
Pondering this slim, concise volume with a magisterial title, the first question that came to mind was, ‘Why another book on Elizabeth I?’ Why indeed, when at the outset Carole Levin notes that readers will find no new evidence or theoretical reinterpretation of research on Elizabeth. This begs the question of who is the intended audience for the book. In the introduction, Levin seems to be aiming at a “new generation,” which suggests an undergraduate audience. Troubled by recent cinematic depictions of Elizabeth, she aims to “separate the myth from the reality,” to complicate the queen’s popular image in recent films. Yet this is a sophisticated book, one that presumes a good working knowledge of the period, and because most of what Levin says is already familiar to scholars of monarchy, the most likely audience will be upper-level undergraduate students in the United States, graduate students, and scholars new to the field. In format and content, the book resembles the familiar seminar series books that pack a lot of information into the form of a bibliographic essay designed to facilitate graduate seminar papers. And Levin does provide the reader with an overview of various interpretations of questions of marriage and succession, the religious settlement, and court intrigue. For the most part, she steps back and judiciously lets her colleagues speak, but she is not shy about her own views on the matters at hand. Still, this is not just a seminar book, either. In fact, it is much easier to say what it is not than what it is—not strictly a conventional biography, not an institutional study of the reign, but more than just a portrait of the age; not simply a study of religion and reformation, and not just a postmodern analysis of gender, sexuality, performance, Foucauldian politics, and cultural studies.

It is, however, an extremely useful survey of the field of Elizabethan studies as it currently stands, and it is for
this reason that it is essential reading for scholars of late medieval and early modern continental monarchies. It is, in essence, Carole Levin’s thoughts on Elizabeth, and having written provocatively on Elizabeth, notably in “The Heart and Stomach of a King”: Elizabeth I and the Politics of Sex and Power (1994), her thoughts are very valuable indeed. Levin’s crisp, well written narrative is organized thematically, and roughly chronologically, in six concise chapters—an overview of the reign, the religious settlement, foreign policy (divided in two distinct chapters that neatly bisect the twenty-five years of Elizabeth’s reign), the question of succession, and a concluding discussion of the society and culture of Elizabethan England. The organization of the book results in some repetition; for instance, we are told several times how distraught Elizabeth was when close advisers died late in her reign. But she is very good at bringing together a great many threads and Levin moves skillfully from the local level to international scene, especially when discussing religion. The introduction, a short historiographic essay outlining several centuries of Elizabethan research, sets out Levin’s thesis that Elizabeth the person is inextricably identified with the reign. This is not a new idea, but it is, nevertheless, worth repeating. The emphasis throughout the book is on the dense, layered connections of religion, politics, economics, questions of succession, and ultimately, personality. Levin gives Elizabeth more credit than other scholars for policy making—both foreign and domestic—so that her Elizabeth is not the vacillating temporizing Elizabeth so often seen, particularly with respect to her courtship strategies. Elizabeth exercises more control over her secretaries, her privy council, her favorites, and her realm than they do over her. She is not simply the youthful and uncertain princess portrayed by Cate Blanchett or the supremely majestic queen of Glenda Jackson or Judi Dench; in Levin’s hands, seen through the theoretical perspective of gender, she is both.

This is a drastically stripped-down narrative, and the advantage of such a strategy is
that once the trees are gone, we can analyze the forest, and, from the point of view of gender and power, what a fascinating forest it is. Levin's queen is a complex admixture of medieval and early modern notions of queenship and governance who ruled a society more tolerant and open-minded than most of its European counterparts while still clinging to the older myths and preconceived attitudes of sex, race, and religious difference. Thus, the personal nature of monarchy characteristic of the Middle Ages was still a powerful force, making the physical, temporal body of the queen a key sign of the transformation of gender roles in early modern western Europe. On the other hand, the "sceptered realm" of England was replacing regional bonds with more modern notions of national loyalty, and the bureaucratic apparatuses of the state (such as espionage networks and foreign diplomacy) were replacing the kingdom as a family affair. Levin regards Elizabeth as more English than Protestant, and proposes that this national identity healed a realm unsettled by decades of shifting religious policies. Seen in this light, Elizabeth's famous procrastination and vacillation stands for the uncertainty of a kingdom in transition, and her religious solution reflects the deep ambivalence of the English as a nation not Catholic, not reformed. These are issues Levin took up at length in "The Heart and Stomach of a King," but they take on a new clarity and force when seen in this stark setting.

In the final chapter on domestic society and economics, Levin subtly and skillfully brings together the queen, her subjects, and her age in all its fascinating complexity. The English—and the Irish and the Scots—step forward as Levin takes up the thorny and contentious issues of the Poor Laws, witchcraft, Africans and the slave trade, and anti-Jewish sentiments. All of these "others," linked by theories of alterity and difference, not the least of which is the obvious fact of a female body occupying the throne, stand as witness to a vibrant moment that represents both the pinnacle of female power and signals the decline of that very power in the decades to come.

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