

Female Kingship in Elizabethan England

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Thanks to a litany of depictions in popular culture, Elizabeth I of England is widely believed to have struggled for the duration of her reign to be accepted as a female king, with her reign being some kind of aberration that was only 'successful' because she had powerful men around her who kept her under control while steering the ship of state on her behalf. Such a view still pervades much of the scholarship on Elizabeth: whether this be a focus on her unwedded and virginal status, her interest in pageantry, or her general indecisiveness and constant desire to prevaricate on almost all political decisions. This is not to say that Elizabeth is not guilty of such criticisms; indeed, she is probably the least decisive monarch to have sat on the English throne since 1066. This paper contends, however, that virtually none of this has to do with either Elizabeth's sex or gender. Contrary to the modern popular perception, being a female king was not an issue for the English polity or commonwealth: in other words, Elizabeth's gender did not really matter in sixteenth-century England. This paper unpicks some of the pervading myths surrounding Elizabeth's exercise of female kingship, arguing that the use of biblical analogy throughout the early modern period demonstrates that sovereignty was not inherently gendered. As she declared in her now-famous Golden Speech of 1601, Elizabeth was England's king, queen, and prince: her subjects did not find any reason to object to this, so why should we?