

# **"Tonight I Think I Die" – Elizabethan Religious Conflict And Violence On Film**

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Queen Elizabeth I of England has been portrayed in more historical films than any other monarch - English or otherwise.<sup>1</sup> The history of this portrayal spans the history of film itself - with the first film featuring Elizabeth appearing in 1912, and the latest hitting screens in 2007. Despite these many cinematic representations - over 25 of them - there is one element of the queen's character that has remained constant, and nearly always features as an integral part of the film's plot. This, of course, is Elizabeth's Protestantism, and the conflict her religion caused before and during her reign.

One of the films where religious violence and conflict serve as the primary plot complication is Shekhar Kapur's 1998 film, *Elizabeth*. The film begins during Mary I's reign - probably in about 1555, and ends in the aftermath of the Ridolfi Plot of 1571/1572. Time does not permit a detailed analysis of religious conflict and violence in the entire film. However, this paper will focus on a central theme and three key scenes. The central theme will analyse the contrasting depictions of Queen Mary and Queen Elizabeth. The three key scenes that will be analysed here are the film's opening scene, in which three heretics are burned at the stake, the debate surrounding the passing of the *Act of Uniformity*, and Sir Francis Walsingham's interrogation of one of the conspirators of the Ridolfi Plot.

The writers of the film were very obvious in what picture of the two queens they wanted to portray. Kapur made it clear that he wished to convey to his audience that the queens, whilst being half-sisters, were polar opposites. The religious conflict they both inflicted upon England is the epitome of this opposition. The scenes that included Queen Mary are very dark and sinister. Even the people around her wear black. And to ensure that this point cannot be missed, all the scenes are filmed in Gothic-style rooms - architecture which predates Mary reign by several centuries. This all serves to leave the audience in no doubt

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<sup>1</sup> Bethany Latham, *Elizabeth I in Film and Television* (London: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2011), 3.

that Mary has brought a darkness over England, and that her reign will only bring about death. These scenes are in stark contrast to those of Elizabeth. They are all light and bright. In fact, the film employs three distinct white washout transitions for Elizabeth, but nothing similar for Mary. Even the people around Elizabeth wear colourful clothing. The contrast between the two queens could not be greater. Elizabeth is light and life. Mary is darkness and despair. The historical accuracy of these polarising depictions is of course questionable at best, but it is indicative of the stereotypes that exist in films of Elizabeth. Religion, and the conflict it causes, features prominently in all aspects of the film: even something as specific as the lighting and sets.

The first key scene of religious conflict in *Elizabeth* is the film's opening scene, in which three Protestant heretics are burned at the stake. As the three Protestants are led to the pyre, a man in the crowd cries out "God bless you, Master Ridley." This means then that one of the heretics is Nicholas Ridley, the former Bishop of London and one of King Edward VI's most prominent Protestant reformers. Bishop Ridley was executed with Hugh Latimer, the former Bishop of Worcester in 1555. Thus, it is safe to assume that he is the other male heretic. However, the woman in the group is completely fictitious - she is simply present for added dramatic effect. As Bethany Latham says of the scene, "a ruler who would burn a woman alive is obviously a monster."<sup>2</sup> Also, the fact that the people gathered to watch the execution have to be chased away by guards on horses to prevent them interfering with the pyre leaves no doubt in the audience's mind that this monstrous act is disastrous for society, and is wholly caused by religious conflict.

It is also significant to note that this is the only burning at the stake in the film. By beginning the film in this way, the viewers relate to Elizabeth, who throughout the course of the film shows tolerance and mercy to religious victims. This is not reflective of the historical reality. Whilst Mary certainly burnt more heretics than any other English monarch, several non-conformists were executed in this way during Elizabeth's reign, including the Unitarian Matthew Hamont, and the Arianist Francis Kett.

This scene also includes what some have regarded as the film's most sickening moment. As the heretics burn, they cry out for more wood to be thrown on the fire because "it burns

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<sup>2</sup> Latham, *Elizabeth I in Film and Television*, 149.

too slowly." By throwing more wood on the fire, the crowds are actually showing mercy to the heretics: but it is a sick perversion of mercy. In Early Modern England, the monarch was considered the fountain of clemency. Because the crowd had to intervene on the heretics' behalf, it is clear that Mary has failed her solemn duty. Thus, in opening the film with this scene, Kapur has perpetuated a number of stereotypes that exist in films of Elizabeth. The violence and conflict caused by religion cannot be ignored. The stark contrast between the Roman Catholic Mary, and the Protestant Elizabeth, is also central to the narrative. Mary is seen as a violent, intolerant, religious fanatic; whereas Elizabeth is tolerant and merciful in the eyes of the audience.

The second key scene in *Elizabeth* that depicts religious conflict is the passing of the *Act of Uniformity*. One of Elizabeth's first acts as Queen was to see that Parliament passed the *Act of Uniformity* in 1559. The law re-established the Church of England as a Protestant church, with Elizabeth as its Supreme Governor. It also required all church services to be conducted using the English Book of Common Prayer – meaning that every service had to be conducted in English (instead of the Latin used in Roman Catholic services), and every Bible reading had to be delivered in English. The *Act of Uniformity*, and its partner piece of legislation, the *Act of Supremacy*, also required all English clergy to swear the Oath of Supremacy. Any clergy who didn't swear this oath were removed from their position. Despite being distinct pieces of legislation, the film conflates the debates of the *Act of Uniformity* and the *Act of Supremacy* into the same scene. It is a tense scene, and sets the tone for the rest of the film.

In terms of historical accuracy, the film is actually less dramatic than the real event. The film has the Catholics against the law, and the Protestants for it. However, Elizabeth had trouble convincing some of the radical Protestants who thought the law was not prescriptive enough to support the Bill. Also, Walsingham announces to the imprisoned bishops that the law passed with a majority of five votes. In reality, the Act only passed by three votes, with all bishops present voting against it, as well as seven other nobles. This majority had only been secured by excluding two bishops and an abbot from voting. Thus, the drama does not come from the closeness with which the Act passed, but from Walsingham imprisoning a fairly large number of bishops in a cell under Westminster. Is religious uniformity a worthy goal if God's anointed bishops have to be locked in a cellar

under parliament to secure its passage?

In opposing the Bill, one of the bishops - probably the Archbishop of York, Nicholas Heath, whose surviving speech against the bill uses similar wording - claims that the law will force Roman Catholics to relinquish allegiance to the Pope. This was legally true - the *Act of Supremacy* required any person taking public or church office in England to swear allegiance to the monarch as Supreme Governor of the Church of England. Failure to so swear was a crime, although it did not become treason until 1562. The Oath was later extended to include Members of Parliament and people studying at universities. All but one of the bishops lost their posts for not swearing the Oath, and only clergy who would agree to the reforms and take the Oath replaced them in the episcopate. However, in response to the archbishop's claim, Elizabeth replies, rather seductively some have noted, "How can I force you, Your Grace? I am a woman." The response shows two things. Firstly, it accurately highlights Elizabeth's goal in enacting the *Act of Uniformity* - as long as her people outwardly conformed to the state religion, she would leave them in peace to privately act on their religious conscience. One of the bishops describes this as heresy, to which Elizabeth counters with, "It is common sense, which is a most English virtue." The contrast between the religion of Mary and the religion of Elizabeth could not be greater. While Mary burned people at the stake, Elizabeth simply wishes for the "peace of this realm." The second thing the response to the archbishop does is emphasise the unusual position Elizabeth occupied. Women held no ordained roles in the Church - it would be another 400 years before a woman could even become a deacon in the Church of England, let alone a priest - yet Elizabeth exercised supreme political power over the Church.

This scene also highlights the very real political dimension of religious conflict. In a time when the church and the state were inseparably intertwined, uniformity of religious belief was paramount to the state's success. The fact that voting members of the House of Lords had to be excluded to ensure the Act's passage shows the conflict over religion. *Elizabeth* is one of only a small group of films that includes legislative debates, which is an important move away from the traditional focus on Elizabeth's alleged romantic relationships. Showing conflict in this way allows the audience to understand that religion played an important role in everyday life. Elizabeth's plea, "remember, in your hands ... lies the future happiness of my people" brings a very human element to a debate that is often treated as

separate from everyday life by many cinematic portrayals.

The third key scene of religious conflict in *Elizabeth* is completely fictitious. It is the imagined interrogation by Walsingham of a Jesuit priest who was planning to kill the queen as part of the Ridolfi Plot of 1571. First and foremost, the scene highlights the conflict over Elizabeth's religion. The priest had travelled all the way from Rome to carry out the Pope's wishes in assassinating Elizabeth. But Elizabeth was not without her defenders, and the priest's arrest and interrogation highlights the many supporters that Elizabeth did have. The scene also reflects on a question that many Protestant and Catholics posed: if God is divine, why does she not strike down the illegitimate or ungodly monarch? This was a central issue that flared up numerous times during Elizabeth's reign. Despite many assassination attempts, the Queen eventually died of natural causes, at the age of 69 after ruling for 45 years. Elizabeth's protection meant one of two things: either God preferred the Protestants (and thus Elizabeth) to the Roman Catholics, or God took no active part in the affairs of the state. Thus, in this short scene, the viewer is forced to comprehend the literal life and death struggle that resulted from religious conflict, since the only reason the priest was planning to assassinate Elizabeth was because of her religion. Finally, Kapur has made use of fire as a torture method to evoke the burning at the stake from the beginning of the film. The fate of the tortured priest is not shown: he does not appear in the film after this scene. Not seeing his execution (as happened in the aftermath of the Ridolfi Plot) allows the viewers to sympathise with Elizabeth. Elizabeth avoided assassination and was completely unharmed, but in spite of this she authorised torture and punishment almost as violent as her predecessor.

Thus, it is clear that religious violence and conflict is at the centre of Shekhar Kapur's film, *Elizabeth*. The film ensures that Mary and Elizabeth are depicted as polar opposites. This is achieved not just through dialogue and actions, but also through the very lighting and costuming of the characters. The film has many scenes that highlight the religious conflict of Tudor and Elizabethan England. Three stand out however. The film's opening scene, in which three Protestants are burned at the stake; the debate surrounding the passing of the *Act of Uniformity*; and the torture of Elizabeth's would-be assassin all highlight the many and varied ways in which religious conflict affected all levels of society. Today, historical films are the primary way in which the vast majority of people learn about the past. And

whilst highly stylised and often historically inaccurate, films like *Elizabeth* do reveal truth about the past. And instead of focussing on abstract political or economic concepts as some historians do, historical films ensure that **people** remain at the core of history - which is something we can all take note of.