

A man? A woman? A lesbian? A whore?: Queen Elizabeth I and the cinematic subversion of gender

Queen Elizabeth I of England seems to suffer from an identity crisis in modern historical films. Depicting England's first unmarried, Protestant female king has occurred for over a century. In the 55 plus films that have depicted the infamous Virgin Queen since 1912, filmmakers have offered their own interpretation of this enigmatic monarch. While the various events of Elizabeth's life and reign are repeatedly depicted—with varying levels of respect for the details of the historical event—the films always seem to stumble on one particular point: that is, the depiction of Elizabeth's gender.

As the title of this paper alludes to, I argue that the various ways in which Elizabeth's gender has been portrayed in film can broadly be characterised by one, or a combination of, four categories. That is, Elizabeth is either depicted as a man, a woman, a lesbian, or a whore. These four categories not only echo arguments that have been raised by scholars and writers for centuries, but they also reflect different opinions of Elizabeth, her gender, and her authority, that all raged during her life. In analysing Elizabeth's public monarchical persona, Christopher Haigh described the Queen as a "political hermaphrodite." While I'm not suggesting that the filmmakers were informing their cinematic vision with Dr Haigh's work, the appearance of the concept both in the historiography and on the screen demonstrates that Elizabeth herself is partly to blame for her ambiguous depiction. For instance, in the Golden Speech of 1601, Elizabeth referred to herself variously as king, prince, and queen—switching between roles and genders with ease, and making clear use of the doctrine of the king's two bodies. As Carole Levin has observed, 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." With this paper then, I aim to take this gender ambiguity—which has existed since Elizabeth's own reign—and offer examples of the ways it has manifested on the silver screen. I should point out too that I consider "whore" to be an inherently gendered concept: not only is the term almost exclusively applied to women, history also demonstrates that sex workers have typically existed outside society's gender binary, and have often been excluded, existing almost as a separate, distinct, gender.

So what are audiences left with? At its most basic level, these contrasting and conflicting depictions of the Queen go some of the way to explain the difficulty of a female ruling a country in her own right during the sixteenth century. However, the danger in this kind of explanation is that Elizabeth's life, reign, and achievements are reduced to plot devices to perpetuate the inaccurate, romantic, picture of Elizabeth's reign that exists in popular culture. We will never know whether Elizabeth truly was a virgin, or indeed what her true sexual orientation was. And that's fine, because Elizabeth and her gender do not have to conform to some arbitrary gender binary, or to our vision of what the past must have been like. To be honest, I don't expect Elizabeth's cinematic gender crisis to come to an end any time soon—it makes for far too interesting viewing. But I do hope that by talking about this ridiculous and varying depiction, Elizabeth's gender can stop being only a plot complication, and the "bewigged, beruffed, and bejewelled" woman from a century of cinematic depictions gives way to a woman who was able to clearly and publicly declare that while she may have the weak and feeble body of a woman, she certainly had the heart and stomach of a king.