

Elizabeth I: Gender and Paradigm

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Elizabeth I: Gender and Paradigm explores how Elizabeth I combined elements: male discourse, Elizabethan theatre, and the new Anglican church to maintain her power and rule for 45 years. The historical figure, Elizabeth, and her dramatic double, Rosalind, provide feminist studies with an insight into how British women of the 16th century used contemporary notions of masculinity and femininity to their advantage. Elizabethan studies and its contemporary plays offer examples of fluid gender identity used by females for safety, free speech, and self-determination. Elizabeth used the new Anglican church as divine validation for her rule and the fact that Elizabeth spoke directly to her people and her parliament and conducted international relations in at least six languages. Elizabeth I, and the theatre she so enjoyed, offer a dialectic for tracing the lineage of what is now referred to as feminism.

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Introduction

Joan of Arc, a peasant shepherdess, put on armor and shamed as well as urged French nobles into action against the occupying English. George Sand put male dress on her buxom, voluptuously feminine body, cut off her hair, and gave it to Alfred de Musset, and wrote Indiana, which could be said to have activated Parisian society, in a manner of speaking, to both the notorious cross-dressing woman and her heroine. Sarah Bernhardt was shocking in her sculptor's pajamas and her doublet and hose as the first woman to play Hamlet. So, too, Marlene Dietrich became infamous for wearing pants, male evening dress to the Paris Opera, and for her stunning, uncannily accurate imitation of a male cabaret singer in Sahara. Literary characters have also dallied in male attire and discovered its interesting effects upon people and men in particular. Sonya, of War and Peace, puts a rakish swatch of charcoal on her upper lip for an evening's dash in the snow with the Rostovs to the astonished titillation of her suitor whose interest in her is thereby rejuvenated. Shakespeare's Rosalind, in "As You Like It", dresses as a youth, attracting the attentions of another woman, while acting out a presumed fictitious Rosalind once again for the lovesick Orlando. Rosalind temporarily juggles genders both surreptitiously and openly, and thereby takes advantage of male freedoms for the ultimate benefit of her covert female self. Gender juggling and manipulation is not new. However, the actions of the previously noted personages have had little indelible, lasting effect upon the androcentric world in which they, and we, live; that is, until the reign of Elizabeth I of England. Not before or arguably since has a woman so brilliantly and

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successfully manipulated the plexus of gender to achieve political power. The English historical period, which bears Elizabeth Tudor's name, experienced extraordinary prosperity, growth, and socio-political unity during her 45 year reign. Yet, this was no easy feat. Elizabeth's gender manipulation, the clever handling of female as well as male gender paradigms, was undertaken from political and religious necessity. She created and maintained a bi-gender personality cult which used the traditional strengths of the male gender and the traditional weaknesses, as well as virtues, of the female gender to suit any given situation, and often, which is most fascinating, at the same time, mentioned but moments apart within the same speeches. She became Elizabeth, the political hermaphrodite. As if to commemorate and comment upon this socio-political innovation, Shakespeare created many heroines who cross dress, for a limited time, and exorcise the possibilities of gender manipulation for their own benefit, for that of other characters in the play, and more importantly, for the Elizabethan audience. Hence, the political innovation of gender manipulation by a female ruler sees its influence in the renowned dramatic scene of the time.

How can a woman be a prince, and how can a maiden be a lad? What purpose is served by a female becoming a sometimes male? For Rosalind and Elizabeth I, the purpose and achievement of gender manipulation is safety and security. Both the dramatic character and the historical figure seek safety through cross-gendering themselves from the potential threat of aggression by men. Rosalind dons man's attire as protection for herself and Celia while they wander in exile in the forest of Arden.

It is a paradox, therefore, that the romantic heroines so frequently disguise themselves as boys, thus denying the procreative function that makes them undisputed rulers of their terrain; but like all paradoxes, upon examination this one reveals more than it obscures. At first glance, the male disguise acknowledges the shortcoming of the female: in virtually every instance in Shakespeare, the heroine changes clothes because she needs to present herself in circumstances where a woman would be rebuffed or, more typically, subjected to injury. (Berggren, 1983)

Elizabeth I manipulated and cleverly utilized male gender terminology and imagery as protection in the metamorphical forest of politics.

Whatever Elizabeth may have thought of women in general, it is certain that she did not imagine herself to be lacking in wit or memory; but she was keenly aware that her greatest political disadvantage lay in the lamentable fact of her gender, and she was shrewd enough to understand that the liability could be manipulated to her advantage in a variety of ways. In this instance, what she did was to state what all men believed and then to declare that God had made an exception in her case. It is a kind of self-inflicted *ad feminam*, and it amounts to a claim of Divine Right.

The resourceful and plucky Rosalind is aware that the young women alone in a forest are easy target of male aggression and abuse (rape and murder), while Elizabeth I, superbly educated both academically and politically (school of hard knocks: her mother beheaded and herself sent to The Tower by command of her half-sister, Mary), knew that as a woman monarch was vulnerable both to actual physical harm by assassination, and political harm through the figurative rape and murder of her independence and power as a ruler through the machinations of Parliament, church and the institution of marriage.

In terms of her religion, Elizabeth was far more acceptable to the Parliament than Mary. However, in term of her willingness to conform to the demands of conventional femininity, Elizabeth was far less manageable than Mary. For example, unlike Mary, she made speeches in the all-male Parliament. Two responses, it seems, were possible: either consider her an early analogue to Dr. Johnson's luscious female preacher or accept the phenomenon as divinely ordained, as an exception to the law of nature. From the point of view of psychological security, the second response was most

logical. Otherwise, one would have to believe that the kingdom was held by unfit hands. There is no disputing the fact that Elizabeth actively encouraged the personality cult that grew up around her, but it seems obvious that most of her subjects were prepared to believe that she was God's anointed.

Although men perpetuate crimes against one another, it is not as easily done as to women, and often, in the realm of politics, not without inherent danger, that is, political risk to themselves and their entire families. Therefore, by projecting an image of maleness, before or beside an actual female visage, both Elizabeth I and Rosalind are able to take advantage of male modes of power, freedoms of speech and movement, and, for Elizabeth in particular, valuable and powerful gender-privileged socio-cultural and political prerogatives to establish lasting physical, emotional, and political security.

The most useful dramatic device for mediating initiatives of the female, however, is the male disguise. Male garments immensely broaden the sphere in which female energy can manifest it. Dressed as a man, a nubile woman can go places and do things she couldn't do otherwise, thus getting the play out of the court and the closet and into interesting places like forests or Welsh Mountains. Once Rosalind is disguised as a man, she can be as saucy and self-assertive as she likes. (We can observe a similar change come over sweet Viola of Twelfth Night as soon as she begins to play the clever page.) The characters, male and female, will accept her behavior because it does not offend their sense of propriety; the audience, male and female, because they know she's playing a role. With male dress we feel secure. (Claiborne Park, 1983, pp. 100-116)

For Rosalind, this security pertains to her eventual marriage; but for Elizabeth, the security pertains to her rule without marriage.

For in fact, on these and so many major issues, Elizabeth and the Parliament were completely at odds. Indeed, what they genuinely agreed upon were not so much issues as the queen's attitudes. So, for example, when the Parliament began to insist that she marry and produce an heir, Elizabeth hedges and proposed an alternative and collective maternity, presenting herself, as she would consistently, as the Virgin Mother...But the management of Commons proved to be more difficult and, in the end, the queen remitted one third of the subsidy—an outright bribe—and dismissed the Parliament in spite of the fact that important legislation was pending...On this occasion, and on this occasion alone, Elizabeth lost a round outright to the Parliament. Yet her policy prevailed. She escaped marriage, and she declared her successor on her deathbed—just as she had planned. (Heisch, p. 54)

Through the cultivation of certain masculine images, references, traits, and traditions, Elizabeth gained the corresponding androcentric strengths and powers men enjoy in the societies they have created.

With one vital exception, all forms of public and domestic authority in Elizabethan England were vested in men: in fathers, husbands, masters, teachers, preachers, magistrates, lords. It was inevitable that the rule of a woman who was unmastered by any man would generate peculiar tensions within such a "patriarchal" society. (Montrose, 1986, pp. 65-87)

Elizabeth reinforced her right to rule by utilizing male prerogatives that men have established and used for thousands of years as protection from their encroachment upon her power. She used masculine socio-political weapons against the sex that invented them and it was through her speeches that we can observe her skillful manipulation of both genders:

Speeches Delivered in Person by Queen Elizabeth

Although my feminine modesty might deter me from making a speech and uttering these rude, off-hand remarks in so great an assembly of most learned men, nevertheless the intercession of my nobles and my own goodwill toward the University have prevailed upon me to say something...I would have all of you bear this one thing in mind, that no road is

more adapted to win the good things of fortune or the goodwill of your prince, than the pursuit of good letters;...This morning I saw your sumptuous buildings, which were erected by my ancestors, most distinguished princes, for the sake of letters. (Latin Oration at Cambridge University, 1564)

But that was not accepted nor credited although spoken by their prince. And yet I used so many words that I could say no more and were it not now I spake these words, I would never speak them again. I will never break the word of a prince spoke in a public place for my honor's sake, and therefore I say again I will marry as soon as I can conveniently, if God take not him away with whom I mean to marry or myself, or else some other great let happen...A strange order of petitions that will make a request and cannot otherwise be ascertained but by their prince's word and yet will not believe it when it is spoken...As for mine own part, I care not for death, for all men are mortal and though I be a woman I have as good a courage answerable to my place as ever my father had. I am your anointed Queen. I will never be by violence constrained to do anything. I thank God I am endued with such qualities that if I were turned out of the realm in my petticoat I were able I to live in any place in Christendom. (On Marriage and Succession, 1566)

Nevertheless, princes have no need of money. God hath endowed us abundantly; we come not therefore, but for that which in right is our own, the hearts and true allegiance of our subjects. To the Mayor of Norwich.

No prince herein, I confess, can be surer tied or faster bound than I am with the link of your good will, and can for that but yield a heart and a head to see forever all your best...In both parts be perils, and of the latter I must pronounce them dangerous to a kingly rule, to have every man according to his own censure to make a doom of the validity and frivility of is prince's government and a common veil and cover of God's Word, whose followers must not be judged but by private man' exposition...Now I conclude that Your love and care neither is not shall be bestowed upon a careless prince... (Proroguing Parliament, 1585)

Nay, if England might by my death obtain a more flourishing condition and a better prince, I would gladly lay down my life...Nevertheless, against such evils and mischiefs as these, I am armed with a better courage than is common in my sex, so as whatsoever befalls me, death shall never find me unprepared...For we princes are set as it were upon stages in the sight and view of all the world...But I must tell you one thing, that by this last Act of Parliament, you have reduced me to such straits and perplexities that I must resolve upon the punishment of her who is a princess so nearly allied to me in blood and whose practices against me have so deeply affected me with grief and sorrow...And whatever the best of subjects may expect at the hands of the best princes, that expect from me to be performed to the full.

Reply to the Petition Urging the Execution of Mary, Queen of Scots, 1586.

But seeing so many have both written and spoken against me, give me leave, I pray you, to say somewhat in mine own defense, that ye may see what manner of woman I am, for whose safety you have passed such careful thoughts, wherein as I do with most thankful heart consider your vigilant care, so am I sure I shall never requite it, had I as many lives as you all...Then, to the end I might make the better progress in the art of swaying the scepter I entered into long and serious cogitation what things were worthy and fitting for kings to do, and I found it most necessary that hey should be abundantly furnished with those special virtues, justice, temperament, prudence, and magnanimity. As for the two latter, I will not boast myself, my sex doth not permit it...I will not say but many reports might haply be brought me in too much favor of the one side or the other, for we princes cannot hear all ourselves.

Second Speech on the Execution of Mary, Queen of Scots, 1586.

This kingdom hath had many wise, noble, and victorious princes. I will not compare with any of them in wisdom, fortitude, and the other virtues but saving the duty of a child, that is not to compare with his father in love, care, sincerity, and justice, I will compare with any oubce that ever you had or shall have. It may be thought simplicity in me that all this time of my reign I have not sought to advance my territories and enlarge my domains, for opportunity hath served me to do it. I acknowledge my woman hood and weakness in that respect...I am contented to reign over mine own and to rule as a just prince...But let me tell you, the sum is not so much but that it is needful for a prince to have so much always lying in her coffers for your defense in time of need and not be driven to get it when she should use it.

Dissolving Parliament, 1593.

And concerning yourself, you seem unto me to have read many books, but books of princes' affairs you have not attained unto, and are further ignorant what is convenient between princes.

Impromptu Rebuke in Latin to the Polish Ambassador, 1597.

Of myself I must say this: I never was any greedy, scraping grasper, nor a strait fast-holding prince, nor yet a waster; my heart was neer set on worldly goods, but only on my subjects' good... Since I was queen, yet never did I put pen to any grant, but that upon pretext and semblance made unto me that it was both good and beneficial to the subjects in general... That my grants should be grievous to my people and oppressions to be privileged under color of our patents, our kingly dignity shall not suffer it... And if my kingly bounty have been abused and my grants turned to the hurt of the people... I know the title of a king is a glorious title, but assure yourself that the shining glory of princely authority hath not so dazzled the eyes of our understanding but that we well now and remember that we also are to wield and account of our actions before the Great Judge. To be a king and wear a crown is more glorious to them that see it than it is pleasure to them that bear it. For myself, I was never so much enticed with the glorious name of a king or royal authority of a queen as delighted that God hath made me this instrument to maintain His truth and glory, and to defend this kingdom, as I said, from peril, dishonor, tyranny, and oppression... Should I ascribe anything to myself and my sexly weakness, I were not worthy to live then, and of all most unworthy of the mercies I have had from God, Who hath ever yet given me a heart which never yet feared foreign or home enemies. (The Golden Speech, 1601)

Speeches Written by Queen Elizabeth I, Delivered by Others at Her Bequest

Since there can be no due debt than princes' words, which I would observe, therefore I answer to the same. (On Marriage and Succession, 1563)

We find it necessary that, as we are most bound to render unto the same our good God the whole praise and honor for these His blessings upon us and our dominions, and for the same to continue thankful, so ought we also in respect of our princely charge... we know no other authority either given or used by us as queen and governor of this realm than hath been by the law of God and this realm always due to our progenitors, sovereigns, and kings of the same... But that authority which is yielded to us and our crown consisteth in this, that, considering we are by God's grace the sovereign prince and queen and to none else... things unfit to be used for establishing or reforming of Christian religion and to be rather condemned by sovereign princes having their seats and thrones established by Almighty God and not subject to the wills of foreign and strange usurped potentates.

The State of the Nation, 1569. (Rice, 1951)

Clearly, Elizabeth I saw and took advantage of the power of employing the strengths and weaknesses within the stereotypes of both genders and applied them to moments and issues of importance. That the qualities and rights of both sexes are often employed parallel to one another caused little, if any, difficulty, confusion, or contradiction, is proof of how cleverly Elizabeth was able to manipulate and apply such gendered assumptions of her day.

Rosalind faces and wards off physical danger in the forest with her "doublet and hose", but she also faces potential danger of another kind—love and marriage. She uses her previously assumed male disguise for both its original physical protection, and its capacity to permit her to talk freely, honestly and often severely with Orlando. Although she falls in love with Orlando at first sight, Rosalind waxes cautious and concerned not upon discovering, from the love poem on the tree, that he too loves her but that the nature of his professed love is manifest as so very exaggerated, wildly romantic, and to her mind, dangerously unrealistic. She concludes that such romantic exaggerations may easily wane and vanish in disillusionment with and by the reality of marriage.

Therefore, Rosalind makes use of her male garb, as Ganymede, to start on a campaign to interrogate Orlando regarding the level of his love's sincerity, and to re-educate him, of sorts, so as to temper his extreme and unrealistic idealism in terms of both love itself and Rosalind as an individual.

By obscuring their own sex, the heroines gain extraordinary access to the men they love, with the result that friendship validates marriage in Shakespeare's comedies. Consequently, when his heroines cease to adopt men's clothing, they forgo the rewards of friendship as well, and the comic world darkens Helena's disguise as a female pilgrim rather than an adventurous boy signal a momentous shift in Shakespeare's treatment of women: "realistic" psychological development takes second place to a determined reification of gender. Because intellectual compatibility in sexual relationships becomes a luxury they can dispense with, the heroines of *All's Well That Ends Well* and *Measure for Measure* shock some sensibilities. (Berggren, 1983, p. 22)

Ganymede's lessons and tests imbue Orlando with sufficient realism to satisfy Rosalind's need for the security of knowing that his love is authentic, sincere, and rooted enough in realism to ensure a marriage at least begun in mutual trust and understanding.

The temporary nature of the male disguise is of course essential, since the very nature of Shakespearian comedy is to affirm that disruption is temporary, that what has turned topsy-turvy will be restored. It is evident that Rosalind has enjoyed the flexibility and freedom that come with the assumption of the masculine role, but it is also evident that she will gladly and voluntarily relinquish it...Rosalind, clearly, is thankful for Orlando's, and although she is twice the person he is, we are willing to believe that they live happily ever after, since that's obviously what she wants. (Claiborne Park, 1983, p. 108)

Elizabeth I faced danger her entire life and learned to weather a series of personal and political storms. Yet, although crowned queen of the realm, she was still liable to both pressure and actual danger from Parliament and the Church regarding, primarily, her unmarried state.

Truly she was an exceptionally gifted woman, but the reality of her political situation—especially in the first seven years of her reign—was substantially less magnificent and glorious than its public representations suggested. For even though the propaganda which produced the public image of "Gloriana" began at her coronation, perhaps even before, she spent the first years of her reign very nearly in combat with councilors and with three successive Parliaments over the issue of her marriage and the naming of a successor. (Heisch, pp. 45-46)

Consequently, in order to avoid marriage and thus retain direct power, Elizabeth manipulated her gender, as evident in her speeches, becoming a political creature of ambiguous double-gender in order to tap the long-established allegiances of the male sex itself. She incorporated the male structures and paradigms of crown, public political discourse, political acumen as well as Christian feast and high holidays which coincided with pivotal moments that marked her reign to promote and unite somewhat mutually exclusive images of herself in the minds of her subjects.

What we must and should understand, however, is the co-optive and cooperative process by which Elizabeth was absorbed into the existing patriarchal system, de-sexed, elevated and hence transformed into a figure both above and distinct from other women. For an understanding of this process gives us a means by which to interpret not only Elizabeth's diminished impact on the status of women but also suggests to us thus a style of social and political analysis through which we may begin to see why the successes of other exceptional women are so limited in their influence, why, in fact, they tend to reinforce, rather than erode, those systems which oppress and exclude women, and why the token woman', so-called', to the extent that she would be successful, must usually become an "honorary male" after all. (Heisch, p. 54)

In addition to employing the male title of prince, Elizabeth proudly regarded and publicized herself as The Virgin Queen, figurehead of the still youthful Anglican Church, justified and ordained by God (so often expressed in her speeches) and thus ruled chastely by divine right.

As the female ruler of what was, at least in theory, a patriarchal society, Elizabeth incarnated a contradiction at the very center of the Elizabethan sex/gender system...Queen Elizabeth was a cultural anomaly; and this anomalousness made her powerful and dangerous. By the skillful deployment of images that were at once awesome and familiar, this perplexing creature tried to mollify her male subjects while enhancing her authority over them. (Berggren, 1983, p. 80)

Elizabeth overlooked no opportunity to further her unique and extraordinary image of herself, for she took excellent advantage of the coincidences of her life as related to, or relatable to religion. By 1570, when the Queen was in her mid-thirties, November 17, the date of her Accession, had begun to be celebrated as a Protestant holy day, with ringing of bells, with great bonfires, with elaborate pageants and, somewhat later, with tournaments. Over time celebrations were extended continuing through November 19th which was St. Elizabeth's Day. Her birthday, which fell on the eve of the birth of the Virgin Mary (a coincidence which did not go unnoticed), became another occasion for public rejoicing—a fact which disturbed both some Catholics, who felt that the Accession Day and the Queen's birthday were being taken more seriously than official holy days, and some members of the Protestant right wing, who viewed the ceremonies as idolatrous (Heisch, p. 45). Finally, in keeping with Elizabeth's political superimposition of her life with that of the former Cult of Mary, she died on the Annunciation of the Virgin.

Joseph Campbell commented in interviews conducted with Bill Moyers that for thousands of years people have been dying for metaphors. He lamented the fundamentalism that forces impossible reality on obvious metaphors and paradigms: Adam and Eve, the virgin births, resurrection. Elizabeth obviously recognized the incredible power of turning religious narratives and their celebratory days into metaphors to reinforce her power. She made herself an archetypal figure that was both male and female throughout her reign. Hers was a lateral and continual juggling of gender, whereas Shakespeare's gender switching heroines adopted and then discarded their male periods in a circular fashion. Only Elizabeth maintained her life as she liked it. This was so because Elizabeth was able to fulfill the requirements of both political and religious paradigms to suit her and their proper social-cultural and political maintenance and continuation.

As a dedicated virgin she fulfilled the highest priority of a woman in the Christian faith—chastity. As a self-proclaimed, self-termed “prince” she fulfilled the male sex expectations for a proper ruler in the 16th Century. But it is also important to look further into the historical reality of the England Elizabeth inherited. The Wars of the Roses between the York and Lancastrian cousins of the Plantagenet family nearly destroyed, and certainly destabilized, the precious unity that had enable England to achieve and advance even into the new millennium. Areas of the European continent we now call Germany and France, to mention only two, were actually de facto semi-independent principalities and dukedoms, at constant war over territory and did not unite under the English notion reaching back to the legend of King Arthur: One land, one king. This established hierarchical order was central in making the British Empire possible while the continent, save Spain, lagged behind in colonialization and immense power that lasts to this day. England controlled most of India, North America, Australia, much of the East and West Indies while German principalities quibbled over where to seat their dozens of minor princes and other nobility at the table.

It is with this specter of political chaos that Henry VIII's obsession to produce a male heir should be viewed, and if not excusable, at least understandable. Henry's myopic but historically traditional certainty that only a male heir could continue the peace following "The Cousins' War" in large part motivated him to break with the Pope and Catholicism and establish a unique English Protestantism and marry Anne Bolyen for which he made this monumental scism in hopes of a son. But Anne's disappointing daughter proved his inarguably most brilliant child who ironically used her father's new English Protestantism and freedom from Rome to manipulate sacred dates and high holidays to spiritually validate her own rule; her referencing and continuation of her alpha male father's will to power to the point of declaring herself throughout her reign as a "prince", appropriating Henry's fearsome personality and actions as informing and inspiring her own as his daughter/son; and finally, the theatre she so loved and encouraged, sought her continued favor, wittingly or not, through an impressive number of plays featuring women who use the guise of the male to gain security for their femininity which mirrors Elizabeth's technique for political and literal survival, as well as her place in world history. Elizabeth I of England turned tradition into metaphor, successfully adapted her image to accommodate basic, fundamental requirements of her day, and ruled with undisputed brilliance for 45 years. It is no wonder that her rule is known as "the golden age" and beginning of what would soon become the empire upon which the sun never sets.

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