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Religion, Politics, and the “Virgin Queen”

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Introduction

Elizabeth I's political style was affected by both religion and her status as the “Virgin Queen”. Her relationships with Mary Tudor and Mary Stuart and their respective religions influenced Elizabeth's political decisions. Comparing Mary Tudor's forceful assertion of Catholicism in her reign to Elizabeth's approach to Protestant dissenters demonstrates religion's role in their politics and the political atmosphere of the time. Religion also played a role in the relationship between Elizabeth and Mary Stuart and their dual claims to the English throne. From the very beginning of her reign, Elizabeth was viewed as illegitimate by some English Catholics as well as Scottish Catholics. Many believed that Mary Stuart, Queen of Scots, had the legitimate claim to the English throne rather than Elizabeth. The role of men and the patriarchy in Elizabeth's rule and the perpetuation of the image of the “Virgin Queen” continued long after her reign ended. Elizabeth as the “Virgin Queen” presented another question of succession. With the turmoil of succession after Edward I, Mary Tudor and now herself, her long reign created much needed stability but worried Parliament on the question of succession, especially after her smallpox scare. The role of religion and Elizabeth's relationship with Mary Tudor and Mary Stuart as well as the perpetuation of the “Virgin Queen” influenced many of Elizabeth's political and personal decisions throughout her reign.

Purpose

I wrote this paper and research in conjunction with two of my peers Latayzia Harris and Morgan Myers. We all wrote papers on the religion and politics of three sixteenth century queens. Morgan wrote about Mary Tudor and her relationship to her religion and her younger sister Elizabeth. I continued to discuss their relationship as well as Elizabeth's relationship with her cousin Mary Stuart. This paper also covered Elizabeth's lasting reputation as the “Virgin Queen” and how this moniker shaped her politics and religion. Finally, Latayzia discussed Mary Stuart's marital struggles and the affects these had on her throne in Scotland and her claim to the English throne.



Argument

I argue that Elizabeth's Protestantism was used to support her claim to the throne, as well as her reputation as the “Virgin Queen” was used to make her claim stronger than her predecessor Mary Tudor and her cousin Mary Stuart's claim to her throne. The role of religion and Elizabeth's relationship with Mary Tudor and Mary Stuart as well as the perpetuation of the “Virgin Queen” influenced many of Elizabeth's political and personal decisions throughout her reign. Elizabeth's personal religion continued to color her public image as well. In 1570 Elizabeth was required to convene another Parliament, however she was in a better position of power with Parliament this time. There were no petitions or mentions of her marriage in this Parliament. Finally Elizabeth's reign had won over Parliament and they could now adjust to the idea of having a sole female monarch. The “Virgin Queen” had come into her own and reigned as sole Queen, not Queen consort, for forty-four years.

Conclusion

The two cousin's relationship was complicated by Mary Stuart's dual claim to the English throne, by their differing religions and also from the question of succession. Henry VIII's Act of Succession, cutting out the Stuart's added to the confusion. Elizabeth's eventual execution of Mary exhibits that familial relationships are not binding when it came to politics and the throne. Elizabeth's early political savvy is shown in her relationship with her sister Mary and her ability to avoid becoming entangled in plots, showing outward devotion to Catholicism and ultimately reconciling with her sister and being named for succession. Elizabeth was able to navigate the political and religious tension and dangers of Mary's reign while remaining true to her own values. Elizabeth's role as the “Virgin Queen” certainly affected her choices and her political life. The goddess-like stature she achieved not only during her reign but long after, demonstrates the strength and legacy of her long reign. After the short reigns of her brother and sister Elizabeth's forty-four year reign brought much needed stability and unity to the empire, not only politically but religiously. Avoiding the extremes of religion of both of her siblings Elizabeth was able to satisfy and appease most of the religious requirements of her subjects. While this action did anger both extreme Catholics and Protestants Elizabeth's approach to religion unified the country as it hadn't been for many years.

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