

"I Have Become a Virgin" - The Virgin Queen in Film

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The portrayal of England's Queen Elizabeth I on film spans the history of cinema itself.¹ Elizabeth has been brought to life on the silver screen in at least 20 different films - the first was in 1912, by Sarah Bernhardt in *Les Amours de la reine Élisabeth (The Loves of Queen Elizabeth)*, and most recently in the 2011 film, *Anonymous*. She is by far the monarch most depicted on film - British or otherwise - beating her father Henry VIII, Queen Victoria, and even the Egyptian Pharaoh Cleopatra.

Despite this century of depictions, I want to focus on a more recent year: 1998. 1998 was a big year for Elizabeth on film. Her last major depiction been almost 30 years prior, in Charles Jarrott's 1971 film, *Mary, Queen of Scots*, played by Glenda Jackson. This film had been a less than positive depiction of Elizabeth. The entire film was designed to engender sympathy for the martyred Mary, who was portrayed as an innocent political pawn, persecuted unjustly for her religion. I should mention that Elizabeth did appear in Sally Potter's cinematic adaptation of Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* in 1992. But given the limited release of the film in mainstream cinemas, and the fact that pantomime dame Quentin Crisp's portrayal of Elizabeth was only in the film for a total of six and a half minutes, I am leaving this film to one side. However, if we rewind back to 1998, moviegoers were in the enviable position of being able to see not one, but two films featuring Elizabeth. Both featured new and radically different depictions of the Queen. The first was John Madden's *Shakespeare in Love*, which saw Dame Judi Dench portray a long in the tooth Gloriana. The second, and the substance of my presentation today, was Shekhar Kapur's film *Elizabeth*, which starred Cate Blanchett in the title role.

¹ The most comprehensive account of this history is Bethany Latham's excellent monograph, *Elizabeth I in Film and Television: a Study of the Major Portrayals* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2011).

The 1999 Academy Awards are a fascinating insight into both the popularity and critical acclaim that both these films received. Both films were nominated for Best Picture, which was won by *Shakespeare in Love*. Cate Blanchett's depiction of Elizabeth was nominated for Best Actress, alongside Gwyneth Paltrow for her role as Viola in *Shakespeare in Love*. Again, *Shakespeare in Love's* Paltrow trumped Blanchett. And despite being on the screen only 10 minutes, Judi Dench was nominated for, and subsequently won, the Oscar for Best Supporting Actress. *Shakespeare in Love* went into the ceremony with 13 nominations, and walked away with 7 wins. *Elizabeth* went in with a respectable 7 nominations, but only managed to win the Oscar for Best Makeup. It's fair to say that because of these two films, both Elizabeth - and Elizabethan England in general - was definitely back in the public eye.

One of the major themes that appears across this century's worth of different cinematic depictions of Elizabeth is her representation and status as the virgin queen. It seems she cannot appear on screen without some mention being made to her pious chastity. That all changed, however, when Kapur went where no other director had gone before: he included a sex scene between Elizabeth and Robert Dudley that unambiguously confirmed Elizabeth was not a virgin. What is perhaps most interesting about this scene is that it takes place not long after Elizabeth was crowned Queen - meaning that Elizabeth wasn't a virgin for almost all of her reign.

But how does Kapur go from this bold statement regarding Elizabeth's biological virginity, to depicting the great Virgin Queen known to history? Near the end of the film, he cleverly uses the Ridolfi Plot of 1571 as the event that shocked the Queen into a decision: marry, or be under constant threat from Roman Catholic assassins, and English supporters who wanted the succession question dealt with. The Ridolfi Plot was a direct response by prominent English Catholics to *Regnans in Excelsis*, the papal bull issued by Pope Pius V in 1570 that had excommunicated Elizabeth. The plot was named for one of its masterminds, the Florentine banker Roberto Ridolfi, and intended to facilitate an invasion of England by the Spanish and other continental allies, to install the Catholic Mary Queen of Scots on the throne, with the Duke of Norfolk to marry Mary on her accession, thereby squashing any legitimacy or citizenship issues. Elizabeth's agents became alerted to a plot when the Spanish Ambassador hinted at an attempt on the Queen's life. When the Duke of Tuscany warned Elizabeth about the plot, she acted. Norfolk was arrested on 7th September 1571, charged with high treason,

and he soon confessed. Ridolfi's messenger, Charles Baillie, was arrested in Dover, and quickly revealed the plot under torture, along with William Barker, a Member of Parliament. Norfolk, who had been sentenced to death on 16th January, was still alive due to Elizabeth's reluctance to sign the death warrant. But after being persuaded that she was undermining her own Treason laws by her hesitation, and thereby potentially encouraging further plots with her leniency, Elizabeth signed the death warrant, and Norfolk was beheaded on 2nd June 1572. After the plot's masterminds have been captured and executed in the film, Elizabeth confides in Walsingham her frustration at being forced to choose between love and domestic security - conveniently in a chapel beneath a statue of the Virgin Mary.

Walsingham - whose religious convictions have bordered on agnostic throughout the film - offers a suggestion to the distraught Elizabeth: replace the Queen of Heaven in the hearts and minds of men with the Queen of England. Elizabeth appears to accept his advice, and the radical transformation to the Virgin Queen known from Elizabethan portraiture commences. As she undergoes the transformation, scenes from her life flash before her eyes: her perilous life under Mary I; the Catholic bishops who refused to submit to her rule; the blood spilt in the name of religion; and finally, her love for Robert Dudley.

This emotional scene, intended to ensure the viewer understands how dramatic and final this transformation was, concludes with one of the film's most fascinating lines: "I have **become** a virgin." The only thing that remained now was for this new Elizabeth to show herself to the world.

This is the final scene in the film: Elizabeth, the newly announced Virgin Queen, sits alone upon her throne. To ensure her survival, she has had to separate herself from everyone else. She has become, in Walsingham's word, "untouchable."

From the moment Elizabeth steps out of the light and into view, she only has interactions with two people. The first is Lord Burghley. Throughout the film, he had been constantly pressuring Elizabeth into finding a husband. Because of this, he is the one singled out by the Queen to announce her transformation: she is now married to England, and thus unavailable for anyone else. Burghley seems to accept this sudden turn of events, and echoes the sentiment of the Court by saying nothing. This entire interaction is of course a ridiculous

overstatement. Firstly, Elizabeth had already made this sentiment known 10 years prior (if we take the film's chronology to equal the historical timeline). In response to a parliamentary petition requesting that she marry, she told the Commons in 1559: "To conclude, I am already bound unto an husband, which is the kingdom of England, and that may suffice you."² Likewise, in Elizabeth's discussions with William Maitland, the Scottish Ambassador in 1561, she is recorded to have said: "I am married already to the realm of England."³ While these comments were probably more of a rhetorical flourish than a statement of determined fact, they show that the concept of Elizabeth being married to England was already in existence. Secondly, the Ridolfi Plot of 1571 did not signal the end of the 38-year-old Elizabeth's marriage negotiations. Between 1572 and 1584, Elizabeth vacillated back and forth regarding the potential marriage with Francis, the Duke of Alencon, later Anjou. Kapur has thus used the Ridolfi Plot as the catalyst for Elizabeth's conscious and sudden decision to become a virgin and thus remain unmarried, rather than following what Susan Doran in particular has showed was a gradual process that was forced onto Elizabeth by her councillors.⁴

The second interaction during the scene is with an unidentified lady of the bedchamber, who kisses Elizabeth's skirt as she glides past. While it is possibly a reference to the longstanding tradition of the power of the Royal Touch, the lack of a visible illness, and the fact that the Queen is touched, rather than being the toucher, discounts this theory. Instead, it is probably a reference to the miracle found in three of the Gospels -Matthew chapter 9, Mark chapter 5, and Luke chapter 8 - where a woman who suffers from a blood disease believes that if she can touch Jesus' cloak, she will be cured. This interaction shows that Elizabeth is no longer a mortal being: her transformation into a Virgin has elevated her above the temporal plane. It also echoes Walsingham's earlier observation to Elizabeth that men "must be able to touch the divine here on Earth."

² "Speech of Elizabeth I in answer to the Commons' petition that she marry, 1559," in *Elizabeth I: Collected Works*, eds., Leah S. Marcus, Janel Mueller, and Mary Beth Rose (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 59.

³ "Queen Elizabeth's Conversations with the Scottish Ambassador, William Maitland, Laird of Lethington, September and October 1561," in *Elizabeth I: Collected Works*, eds., Leah S. Marcus, Janel Mueller, and Mary Beth Rose (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 65.

⁴ See Susan Doran, *Monarchy and Matrimony* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 279pp.

In some ways, *Elizabeth* is a dramatization of the long-running historiographical debate surrounding the question of why Elizabeth never married. The film eschews the nuanced answer that modern historians are starting to agree on, which states that Elizabeth cleverly dangled the possibility of marriage like a diplomatic carrot to pit her various Protestant friends and Roman Catholic foes against each other. Instead, Kapur's answer is that Roman Catholic assassination attempts forced her to usurp the Virgin Mary's role, and in the process become married to England. To historians, that answer seems implausible. However, to modern audiences - shaped by a century of uncritical and unscholarly cinematic and cultural depictions of Elizabeth - it makes sense.

For me, however, the film serves as an attempt to provide a modern-day explanation for an Early Modern English event. Even today, an unmarried female ruler faces the same kind of issues Elizabeth faced - the treatment of Australia's former Prime Minister Julia Gillard immediately comes to mind. And while this sexism may be much less religiously focussed than it was in the sixteenth century, it is no secret that the world is still gripped by raging gender inequality. I once had a student in a tutorial announce that in his opinion, the reason Elizabeth never married was because she was a lesbian. While we will never know Elizabeth's sexual preference, this kind of outlandish comment strikes at the inability of people today to understand the reality of Elizabeth's life and reign. The value, however, of this film is that it shows it's not important whether or not Elizabeth was actually a literal virgin, but rather that the Virgin Queen iconography endures, and continues to fascinate, four centuries after England's first - and only - unmarried female monarch died.