



The Tudor Women

Edward Rutherfurd's novel *London* poses many interesting questions about societal constraints and standards, as well as their proclivity for perpetuating gender stereotypes. In particular, the chapters: *Hampton Court* and *The Globe* demonstrate a nascent paradox within 16th century London, between two dueling female identities. Although the prevailing view of the time perceived women as weak and subordinate to men, the rise of female rulers in England marks a significant shift away from traditional gender roles in a historically patriarchal society.

Rutherfurd's character Susan Bull illustrates this emerging contradiction within Tudor England. An educated woman of moderate wealth and prestige, she balances between her prescribed roles as wife, sister, and mother in addition to her own sense of identity and worth. Cognizant of the responsibilities and expectations placed upon her, Susan fights an internal battle, analogous to the struggles faced by other women of the time, including Catherine of Aragon (1485-1536), Mary I of England (1516-1558), and Elizabeth I (1533-1603). A study of the functions of women in 16th century English society compared to their individual roles as monarchs emphasizes this point.



Hampton Court

Law

English law in the 16th century was an amalgamation of Roman law and religious doctrine. Strictly patriarchal, women were a commodity by legal standards and

therefore the property of a male guardian, usually her father and then later her husband.ⁱ *Glanvill*, a legal treatise written around 1188, is some of the earliest documentation English legislation predating common law. Moreover, its statures on marriage and women remained relatively unchanged until the late 18th century so its writs were extremely relevant to the societal structure women experienced during the 16th century. As the text notes, "legally a woman is completely in the power of her husband, it is not surprising that her dower and all her other property are clearly deemed to be at his



Catherine of Aragon (1485 - 1536); First wife of Henry VIII

disposal. Therefore any married man may give or sell or alienate in whatever way he pleases his wife's dower during her life and his wife is bound to consent to this as to all other acts." (*Glanvill* IV A. 6.3)ⁱⁱ As the passage suggests, women were legally subordinate to males and thus, excluded from positions of power and leadership.

Catherine of Aragon, the first wife of Henry VIII, acutely experienced the inequitable consequences of such legislation in 1525 after failing to produce a male heir. No woman had ever reigned in England and to avoid a dispute concerning succession and a potential civil war, the desire for a male heir became a pressing necessity. Henry VIII petitioned Pope Clement VII numerous times between 1526 and 1530 for an annulment of his marriage; however when the Catholic Church refused to break with its doctrine, Henry chose a different route to achieve his aims. Thus in 1530, Henry VIII officially broke away from Rome and became head of church and state. Having achieved supreme authority over his territory, Henry VIII's divorce case came before court on May

10th of 1533 and the marriage was declared null and void by May 23rd 1533.ⁱⁱⁱ Catherine, remembered as a strong and

intelligent Queen, unwaveringly refused to step aside through the entire ordeal.^{iv} She fought Henry with every resource available to her, but the fact that she had no legal rights separate from her husband's and was forbidden by law to advocate for herself in court prevented her from retaining her role as monarch.^v



Henry VIII (1491-1547)



In 1539, Thomas Cranmer, the Archbishop of Canterbury, hired Myles Coverdale at the behest of Henry VIII to publish the "Great Bible." It was the first Bible in English to be authorized for public use, being distributed to every church and chained to the pulpit.

Religion

Faith and religion remained at the heart of English society during the Tudor reign. Rutherford emphasizes this point within the opening paragraphs of *Hampton Court* by calling attention to the cross hanging around Susan Bull's neck, which suggested, "...that she loved her religion, though many a lady would have made a similar show of piety at the court, where it was quite the fashion." (*London* p.403) A segue into the context of the English Reformation, her jewelry represents more than just a fashion statement in 16th century society. By the medieval era, faith had

become so deeply ingrained within the English social order that people were willing to defend their religious affinity, or the “True Faith” at the cost of their own lives.^{vi} Women in particular, were deeply influenced by religion for many reasons during this time period. Above all, faith formed the structural basis of English patriarchal society, but it also gave women a certain amount of autonomy through Religious study. Though restricted to personal introspection, it was considered an acceptable pursuit for women, and provided them with an outlet within which they could communicate their individual ideas and sentiments.^{vii}

The progress of the Reformation in England was closely bound up with Henry's personal affairs as demonstrated by his choice to divorce Catherine and break away from the Church. Yet as Henry's health failed in the last years of his life it became clear that his own actions had encouraged the growth of a powerful evangelical party at Court, which upon his death in 1547 was able to establish their supremacy through the new king, Edward VI (1547-1553).^{viii} The short reign of Edward VI saw a determined attempt to make Protestantism the official faith of England. In only five years of his rule, Edward was able to achieve two evangelical Prayer Books, a new English order of service and the stripping of the remaining Catholic paraphernalia from the churches.^{ix} However despite the progress made by reformers and Henry's attempts to assure male rule and therefore peace and security, the religious identity of the nation remained ambiguous and ultimately unstable.



Edward VI (1537-1553)

In the aftermath of Edward VI's premature death in 1553, the need for a monarch of royal blood finally brought a female to power. Following [Jane Grey's](#) nine day reign as Queen, Mary I, daughter of Henry VIII and Catherine of Aragon, was able to ascend to the throne. A staunch catholic from a young age, Mary consistently resisted pressure to renounce her faith, and made repealing the Protestant legislation of her brother Edward VI, her first priority as Queen.^x Although thoroughly committed to providing

England with strong leadership through the re-establishment of Catholicism in England, Mary was convinced by her all male council and her own religious beliefs to seek a husband who could solidify her authority and lead the country. Mary turned her attention to finding a husband and producing an heir, thus preventing the Protestant



Mary I (1516-1558)

Elizabeth from succeeding to the throne, but rejected eligible English suitors on the basis of their protestant faith.^{xi} Caught between the perceived need for a male ruler and her own religious identity, Mary chose Prince Phillip II of Spain, the leader of most powerful Catholic state in Europe, as her betrothed. An extremely unpopular decision with the vast majority of Englishmen, Mary lost much of the popular support she had enjoyed in her early years. Moreover her marriage to Phillip and the resulting alliance with Spain and the Holy Roman Empire placed mounting pressure on her to “deal with the Protestant issue”; resulting in the persecution of nearly 300 Protestants including Thomas Cranmer, which only deepened Mary’s unpopularity.^{xii} Mary’s situation is notable because it demonstrates the incongruity between her religious, political aims and the pressures placed upon

her by a male-centric society. Consequently, although there is evidence that she could have been a great leader, the constraints placed upon her by societal dictates on gender roles prevented her from unifying England the way she had imagined.

Education

Education in the traditional sense was limited to both sexes by and large in 16th century England. However among the nobility and upper-class citizenry, men were frequently expected to learn reading, writing, mathematics, and obtain a standard humanist education. Meanwhile, the majority of women received little to no formal education and in fact only four of Henry’s wives received any instruction including Catherine of Aragon, Anne Boleyn, Anne of Cleves, and Katherine Parr. Two of his wives, Jane Seymour and Katherine Howard were barely literate.^{xiii} The reason for these



English women in prayer

inequalities relates back to the issue of religion, much like its application in the law and social customs, religion shaped the context in which women were taught and specifically what they were taught. The majority of people in the 16th century did not support education for women. Any instruction received by women was reserved to the privileged and wealthy, yet its aim was to produce wives schooled in godly and moral precepts and it was not intended to promote independent thinking or problem solving. As such, women were chiefly taught household management, sewing, and their duties to God and husband through strong religious training.^{xiv}

Thus, the social structure of 16th century Europe allowed women limited opportunities for involvement and forced them to serve largely as managers of their households. Women were expected to focus on practical domestic pursuits and activities that encouraged the betterment of their families, and more particularly, their husbands. In most cases education for women was not advocated because it was thought to be detrimental to the traditional female virtues of innocence and morality.^{xv} Therefore, it is remarkable but also a testament to Tudor culture that the character Susan Bull is so educated in her own right. Rutherford writes,

“Her eldest daughter, Jane, now ten, was her chief helper in the house; but every day, without fail, while the two little girls played, she would make her sit down for three hours to work on her books, just as she had been made to do. Jane already had a good command of Latin, and if, sometimes she complained to her mother that many of her friends could only just read and write English, Susan would tell her firmly: “I don’t want you to marry an ignorant man; and believe me, a happy marriage is a sharing of minds as well as of other things.”” (*London* p.416)

Susan is allegorical to other educated women of her time such as, Catherine of Aragon, Mary I, and Elizabeth I. Her

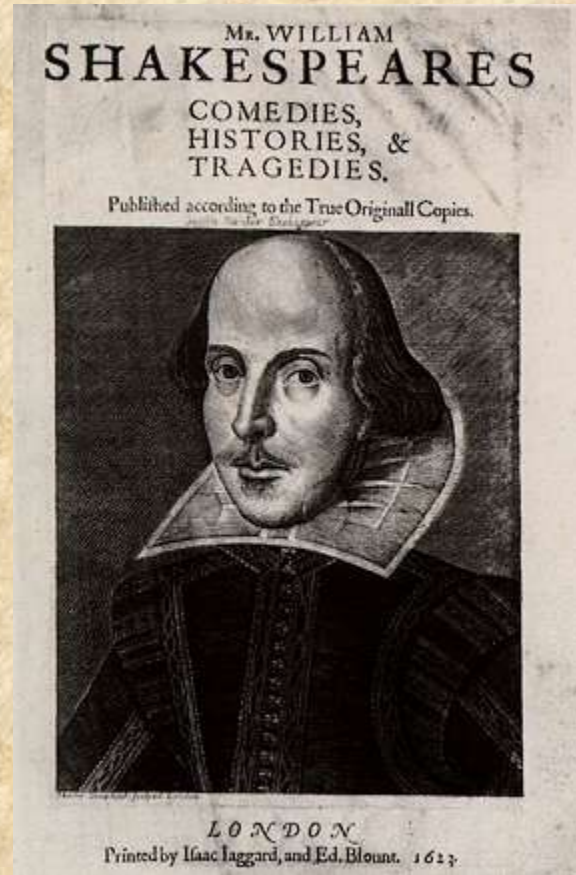


Elizabeth I (1533-1603)

situation is completely unique and far from typical of 16th century society, yet so were the lives of each of the women previously mentioned. Moreover it is the contradictory dynamic of being academically accomplished but also at the service of a man, marriage being the ultimate goal for the majority of girls of the time, that captures the paradox within the social structure and the women themselves.

Elizabeth I ascended to the throne in 1558, and would eventually contradict many of the gender roles of the age. Not only was she well educated, having studied a variety of subjects including theology, mathematics, philosophy, politics, and history, Elizabeth was also an outspoken but widely respected leader, known for her oratory skills as well as her patronage of the arts.^{xvi} Fluent in six languages, including Latin, Greek, French, and Italian, she even once remarked to an Ambassador that she knew many languages better than her own.^{xvii} The daughter of Henry VIII and his second wife Anne Boleyn, Elizabeth ruled strategically, minimizing her image as a woman and emphasizing her English heritage. In one famous speech Elizabeth asserts,

“My loving people, I have been persuaded by some that are careful of my safety, to take heed how I commit ourselves to armed multitudes for fear of treachery. But I tell you that I would not desire to live to distrust my faithful and loving people. Let tyrants fear. I have so behaved myself that under God I have placed my chiefest strength and safeguard in the loyal hearts and goodwill of my subjects. Wherefore I am come amongst you at this time but for my recreation and pleasure, being resolved in the midst and heat of the battle to live or die amongst you all; to lay down for my God, and for my kingdom, and for my people mine honor and my blood even in the dust. I know I have the body but of a weak and feeble woman, but I have the heart and stomach of a king, and a king of England too. And take foul scorn that Parma or Spain, or any Prince of Europe should dare to invade the borders of my realm.”^{xviii}





Defeat of the Spanish Armada

Elizabeth may have had professed herself as 'a weak and feeble woman,' but during her time as England's Queen, Elizabeth manipulated the hindrance of her 'femaleness,' by making it a strong political tool. Elizabeth's persona of 'Virgin' Queen made all the men at her court potential suitors and therefore in a position of vying for her favors. Likewise it kept foreign threats at bay, due to the fact that other states were hesitant to attack and therefore spoil a potential alliance or instigate war with another

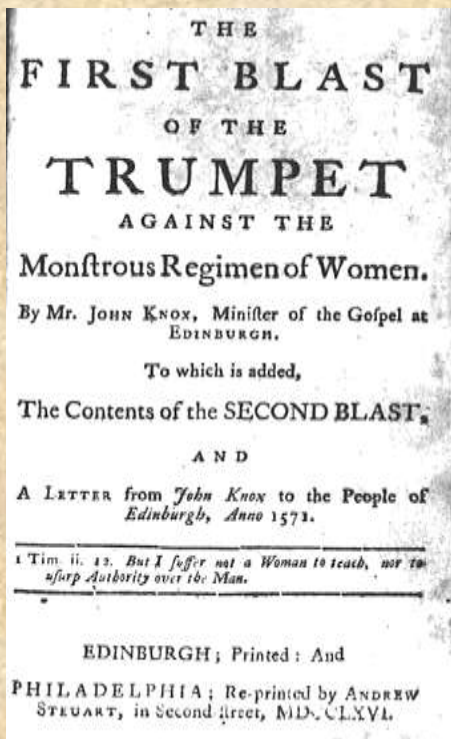
rival nation.^{xix} Her 45-year reign is generally considered one of the most prosperous in English history and is marked by a secure Church of England through the 39 Articles of 1563, a compromise between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism, as well as territorial expansion, military victory, and a renaissance in English arts.^{xx} Whereas her predecessors had fallen victim to the patriarchal dictates of English society, Elizabeth maneuvered her femininity to her own benefit and ultimately prevaricate the paradox between her personal identity and her prescribed role as a woman.

Politics

Elizabeth I was by far the greatest politician of all the female rulers of the 16th century. She wisely understood the nuances of English society, and made astute political judgments, which kept her popular and above male domination. Nevertheless many of her female counterparts, Mary I, Mary Stuart, Queen of Scotland (1542-1587) and her mother Mary of Guise (1515-1560) came under close scrutiny for their leadership abilities. The most famous attack on female rule came from John Knox (1510-1572) a Scottish clergyman and the founder of the Presbyterian denomination during the Protestant reformation.^{xxi} In 1558, Knox published his best



John Knox (1505-1572)



known pamphlet, *The First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women*, which denounces the rule of women as, "...repugnant to nature; contumely to God, a thing most contrary to his revealed will and approved ordinance; and finally, it is the subversion of good order, of all equity and justice."^{xxii}

Knox's views were not unusual for his times and in fact they reveal the prevalence of misogyny in policy and practice during the 16th century. His assertion that, "that woman in her greatest perfection was made to serve and obey man, not to rule and command him,"^{xxiii} was never aimed at Elizabeth I, however she took personal offense to the document, resulting in its royal condemnation and the refusal of his passage through England when returning to Scotland in 1559. Although

he basis the majority of his conclusions on a stereotype of women as "feeble, weak, and foolish creatures," Knox also employs a wide range of Biblical scripture to defend his argument that women are unfit to rule.^{xxiv} Such blatant assertions about the role of women and their place in society accentuate the contradiction that must have resided in the hearts and minds of each the female rulers. Further, the complex dynamic between their responsibilities as politicians and women emphasizes the significance and remarkable nature of their rule.

Conclusions

Although the shift within England away from a strictly patriarchal social construct did not endure past the reign of Elizabeth I, the period had lasting implications for women. Persistent friction between two female identities, one progressive and one steeped in religious dogma, encouraged greater challenge of the status quo. Moreover, as education expanded to a greater number of women in the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries the capabilities of women to resist stereotypical gender roles became increasingly easier and a reality for many. Considering the obstacles that they faced during this time period, the accomplishments of these powerful, patient, pragmatic and courageous women, who dominated in ways not always apparent to their male counterparts is not only historically significant to the feminist movement, but our understanding of the Reformation, as well as, its impact on western civilization as a whole.



ⁱ Palmer, Robert. Internet Medieval Sourcebook. 2007. Fordham University.
<http://vi.uh.edu/pages/bob/elhone/rules.html>. April 21, 2008.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*

ⁱⁱⁱ Trueman, Christopher. History Learning Site. 2008.
http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/catherine_of_aragon.htm. April 23, 2008.

^{iv} *Ibid.*

^v Frable, Brian. MMV Prof. Pavlac's Women's History Site. June 6, 2006.
http://departments.kings.edu/womens_history/cathyaragon.html. April 23, 2008.

^{vi} Muhlberger, Steven. Online Reference Book for Medieval Studies. 1999. http://www.the-orb.net/textbooks/muhlberger/15c_religion.html. April 22, 2008.

^{vii} Warnicke, Ruth. *Women of the English Renaissance and Reformation* (London: Greenwood, 1983), p. 33-6

^{viii} Britannia: Monarchs of Britain. 2005. <http://britannia.com/history/monarchs/mon42.html>. April 23, 2008.

^{ix} *Ibid.*

^x Eakins, Lara E. Tudor History. Sept. 7, 2007. <http://tudorhistory.org/mary/queen.html>. April 21, 2008.

^{xi} Best, Michael. *Shakespeare's Life and Times*. Internet Shakespeare Editions, University of Victoria: Victoria, BC, 2001-2005. <http://internetshakespeare.uvic.ca/Library/SLT/history/mary.html>. April 22, 2008

^{xii} The Royal Household. *History of the Monarchy*. Official Website of the British Monarchy, UK. 2008.
<http://www.royal.gov.uk/output/Page45.asp>. April 22, 2008.

^{xiii} Simon, Joan. *Education and Society in Tudor England* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1967), p. 122

^{xiv} *Ibid.* p. 123-125

^{xv} Fantazzi, Charles. Intro to J. L. Vives, *The Education of a Christian Woman: A Sixteenth Century Manual* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. xi.

^{xvi} Strickland, Agnes. *Lives of the Queens of England*. London: Bell and Daldy, 1872.

^{xvii} Vosevich, Kathi. "The Education of a Prince(ss): Tutoring the Tudors." In M. Burke, J. Donaweth, L. Dove, K. Nelson, eds. *Women, Writing, and the Reproduction of Culture in Tudor and Stuart Britain*. Syracuse: Syracuse University. Press, 2000.

^{xviii} Marcus, L., Mueller, Janel, Rose, M. Elizabeth I: Collected Works. London 1964 page 325-6

^{xix} Strickland, Agnes. *Lives of the Queens of England*.

^{xx} *Ibid.*

^{xxi} Hunter-Blair, D.O. The Catholic Encyclopedia, Volume VIII. 2008.
<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/08680a.htm>. April 24, 2008.

^{xxii} Reed, Kevin. Presbyterian Heritage Publications. "The First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women 1558." <http://www.swrb.ab.ca/newslett/actualNLs/firblast.htm>. April 23, 2008.

^{xxiii} *ibid.*

^{xxiv} *ibid.*