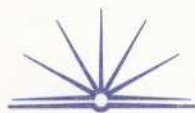


Queen Elizabeth the first has been hailed by many as one of the most glorious monarchs in known history. She has inspired as many people and historians as she has terrified, and she has earned for herself a type of professional androgyny and ambiguity, and a sense of personal amazement.

While many areas of her personality, personal life and reign have come under intense scrutiny, the area of study into Elizabeth I which has generated the most discussion is the issue of her gender and identity.

The personal values, and social context of the historian figure strongly within this area of debate, and two historians who sharply contrast each other, both in views and focus, are the British historian G. L. Elton and the American historian Susan Bonnett.

Elton's sense of wonder and near confusion at Elizabeth's gender can be comprehended



upon an examination of his context. As a male writing in the Western hemisphere during the 1960's, his attitude towards women can be called chauvinistic. This is evident in his interpretation of Elizabeth.

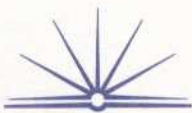
He establishes her as the clear superior to her older half sister Mary, whom he calls 'devout and blundering', and then goes on to label Elizabeth as 'The Most Masculine of all Female Sovereigns in history.' Judging by the tone of his writing, he views her masculinity positively, thus revealing the common 1960's Western attitude of male superiority. He praises her character and says that 'her character was of steel', that she was iron willed and determined, and he adds that she inherited the sweetness of her mother, Anne Boleyn, and views this feminine trait as a flaw. He also says that she 'nourished several supposedly female characteristics,' and it is at the mention





of feminine traits that his attitude towards her becomes altered. He calls her dilatory, and criticizes her supposed inclinations towards procrastination. Parsimony, Sagacity and tenacity are mentioned, and he implies a sense of disbelief at the fact that these characteristics are feminine. He goes on to state that in her later years she developed two decidedly old-maidish traits - A permanent show of youthfulness and desirability and a venomous jealousy of younger or married women.' He states that what truly matters where Elizabeth is concerned is her political skill, rather than her 'pretty obvious failings as a woman.' By failings, Elton refers to the fact that Elizabeth did not marry; neither did she produce an heir. As in Elton's day when marriage and procreation were seen as the two prime functions of a woman, he applies the same judgment to ~~the~~ Queen Elizabeth.





on the issue of political administration, Elton is quite generous in his praise of Elizabeth's political skills. He does, however, tend to dwell upon some 'female' characteristics when he discusses the issue of her prerogative and her stubborn will. Using the debate over monopolies as an example, he wrote:

'The commons had decided in 1597 to petition the queen to abolish the burdensome monopolies. Elizabeth, as usual, made a fair answer but had no intention of doing anything.'

Thus, the questions over Elizabeth's identity and gender enter both his views of her as a woman, and of her as a politician.

His context plays an important role in this, as a woman's capriciousness and changeable nature were very much emphasized during the pre-feminist 1960's. Elton praises Elizabeth's masculinity and chastizes her

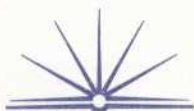
feminine side, perceiving this as a weakness in her character.

In sharp contrast, the American feminist writer Susan Bassett, who writes after the advent of feminism, admires Queen Elizabeth and zealously defends her character, gender and identity against critics.

As Bassett's feminist ideology values a defiance of the patriarchy and of the domination of a woman within a majority male context, Elizabeth was a role model who stated: 'Before I knew why, I supported Elizabeth.'

Bassett, who sees Elizabeth as a strong, independent woman, states that what many writers have felt were Elizabeth's flaws, she sees as virtues. For example, many writers have written of her levity which Bassett sees as Elizabeth's skill of being able to defend herself of refusing to be pinned down. She





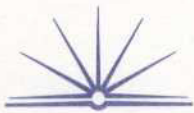
discusses the excuse given by Elizabeth to Philip of Spain when she refused his proposal of marriage: she couldn't marry him because he had been married to her sister, which would create needless legalities.

Barnett outlines her belief that Elizabeth's decision not to marry and produce an heir was not a feminine weakness but a wise decision; in a day when marriage for women meant subservience to their husbands, Elizabeth protected her throne through skill and games of procrastination, such as the games she played with her suitor, the duke of Alençon.

Barnett criticizes the work of Elizabeth Jenkins who claims that Elizabeth's lack of sensuality which came from her fear of sex made her less ~~than~~<sup>of</sup> a woman.

Jenkins claimed that Elizabeth had been scarred by the Seymour affair and her own mother's death. Barnett disregards



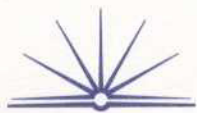


these claims, stating that Elizabeth's decision not to marry was prudent.

She also defends the queen from the 'narrow feminist perspective' which states that Elizabeth did nothing for the cause of women during her reign. Barnett warns her readers away from anachronism by stating that in Elizabeth's day any feminist inklings would have been greeted by utter incomprehension. After her evaluations of various opinions of Elizabeth's identity and leader, Barnett decides that as a woman who was a monarch, Elizabeth's wisdom and cunning were to be admired.

on issues of politics, Barnett states that Elizabeth's prerogative centered strongly around diplomacy and foreign affairs rather than domestic reform, and while Barnett praises Elizabeth's political skill and diplomacy she does not refrain

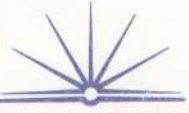




from mentioning that Elizabeth had a vicious temper and that she could be spiteful. She states that Elizabeth was not a warmonger, and that through her cautious pursuit of peace, she guaranteed England's stability.

True to postmodernist technique, Basner illuminates details of the past which had been overlooked. For example, while she praises the high levels of law, morality, and the establishment of a democratic parliament system during her reign, she compares the levels of poverty and new classes of poor in Elizabethan England to the modern aftermath of capitalism in Africa and Latin America, and she outlines that child labor was exploited. Although she makes a mention of Elizabeth's paradoxical reign and at times vindictive personality, her assessment





of Elizabeth is positive as she sees her as an independent woman whose pursuit of pacifism guaranteed peace for Britain. She does not mention ~~in~~ a sense of wonder at Elizabeth's gender, nor does she separate the Sovereign from the woman, as does the female historian Alison Weir, whose assessment of Elizabeth in other areas is similar to that of Barnett. By naming her work 'A Feminist Perspective' Barnett defends every aspect of Elizabeth.

In conclusion, the interpretations of some key issues regarding Elizabeth I differ greatly due to the perspectives and eras of the historians.