridiculous" to worry about bringing "the past back to life." Because, he explained, "you're dealing with human events performed by human beings, and human motivations simply don't change so much as to be no longer understandable! People are always doing the same things for the same reasons--money, power, love, revenge--in only slightly different ways. Stress the similarities, and the differences become easy to explain."

Kapur, born in what is now Pakistan in 1945, brings vigor and perhaps the advantage of an outsider's view to the film, but his comments seem fairly conventional as well. I don't want to be unkind, but that sort of musing always reminds me of Brecht's comment that "philistines will always find the same motive forces in history, their own." Nobody changes much; "Man with a capital M" has always been the same as he is now, and always will be.

Of course, we and the Elizabethans share many elemental concerns; otherwise we would study Shakespeare's and Marlowe's works only as historical curiosities. But wouldn't the English of the sixteenth century, in a society where feudal forms still prevailed, have had different attitudes toward such problems as loyalty, personal and civic; the responsibilities of kingship and political leadership generally; nationalism and nationhood; guilt, punishment and retribution; sexual and generational relationships? If no distinctions are made between epochs, events merge into a bland sameness, a sameness that precludes sharp and qualitative changes.

In any event, the enduring is not grasped through pursuing a passive, lazy, abstract "universalism," but precisely by capturing the fleeting, the impermanent in the richest, most concrete fashion possible, and allowing the essential to unfold. This is the process that seems to me to promise the greatest rewards: *stress the differences, and the similarities will more easily emerge.*

In one of the final sequences, Elizabeth, standing by a statue of the Virgin Mary, tells Walsingham that with the end of Catholicism's domination there is "nothing to replace Her" in the hearts of the people. Her transformation into a royal icon is presumably an attempt to fill this space. It is certainly historically suggestive that the Holy Virgin was displaced by the Virgin Queen within a few decades, as part of a process

of supplanting the Church of Rome by the secular cult of the English nation-state.

There is, however, an aspect of this theme that is slightly disturbing and hints perhaps at the overall approach taken by its creators. The notion that the art of governing consists simply of giving the easily manipulated and backward population "what it wants" has definite implications, and not only for politics. On this somewhat calculating and cynical basis, anything can be justified, including offering film-going audiences too much of the lowest common denominator.



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