

The virgin queen essay sample



“ I know I have the body of a weak and feeble woman, but I have the heart and stomach of a king, and of a king of England too; and think foul scorn that Parma or Spain or any Prince of Europe should dare invade the border of my realm.” These famous words were spoken by Queen Elizabeth I while addressing English troops before defeating the Spanish Armada. Queen Elizabeth I is one of the most iconic British rulers and has become a modern feminist hero. The fascination with Queen Elizabeth I has lasted since 1558, when she became the third queen regnant of the British Isles (Ellis). Perhaps society became so fascinated with Queen Elizabeth I because it is hard to decipher who she really was. Being an unmarried woman during the sixteenth century presented many challenges. In order to deal with these challenges Queen Elizabeth had to become an actress to project the character of the Virgin Queen. Queen Elizabeth became a successful ruler by mastering the art of propaganda and playing the role of the Virgin Queen.

Under Queen Elizabeth, England experienced major growth in the arts, military victories, and discovered new lands. Her support of the theatre produced famous play writes such as William Shakespeare and Christopher Marlowe. It was a time of intellectual and creative expansion. Her 44 year reign has been deemed the British Golden Age. Since her reign, she has been the subject of many films, plays, and literary works (Ellis). During her rule the arts flourished, and she became an actress herself.

The 16th century was characterized as a patriarchal society. While Queen Elizabeth I was certainly not the first female ruler, women were still viewed as incapable of making decisions independent of male counsel. Elizabeth, however, refused to become a figurehead queen. She continued to exercise

the full extent of her power through out her reign (Doran). In order to survive as a woman in a man's world, Queen Elizabeth had to manipulate her public image to fit the socially acceptable gender roles of the time. In this century women were still categorized as either the Virgin Mary or the sneaky, seductive Eve. Being an unmarried woman, Queen Elizabeth had to perfect the image of the Virgin Queen. She claimed she was married to England and this was the only husband she would take. This way she was seen as harmless and could be trusted. In reality, the Queen was not a virgin but had several affairs. Elizabeth probably never married because of growing political tensions between France and Spain. Queen Elizabeth was smart enough to know that she did not want to make alliances or enemies with either country, and if she married an English noble she would have to share her power. (Warnicke).

Portraits of Queen Elizabeth are easily identifiable. Horace Walpole describes a typical portraits as, " A pale Roman nose, a head of hair loaded with crowns and powdered with diamonds, a vast ruff, a vaster fardingale, and a bushel of pearls, are the features by which everybody knows at once the pictures of Queen Elizabeth (Moss)." Because Queen Elizabeth was a woman, she feared that rival countries would see England as weak and vulnerable. Part of playing the role of the Virgin Queen meant wearing a costume. In her portraits she was painted wearing jewels and extravagant clothing to show the wealth and power of England. If the Queen could afford to dress in expensive clothing, it showed the nobles that England was prospering (Moss). Obviously this was before the days of mass production and the Queen made sure to regulate the images the public saw of her. In 1563, she

drafted a proclamation detailing the exact rules for painting an image of the Queen. A face pattern would be provided to artist that they would have to follow exactly. Although the proclamation was never issued, it shows how important maintaining a certain image was to the Queen (Cooper).

“ We princes,” Elizabeth told the English Parliament, “ are set as it were upon stages in the sight and view of the world (Lewis).” Queen Elizabeth I was a woman of mystery. She perfected the image of the Virgin Queen to secure her vulnerable position as an unmarried female ruler. Being a virgin meant that she was innocent and could be trusted. Her costume of lavish clothes and jewelry showed the public that England could prosper under a female ruler. Although her gender presented her many challenges, Queen Elizabeth developed a successful strategy to deal with public opinion.

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