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How Did Elizabeth I's Radical Approach to Dynastic Marriage Preserve England Whilst the Valois' Strategy Precipitated the Downfall of their Dynasty?

Sanaa Pathak

Student, History, K.R. Mangalam World School

Abstract

This paper critically examines the contrast between two major powers of Renaissance Europe. It explores the divergent diplomatic and matrimonial strategies which were at play during Elizabeth and England and Valois France. Drawing on both primary and secondary sources, including original archives of Elizabeth I's 1558 Hatfield speech. The study further elaborates on how Elizabeth's refusal to marry became a deliberate political tactic, while the aesthetics employed by Catherine Medici deepened factionalism, and the collapse of the dynasty.

"I am already bound unto a husband, which is the kingdom of England."[1]

Queen Elizabeth I adopted a humorously yet diligent approach to matrimony, this approach was both shocking and outrageous to all of Europe but is also thought to be one that protected and harboured the "Golden Age of England." In contrast, the court of Valois embraced the artifice of matrimony fully, turning into a true theatre of the art, puppetted by Catherine de Medici, who served as the Queen Regent of France for her young son Charles IX.[2] The polar strategies redefined two omphaloi of the European renaissance, England and France, and despite the alignment of the Valois in accordance to the Papal States, Elizabeth's England came to be lauded as one of the most successful reigns to this day, while the Valois dynasty became plagued with civil religious strifes, and factionalism in their own court, eventually culminating in their extinction.

This paper will examine Elizabeth's matrimonial strategy, wherein silence in itself became the most puissant political tactic, contrasted with Catherine de Medici's dynastic maneuvering in the Valois court, and consider how these approaches shaped Renaissance Europe.

The England that Elizabeth inherited was, on the face of it, a strictly hierarchical society with each man born to a degree god had intended and each class defined by style of living manners and dress.[3] The rule of Mary Tudor had lasted for a turbulent and unhappy five years, leaving Elizabeth to succeed to a land scarred with scandal and brutality. Elizabeth ascended to the throne in 1558 and symbolised both a sense of continuity and renewal of the years that had preceded her father's reign. She embodied being the daughter of Henry VIII and also the truest testimony of her mother's defiance as a shining relic of

[1] J.E. Neale, Elizabeth I and Her Parliaments (London: Jonathan Cape, 1957), 22.
[2] R.J. Knecht, Catherine de' Medici (London: Longman, 1998), 112.
[3] Alison Weir, The Life of Elizabeth I (London: Ballantine, 1998), 102.

protestantism that anchored not just England, but Europe as a whole. From the moment of her first address at Hatfield, she displayed true majesty, a performance of pure political diplomacy while addressing the Lords and Cecil, we come to see the gravity of somebody who was truly ordained by God. Despite her assurances, the truest test of her reign lay in a question that could imperil her or save her, who would she marry?

Premierly, in what seems to be one of England and Spain's most ironic acts of imperial politics is the proposal of Philip II of Spain to Elizabeth I. King Philip II, was the former husband of Queen Mary I, who was a devout Catholic Queen. Within a fortnight of the young Elizabeth's accession, the strongly protestant queen received his proposal, courtesy of the ambassador Count de Feria.[4] Elizabeth graciously composed herself and gave no definite reply, remarking the need to "settle the realm" and see what "God would ordain" for her kingdom[5]. "Her first act of policy was a masterpiece in delay. Philip's offer was courteously evaded, not rejected — the surest way to avoid offence.[6] She refused the King by simply doing nothing. This rejection not only ensured to defend the integrity of her late sister Mary, by hypothetically succeeding her in reign and husband, but also by solidifying England as a strong protestant nation that would be too proud to compromise its sovereignty or its faith.

Philip II had deeply tested the queen's diplomacy, after all, Spain was the most powerful nation in the world, but the truest test of Elizabeth's reign, after her political stifles, was a test of the heart. Elizabeth found herself deeply infatuated by the newly named master of the horse, Sir Robert Dudley. Dudley was granted a closeness few others had even dared to dream of. He was a true Englishman, and above all a confidante, born only a year apart Dudley and Elizabeth were friends before she even turned eight. Their bond deepened while being simultaneously imprisoned in the Tower during "Bloody Mary's" reign.

Although an English marriage was seen to be greatly supported by the majority of the English, except, apart from the queen, most notably by Cecil. The queen found the thought of an English marriage to be a treacherous impeachment of the sanctity of the royal bloodline. Dudley claimed to a French ambassador that the queen had vowed upon the death of Katherine Howard that she would never marry, lest any chance for her being forsaken to an act of passion and scrutiny. But alas, it is said the queen only ever loved Robert. Their intimacy and connection was one that was unparalleled at court. What brought the most serious stalling was the political controversy surrounding the mysterious death of Dudley's wife Amy. Amy Robsart had been found dead at the end of a stairwell in 1560. Sending shockwaves throughout realms the death left the rapport shared between the Queen and Dudley to be forever jeopardized, scarring Robert's reputation, with the entirety of Europe's tongues wagging. Elizabeth knew that her reputation, and her head could not survive the turmoil of the scandal, alas, she was a virgin queen, one only wedded to her country. So even amongst the deepest, most beloved forbidden desires of the heart, the queen had chosen to forfeit effort and hope and chose her head while leaping away from probably the one and only true shot she had at love.

England became the epicenter of the European renaissance, with Elizabeth as its focus. As Vann notes, Elizabeth stood in a unique position of agency where women's decisions were largely circumscribed — one that allowed her to act not only for herself, but for her country.[7]

[4] J.E. Neale, Elizabeth I and Her Parliaments, 18.
[5] Elizabeth I, speech at Hatfield House, 1558, in The Elizabethan Letters, ed. Simon Adams (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 12.
[6] Neale, Elizabeth I and Her Parliaments, 22.
[7] Marion Vann, "Elizabeth I and Female Agency in Renaissance England," Historical Review 56, no. 2 (2007): 201.

Marveling authors and playwrights such as Shakespeare and Marlowe, all of whose works are widely lauded and celebrated today flourished under the Elizabethan patronage.[8] The pivotal aspect of her reign, from the early years through her later years, was her deliberate choice to remain unmarried, mirroring the image of the Virgin Mother Mary.

One of the most extraordinary proposals of her later years was the Alencon affair, which evolved into one of the most exquisite performances of Elizabeth's reign. The Queen received Anjou in 1579 and again in 1581.[9] Despite Francis' short height and pock-scarred face, Elizabeth displayed a unique fervour to his wit and etiquette, shocking the court. She affectionately and playfully referred to the young prince as her "frog", often jesting how he proved more enchanting than his reputation had allowed.

Yet, this was far more than a romantic diversion. By toying with the French alliance, for nearly a decade, Elizabeth staged one of history's most elegant displays of deterrence.

The French alliance had offered something more, a counter weight against Spain.[10] The Queen was able to overtly support the Dutch cause by indulging in funding for the protestants against Philip II. Elizabeth initially was quite cautious, lest to provoke Spain, but began to feel increasingly compelled to address the issue, especially after the assassination of William of Orange.[11] Elizabeth began to be seen as the guardian of not just her England, but also of protestant Europe as a whole, by protecting interests while dodging the possibility of an overly Spanish Europe she quietly funded the Dutch and renewed the Spanish offence. By this, she positioned herself at the helm of continental and imperial power by ensuring to be seen as a potential ally, but never as a confirmed one.

In a Europe creased by the factions and divide of the Catholic and Protestant people, Elizabeth delivered a deliberate spectacle of display during his reception, yet the affection never dared to tread further than the line, but alas, left the court, and the entirety of Europe on their toes in complete suspense, questioning the possibilities of a Franco-British alliance. She maintained the good will of France, which was most potent at a time, without ever compromising on her independence. She had transformed into Europe's most regal and courted brides without ever truly ever being one.

Upon the death of Mary I of England, King Philip sought to maintain his influence in western Europe and prevent any possibilities of ambush. His first choice was to look towards remaining with England, and when that didn't work out, he moved towards the French and proposed to Elisabeth of Valois, a marriage which was like many of the time, borne of political necessity, following decades after a bitter conflict.[12] Elisabeth was the eldest surviving daughter of Henry II of France and Catherine de Medici.[13] Their union was representative of a carefully calculated maneuver to intertwine the two greatest Catholic nations of the renaissance against an increasingly protestant uprising. The marriage embodied the value of using matrimony as an instrument to project power and resolve conflict.

Catherine became an interior designer of majestic appearances.[14] Under Catherine, the governance became synonymous with flamboyant banquets and masquerades, which projected an image of supposed stability of the country, despite it being wrecked to the limb. The union of Elisabeth and Philip was shown to be an edifice that reaffirmed the magnificence of Catholicism asserting that even though France was divided,

[8] Lorna Hutson, Shakespeare and the Rise of the State (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 78.
[9] John Guy, Queen of Scots: The True Life of Mary Stuart (London: HarperCollins, 2004), 205.
[10] J. E. Neale, Elizabeth I and Her Parliaments (London: Jonathan Cape, 1953), 298.
[11] Garrett Mattingly, The Armada (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1959), 34.
[12] R. J. Knecht, Catherine de Medici (London: Longman, 1998), 88.
[13] Knecht, Catherine de Medici, 88.
[14] Yates, The Valois, 102.

it remained a major power in Europe, this strategy also revealed the dependency of the French people to focus more on aesthetics rather than actual diplomacy, which can be perceived in the years following the Valois as well.

One of the more poignant exhibits of Catherine's work was embodied in Mary, Queen of Scots, who came to be more a French woman than Scottish.[15] She was a true example of Catherine's tutelage that represented both great promise but also walked bleakly on the lines of danger. Her eventual marriage to Francis II, although short, was one adorned with dazzling splendour. But as her story transpired, the fragility of Catherine's tactics she inherited eventually led her to think with heart over head, and leading to her tragic fate.[16]

On the central stage of the Renaissance twin countries, England and France, both remarked on two rival scripts of power. Elizabeth embodied restraint, and curated a country built on intellect rather than vanity, elevating the monarchy to a different standard than known.[17] Across the channel, France focused on aesthetics and grandeur, its policy made to curate illusion and mask the missing precision to rule. Together they represent multipolarity, unmasking layers of governance, one of caution and restraint and the other of flair mounted on orthodoxy. Yet history only truly remembers one as victorious, fulfilling how the greatest acts lie not in possession, but in absence.

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[15] Antonia Fraser, Mary Queen of Scots
[16] Fraser, Mary Queen of Scots, 134.
[17] J. E. Neale, Elizabeth I and Her Parliaments (London: Jonathan Cape, 1953), 55.