

Did tudor queenship
differ fundamentally
from tudor kingship?



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In contemporary Britain many tend to see gender as a social or “cultural construction detached from sexed bodies”[1], but this concept falls far from true in Tudor society. With regards to the throne – and more broadly society as a whole – gender encompassed the physical and mental aspects of the body. Ideas of gender differences were concrete in society, with biblical readings proving evidence from the highest being, for the case of gender inequality and gender roles. At the time, great importance was put on having a strong king (and therefore male) figure at the centre of the Tudor regime. By 1553, Tudor society had already had to deal with the accession of an infant king and now this “heterogeneous population, archaic and conservative, yet caught up in rapid change of every kind”[2] was being faced with a more threatening idea, that of a female Monarch.

Connotations of gender and their distinctions and restrictions were seen at large in Tudor society. Men were seen as natural leaders, with women as their subordinates. The idea that women were physically, intellectually and morally inferior to men was in part justified by nature. It was argued that throughout the animal kingdom the male of the species would be found as the natural born leader. Women were said to be easily led and therefore had to be controlled by man who would act as her head – “the head of woman is man”[3]. The Bible itself was also extensively used to connote a woman’s place in society, with Genesis 3: 16 reading “men rule over thee”. Not only was a woman’s status and innate traits determined, but also values were attached to traits that a woman should hold. These traits, such as chastity, were ones that held significant value to a woman’s worth. Unlike traits such

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as those inferior to men which were inherent in the female body, ideas of chastity were seen as a woman's virtue that she herself had control of and if lost would cause her to become a fallen woman.

These ideas of gender permeated into ideas of monarchy. The possibility of a female monarch as a ruler in her own right was unprecedented; however this possibility became a forced reality at the time of Mary I's succession.

Edward's device showed how infant males were preferable to female monarchs; in fact almost any other possibility was preferred. John Knox, famous for his ever-critical writing on Mary I's reign states that "to promote a women head over men is repugnant to nature and a thing most contrary to that order which God hath approved"[4]. The ideas against female rule were not just emphasised by religion or by critics, but also by Monarchic writings. 'Mirrors for Princes' acted as a ruler handbook, laying out how a ruler should act and guiding them through their time as monarch. However, these instructions for reign were "written by men, for men, and were full of characteristically male attributes such as strength and virtue"[5], leaving no place for a female monarch. Given these long-standing and deep rooted attitudes towards the "respective roles of men and women"[6]it seemed almost inevitable that Queenship was criticised.

When Queenship was encountered it found itself arriving in many different forms. While Kingship appeared to be a constant and continuous post of ruler, a female monarch would find herself put into a sub-category of rulership. A female could be queen in different ways as: regnant queen, queen consort, or dowager. All of these titles possessed different power and status and were important in establishing the authority of the queen. Queen
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Consorts exercised partial rulership and held power that was significantly inferior to the Kings, “ they performed political duties alongside them or acted as their temporary representatives”[7]. While regent queens ruled as a stand-in for their infant heirs, only holding temporary power until the child was able to make their own decisions. These types of Queen remained answerable and under order and influence of the King.

However, the Tudor period shows examples of Queens that ruled in their own right. “ Sovereign women like Mary I and Elizabeth I”[8]followed in succession and both challenged the gender specific roles of Monarch. As Queen, both endured “ mounting conflicts between their political status and sexual status”[9], while Henry VIII had the advantages of being “ male and of unchallenged legitimacy”[10]making their time as Monarch an even more challenging one than that of a King. Mary I’s reign shows the practice of “ choosing blood legitimacy over gender legitimacy”[11]. Yet, despite these examples and despite hereditary claim Queenship was still seen as unfavourable as their “ sex posed a problem”[12]. It seemed that it was impossible for females to isolate themselves from the gender dispositions, the idea remained that “ a ruler was a strong man leading a large army into battle”[13]while women only complemented their husbands “ bearing children, tempering his severity [and] sustaining his virtue”[14]. Queens were seen as an additional option, not a necessity.

Yet at times it could be argued that the attributes of females came in handy during a Queen’s time as ruler. For instance, Elizabeth would use the women trope to her advantage while at other times manipulating male traits to suit her case. While portraying herself as mother or wife to the nation, in the <https://assignbuster.com/did-tudor-queenship-differ-fundamentally-from-tudor-kingship/>

political sphere she would sit her sexuality on the fence – a political hermaphrodite. The Tilbury speech is perhaps the most obvious example of this manipulation of both male and female gendered traits. Though we are uncertain of just how truthful the Tilbury account is, if we take it at face value Elizabeth appeared to defend her strength and rulership by claiming “ I know I have the body but of a weak and feeble woman; but I have the heart and stomach of a king, and of a king of England too”[15]. It was believed that Elizabeth had learnt from Mary’s mistakes and therefore acted in a way which she believe would please the public while “ exploiting her gender to render herself more powerful, more able to command loyalty, than she might have done if she were a man”[16]and through doing this she managed a relatively successful and long reign as Queen. However manipulation of gender traits was not the only key to success as a Female King.

A long and successful reign would rely on the King or Queen being able to hold power as monarch, and to be able to show their legitimacy and authority. The coronation of the monarch was a major ceremony used to show the coming of a new ruler. A Monarch’s coronation was “ steeped in liturgy of the medieval church and the devotional logic of kingship [...] relied upon for broadcasting their legitimacy and divinity”[17]. It was relied upon heavily despite the ‘ King’s two bodies’, the idea that the physical and spiritual body of a king remain separate. This meant that even though the King dies for he is human, the spiritual body of Kingship would be passed on as “ a symbol of his office as majesty with the divine right to rule”[18]. Yet there remained in the eyes of the people a “ need for and a belief in a moment of ‘ transferences’”[19]. Quite significantly, the coronation

proceedings were almost universal for both King and Queen, the same routine was followed despite the gender of the monarch and the same Latin prayers and hymns sung. In Mary's second parliament of reign she enforced a statute that "ungendered the Crown and declared that a queen's authority was identical to that of a king." [20] With the crown ungendered it was suited to both male and female rulers. In 1559 the coronation of Elizabeth I would "have been recognisable to those who witnessed her grandfather's ceremony in 1458" [21]. This similarity between the two coronations shows the lack of emphasis on gender during the ceremony and therefore the similarity between coronation for both King and Queen as ruler. This similarity in proceedings does not mean, however, that there was equal acceptance for either Male or Female ruler, while routine stays the same the opinion of the public and of the authorities may have changed. Routine coronation was most probably due to tradition and expectation rather than a progression to the acceptance of a Female King.

While Queens found themselves facing many problems about legitimacy prior to their coronation as Monarch, they also had many more to come. The idea of marriage was one that served itself to be extremely problematic for a female ruler. While a King could essentially marry whomever he chose, a woman had to not only be selective in her suitor but also aware of the problems marriage may bring to her rulership. The Idea of a Queen as a wife was problematic as gender ideology imposed that a woman should be subordinate to her husband - "marriage was almost invariably the lot of every freeborn woman - an institution in which she was unilaterally deemed to be subordinate to her husband" [22]- but how shall a Queen be

subordinate to a subject? It was almost impossible for a Queen to be a “petitioner and intercessor in her own country”[23]. This idea of joint roles brought on the transcendence of ‘two bodies’. The idea of the ‘Kings Two Bodies’ would be adopted for the female ruler, this idea that one body of the woman constitutes a wife, her human mortal self, while her separate entity remains Queen. However this proved difficult to physically impose and the problem was no better solved. What’s more, ideas of ownership – not just of the female- but of property too, caused confusion. Mary I had to deal first hand with this issue, many were cautious and believed that her marriage to Phillip may lead to a passing over of property, influence and therefore power. The role of wife was simply not compatible with the role of Queen as a result of pre-empted ideas of gender restrictions and rights. Perhaps this is why the unmarried Elizabeth I ruled so successfully. It seemed that being without a husband gave Elizabeth the “opportunity to redefine gender and royal authority roles by exploiting the ambiguity involved in the status of being a female king”[24].

However while marriage caused a gendered power struggle for Tudor Queens, remaining unmarried caused problems for both Sexes. If the Monarch remained unmarried, they would have no legitimate children and therefore provide no heir for securing the dynasty. While Elizabeth appeared successful in her rule, she failed in leaving a next-of-kin for the throne. One of the most important characteristics of a Queen as both a King's wife and a ruler in her own right was motherhood.

“Here lies Henry’s daughter, wife and mother, great by birth, greater by marriage, But greatest by motherhood,”[25]

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Reads an inscription on Matilda's tomb, another prominent female ruler of whom motherhood is her immortal trait and sense of identity in the world once she had passed. Though Elizabeth's unmarried state and virginity did offer "opportunities for enthusiast's praise of her personal virtue"[26]it left political problems as an heir was absent. Due to this chastity and lack of male partnership, rumours of homosexuality were put out by Elizabeth's critics. Queens were always more vulnerable to attacks of sexual slander than men. For example Henry VII had a very dubious sex life which went against religious teaching, however though it was discussed the slander did not hold the same power or cause the same damage to his reputation.

This idea of reputation and of portrayal was extremely important to Tudor Monarchs. Portraits of Monarchs were one of the key ways in which their presence and power as ruler would become immortalised and remembered. Both Kings and Queens would commission works to portray them as rich, powerful and dynastic. However, "queens could not always control their image"[27]the same way that Kings could. For example, Mary I's portraits show her elaborately dressed but "otherwise nondescript, neither regal nor iconic." [28]In fact the popularised image of Mary today is not that of a successful female ruler like those of Elizabeth, but rather she is remembered as "Bloody Mary, the arch persecutor and religious bigot"[29]. However, portraiture celebrates and idealise the reign of the child king Edward, despite his lack of authority, for he ruled only through guidance of the Privy Chamber and courts. This tendency to idealise insufficient kings over power Queens again shows the hierarchy of favourability to the throne.

Perhaps most importantly in the portrayal of Monarchs is the symbolic representation held by the Sword and the Book. These symbols hold great significance within the Tudor Monarchy and are used as physical representations of strength of rule and divine right “ unifying ecclesiastical and secular authority”[30]. However these symbols do not always appear on the portraits of the Tudor Queens, in fact “ the sword tends to disappear or undergo subordination in portrayals of the queen”[31]as too is the Book placed with less emphasis. This is perhaps due to the affiliation to gender which would deem women weaker, inferior and unable to “ fill the ruler’s primary function in the larger order of the cosmos: to represent God to her people”[32].

Not only did a Queens gender prevent her from representing God’s image it also prevented her from holding ultimate power over the Courts. The courts were closely connected to the monarch, and years of tradition had seen the courts and monarch bond through jousting’s and tournaments. This idea of bonding with the courts led to a court culture struggle for a Queen , for she was often unable to join in with the masculine activities leaving her in exclusion. However, Elizabeth I refused to allow this, instead she played on her fondness of hunting and developed her own court culture which implemented bonding through a personal-closeness using flattery and almost idolist approach. However, this bonding did not prove any more progressive in helping Elizabeth’s status. It appeared that gender formed an “ important politico-cultural milieu for Elizabeth’s relations with her counsellors”[33]. As a women it was expected that she should listen to her male counsellors, therefore the counsellors believed they held more power in

a Queens court than in a Kings and actively tried to “ assert control over the process”[34]causing divisions. The power of the courts became more devolved under a Queen as a result of these gender assumptions. While a counsellor acted merely to advise a King, in a Queen’s court the male counsellor felt the Queen was obliged to listen to his instruction.

Perhaps a more physical representation of the changes caused by gender amongst the most private matters of a Monarch is the replacement of Privy Chamber men. The Privy chamber remained a private and intimate sector of political decision making, which include the Monarchs bedroom. As a woman, the Queen could not take on the former Kings Privy Chamber men for it would be inappropriate and therefore women were brought in to carry out the once male roles.

However, to what extent can we ascribe the difficulties faced by Queens to gender? Though Queenship suffered as a result of gender distinctions it did not prevent them from carrying out a successful reign. Kings too faced difficulty in their rule, Henry VII was not totally unquestioned by the state or the church, for example the refusal of his divorce and the actions taken as a result caused much division during his reign. Each Tudor monarch had problems within their time as ruler which they had to overcome, and some may argue that their personality is as much a factor as their gender. Queens and Kings were a Monarch foremost and the idea of two bodies helps explain the divine right that inherits a human body. The body, therefore, acts as a vessel for which God can spread his will.

While there were many continuities between Tudor Kingship and Tudor Queenship – such as the proceedings of the coronation – there were also many changes; such as the authority held by the Monarch and the authority held by those around them. However, the relationship between the two is complex and “ continuity of the outward form does not imply continuity of interpretation or purpose”[35]. While we can objectify the court proceedings, the hereditary lines and the routines of coronation, we cannot be sure just how this was interpreted through public opinion. The verdict of Queenship was mixed, though there was controversy it was most definitely not universally condemned. The theoretical views of the gender restrictions for a Queen ruler were not as harsh when put into practice. While there is no dominant position on whether or not a female ruler was accepted, there was a “ preference for male-exercised authority”[36]. With regards to the question “ did Tudor Queenship differ fundamentally from Tudor Kingship”, the answer is perhaps no. The fundamental aspects of both male and female Monarch remained the same, however, it was the problems faced while carrying out their regal duties that showed the differing in status and of acceptance. A Queen was faced with the “ struggle against feminine fragility which [she] had to undertake”[37]. Just as a King had to live up to his gender expectations, a Queen had to actively play down hers.

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