Film as a Historical Text:
Exploring the Relationship between Film and History through the Life and Reign of Elizabeth I

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CHAPTER 1:
INTRODUCTION

Long a subject of detailed discussion, Elizabeth I has captivated the interests of the research scholar to the amateur history buff. With a personal life as turbulent as her political reign, the controversies surrounding Elizabeth continue to generate debates about the issues of her rule and the impacts she had on Western civilization. Situated within these debates, and in historical debates in general, is the use and impact of film medium in history. Elizabeth I provides a strong character for film and her reign a powerful story line that attracts many film writers and directors. A popular topic for the historical film as well as the subject of historical research, the life and reign of Elizabeth I offers a unique lens through which to study the relationship between history and film. This thesis examines the relationship between history and film in an effort to determine whether such a relationship is beneficial and true to historical discourse.

METHODOLOGY

Using both an understanding of film-history theory and a historiography of Elizabeth’s life and reign, I will determine whether five films depicting Elizabeth’s rule should be considered part of the Elizabethan historical discourse or simply pieces of fiction. By comparing historical accounts of Elizabeth with films that portray her life and reign, the accuracy of those cinematic depictions can be determined. The general themes of Elizabeth’s life and reign are determined first from the historical texts and second from the historical films. The two sets of
themes are compared, looking for continuity or changes. The films will confirm or challenge, utilize or reject the historiographical themes.

Focusing specifically on the religious and succession questions that plagued Elizabeth’s reign, it will be determined whether these films accurately deal with those issues, or choose to ignore them completely. In order to establish this, first I will lay out the historiography of Elizabeth’s life and reign to understand the issues surrounding those questions. Just as films can vary on the style and approach to the same story, in effect proposing different themes and ideas, historians can have differing opinions on how to interpret facts and evidence to construct a historical narrative or analysis.

Finally it is determined whether the films should be regarded as pieces of fiction meant only to entertain, or as legitimate forms of historical analysis situated within historical discourse. This is achieved through the application of film-history theory. Concepts of true and false invention, supplement versus complement, and Rosenstone’s four fictional moves are discussed and then applied to the film narratives. Depending on the goals and purposes of the films, certain historical issues will or will not be addressed. Those with entertainment in mind will choose dramatic exaggeration over faithful adherence to historical fact. The films that do provide a narrative with historical context then are assessed to determine whether they should be considered supplements (a separate historical source) or complements to written biographies and analyses. This will determine their importance as histories and whether the relationship between film and history is beneficial to the field of history and furthers the development of historical discourse.

The five films span eight decades and are mainstream films produced by Hollywood. By choosing mainstream Hollywood films, the films should be recognizable and accessible to the
As the film medium increases its role in society and culture, mainstream films increasingly influence the public’s ideas and understanding of the world, and consequently, of history. Viewers generally trust what they have seen on film as truth, and often the film is the only contact they have with the subject matter. Produced with the general public in mind, these five films are advantageous in determining the use of film to educate, entertain, or both.
CHAPTER 2:

FILM THEORY

To establish the historical place and usefulness of the Elizabeth films, first film-history theory must be understood. Robert Rosenstone, a professor at the California Institute of Technology, developed the controversial field of film as history through his experiences as a historical film consultant and emerged a leader in the field.\footnote{Robert A. Rosenstone, “The Historical Film: Looking at the Past in a Postliterate Age,” in \textit{Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to Our Idea of History} (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 45-79.} Rosenstone finds that film can be an excellent source of history, provided it finds support within a historical discourse. He feels historians often put restrictions on the mediums through which history is discussed, and forget that history is both a process and a construction. This is as true for the written word as it is for film. Both are lenses through which the real world is reflected.\footnote{Rosenstone, \textit{Visions of the Past}, 49.}

Rosenstone divides historical films into two parts: history as document - the documentary, and history as drama - the mainstream film. Both follow six points in creating a visual historical world. History in film is always told as a story, with a beginning, middle and end, which delivers a moral message meant to show how history is progressive. Most films leave the audience feeling good and positive about the story, and when a film does present uncertainty or distrust as the main message, it still gives the audience optimism that raising awareness of certain questions will cause beneficial change. The viewers’ connection to film is essential with film’s use of presenting history through emotion and personalization. Allowing the viewer to experience the history through sensory means immediately makes the viewer feel
connected to the past, something the medium of film effectively delivers with its cinematographic and editing techniques. Those techniques, along with the use of sets and costuming, allow films to present the past visually. This in a sense brings history to life, or at least attempts to present it in a multi-layered context; the landscape, utensils, homes, clothing, and personal interactions all work together to show the bigger picture, rather than focusing on one fact after another. This is what Rosenstone calls showing history as process. While the written text will often sort aspects of history into different groupings, such as politics, religion, economics, social structure, film will integrate and connect all the aspects and definitions of history. As Rosenstone states, “[h]istory in film becomes what it most centrally is: a process of changing social relationships where political and social questions…are interwoven.”

History in film form is developed through the story of the individual because of the manner of the medium. The camera creates a connection between the viewers and the individuals on the screen. The actions of the individuals represent the history of a larger group. Film also depicts history through one story, one perspective of the past. The linear storyline is where Rosenstone finds fault with history as film and sees it as the main difference between film and the written text. Like the need to present the story through individuals, film is condensed into one linear storyline, not providing for the possibilities of interpretation found in the written document. While the written text allows for generalizations, film demands specific images that require a summary of events and facts more exact and linear than those found in the written text.

This comparison of the written text and film is where another leading history and film theorist differs with Rosenstone. Hayden White coined the term historiophoty to describe “the representation of history in verbal images and filmic discourse,” and argues that the historical

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3 Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past*, 61.
process that films and written documents use to decipher their data is the same. The historian and filmmaker both construct their version of a historical document, as the historian interprets and constructs the written word from facts much like the filmmaker does when he interprets the written word into a visual representation. Both the written text and film are products of “processes of condensation, displacement, symbolization, and qualification.” For White, this counters the charge that film provides both too much detail and too little detail when dealing with historical facts and events. Academics make such a claim based on the fact that films may require the use of sets and actors that do not absolutely correspond with the historical facts (too much detail) and often condense a story that transpired over the course of several years into a two-hour film (too little detail). But for White this condensation is a natural occurrence due to the medium of film, and is evident in written texts as well.

Rosenstone agrees with White on the method film uses to depict history, breaking it down into what he sees as four fictional moves: compression, condensation, alteration, and metaphor. Neither a film representation nor a written document can provide a literal truth of history. Instead the written text generalizes and film summarizes. Specific images are needed in film to present a coherent narrative, while the written word can generalize ideas and events. In both, certain facts represent the larger historical picture, and this is where film uses the four fictional moves to depict history. Film often compresses historical figures into certain stereotypes that offer a diverse representation of the population, using the obvious differences between the characters to illustrate the conflicts and tensions commonly found in that culture or society. The same can be done for events through condensation, where the timeline may be

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5 White, “Historiography and Historiophoty,” 1194.
altered or condensed in order to continue the narrative in a coherent storyline, or simply for production limits on time and money. Similarly, metaphor provides an outlet for actions or events that may not have occurred but which signify a theme or idea the film aims to convey, providing a connection to historically relevant material for the viewer. Alteration is used much in the same way, allowing for subtle changes of historical fact in order for the plot to generalize about a larger historical experience, as long as it adheres to an overall historical truth. For all of these methods, capturing the spirit of the times becomes the focal point, rather than the direct delivery of historical facts.

With everything in a film in a sense created because it is a representation, and the narrative constructed from certain pieces of evidence, Rosenstone ultimately judges the historical film based on its use of true versus false invention. A true invention uses the methods of compression, alteration, metaphor and condensation while staying true to the historical evidence. Even though a certain event depicted in a film may not have literally happened, such fiction is a true invention in that it could have happened because it can be situated within historical discussion on the topic. Events and people in a film symbolize the larger picture, and as long as evidence established within a historical discourse can verify the film representation, the viewer can accept it as a truth. In contrast, false invention deliberately ignores historical facts, depicting an incorrect and fake representation of history in order to explain the historically flawed plotline.

The use of invention usually unsettles historians grounded in the scientific and analytical processes of history. However, it should be recognized that just as there are different categories through which to view narrative history such as economics, politics, or religion, film proposes an alternative approach to history. How to evaluate its approach remains unclear, but the emotional and personal connection film creates with history cannot be ignored or underrated. In this sense
White sees film is a supplement, rather than merely a complement, of written text. The film itself would take part in a larger discourse of some historical truth, rather than simply being a visual representation of the written facts.

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6 White, “Historiography and Historiophoty”, 1193.
CHAPTER 3:
HISTORIOGRAPHY

HISTORIANS’ PERSPECTIVES

Historians have debated the reign of Elizabeth I, 1558 to 1603, from her rule as Queen to modern times. Most historians fit into one of two groupings: those who believe Elizabeth ruled as a great monarch and contributed immensely to the development of England, leaving behind a rich and noble legacy, and those who believe Elizabeth receives undeserved credit, that her advisors were the true statesmen behind her reign, and her policies resulted in numerous tensions and disruptions in England. As the historian Joel Hurstfield says in his contribution in the book Elizabeth I, Queen of England, biographies are subjective according to the perspective of the biographer. A biography takes its subject out of his or her context, looking at the history through the life of one person, which can cause misrepresentation. It can, however, also contribute to understanding the subject’s perspective of his environment. Understanding Elizabeth is in part dependent on understanding her subjects, advisors and especially the points of view of historians who wrote about her, both contemporaries and subsequent generations.

Historians view Elizabeth from two perspectives: her private life and the political issues of her public reign. For some the two are interconnected, finding that Elizabeth’s private life heavily influenced her political choices. Other historians instead choose to treat each as a separate topic, focusing either on her political tactics and decisions or her relationships and psychological characteristics. I will mainly deal with historians who have the former outlook of Elizabeth and her rule as queen, although the opinions of her range from critical to supportive.

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Those critical of Elizabeth find fault with her political agenda being either too supportive toward one religion or too lax toward another. They see her as having major personality flaws which hinder her abilities to rule rationally and effectively. In opposition, those who see Elizabeth bringing stability to England look towards her political policies and personality as strong-willed and well-governed; her hardships only strengthened her resolve to bring an era of peace and prosperity to England.

To produce this historiography, I have chosen five authors representing the differing opinions of Elizabeth, ranging from very positive to highly critical. As my foundation, I draw mainly from Carole Levin, whose biography utilizes the other four authors I have chosen to construct a comprehensive study of Elizabeth’s reign, which serves as an introduction. Assuming a moderate viewpoint on the issues of Elizabeth’s reign, Levin provides the ideal middle ground between the other author’s views and a standard against which to evaluate their perspectives against.

Taking a decidedly feminine viewpoint in the biography *Elizabeth I: A Feminist Perspective* is Susan Bassnett, a professor of cultural and translation studies at the University of Warwick. Producing a favorable depiction of Elizabeth, Bassnett views the Queen as a model for independent women and assesses her reign through a woman’s perspective. Bassnett ultimately asserts that Elizabeth’s strong personality, with as close as feminist leanings one could have in the sixteenth century, determined her productive yet controversial reign.

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8 Carole Levin, *Reign of Elizabeth* (New York: Palgrave, 2002). My main source from which the overall history of Elizabeth I is determined, providing a moderate analysis of Elizabeth, situated between the pro-Elizabeth historians and those generally critical of her reign.

9 Susan Bassnett, *Elizabeth I: A Feminist Perspective* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1989). Susan Bassnett has published over 20 books covering topics of feminism in culture, translation and literary studies of which *Translation Studies* (1980) remains one of the leading textbooks in the field, as well as editing several British cultural histories.
A much different view of Elizabeth is taken by Christopher Haigh, a lecturer of modern history at the University of Oxford with an interest in Elizabethan politics and religious history in England. Rather than assessing the successes and failures of Elizabeth’s policies, he judges her reign through her relationships with the political institutions of the day, such as her Council and the Catholic and Protestant churches. He bases his understanding of her reign through her use and maintenance of power and control over those institutions.

My third author, Wallace MacCaffey, remains one of the most distinguished experts on Elizabethan history, having written five biographies on various aspects of Elizabeth’s reign. Mainly dealing with the impact her political policies had on her reign, MacCaffey’s studies focus on understanding the political context of the Elizabethan era in an effort to comprehend the formation and significance of her policies.

Finally, my fourth author, J. E. Neale, has long been considered the definitive biographer of Elizabeth, especially concerning her relationship with Parliament, writing what many consider the standard of Elizabethan biographies in 1934. Neale stresses the obstacles Elizabeth faced as a woman on the throne at a time when politics and government were regarded as a man’s world.

These four historians’ approaches to Elizabeth represent a wide spectrum of historical interpretation. Ranging from critical to feminist to political to psychological in outlook, together they offer a wider and more in-depth understanding of Elizabeth. Well known to each other,

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these historians use their colleagues’ position on Elizabeth to place their own interpretation in a historical discourse. In line with her feminist views, Bassnett sees MacCaffey as taking a sexist approach to Elizabeth, clearly defining the differences between her reign and that of her father and brother. Bassnett attempts to counter MacCaffey’s assessment that Elizabeth lacked a sense of personal ambition and that her gender ultimately hindered her reign as Queen. Although generally agreeing with Neale’s positive representation of Elizabeth, Bassnett finds his treatment of the marriage issue patronizing and chauvinistic.\(^\text{13}\) Haigh defines Neale’s approach to Elizabethan history as the epitome of “modern romantic nationalist interpretation.”\(^\text{14}\) 

Bassnett points out that the majority of historians writing about Elizabeth have been male while the majority of novelists have been female, contributing to the gender-heavy representations of Elizabeth. She argues against what she sees in most biographical studies as Elizabeth’s negative personality traits attributed to her gender. Bassnett correctly states that the image of Elizabeth has changed depending on the era of scholarship and political and cultural situations. For example, she sees Neale’s assessment as forcing a resemblance between the English fending off the Spanish Armada and the fight against Hitler. To champion England’s imperialist nineteenth century ventures, the accomplishments of Drake and Raleigh in Elizabethan times were held in high regard and offered as parallels to England’s endeavors in Asia, India and Africa.\(^\text{15}\) 

Haigh contributes the positive approach to Elizabeth throughout the centuries to William Camden, who penned the first historical account of her reign, although Haigh sees it as historically masked propaganda praise. One of the leading historians who offer a more critical approach to Elizabeth’s rule, Haigh goes against what was the norm for centuries, unless a

\(^\text{13}\) Bassnett Elizabeth I, 40, 53.  
\(^\text{14}\) Haigh, Elizabeth I, 182.  
\(^\text{15}\) Bassnett, Eliazabeth I, 4.
historian had an issue with Elizabeth’s religious views. Haigh and others in his camp such as Carolly Erickson, attempt to deliver a more humanized approach to Elizabeth rather than glorified praise, highlighting her negative personality traits and how they affected her rule.\footnote{Haigh, \textit{Elizabeth I}, 182-84.}

Recently, historical understanding of Elizabeth has included a feminist outlook, as writers attempt to expose the sexist qualities of earlier histories while exploring the impact male attitudes had on a woman in a typically male role.

As these historians point out, determining a clear and balanced version of Elizabeth’s political and personal history is hard to achieve. Yet when compiled together, they can offer a more complete grasp of the politics and cultural influences of the era. A historian must place his account within the historical discourse of the topic, and to do so, he must take into account the diverse and wide-ranging analysis of the same subject matter.

\textbf{ISSUE OF RELIGION}

The two main themes historians discuss about Elizabeth’s political issues are religion and succession. The issue of religion stemmed from Elizabeth’s father Henry VIII and his break from Rome and the Catholic Church in his pursuit of a divorce from Catherine of Aragon. Those who had broken with Rome adopted the title of Protestants, but this was a broad designation and included a wide spectrum of religious attitudes. The conservatives, who wanted a church Catholic in name but separate from Rome, clashed throughout Henry’s rule with the reformers who saw this as an opportunity to spread the Protestant Reformation to England. No significant progression of Protestantism was made until the reign of Edward VI, Henry’s immediate successor and Elizabeth’s brother, under whom the English church developed heavy Protestant practices and leanings. However with the succession of Mary Tudor to the throne, the religious
pendulum swung back towards Catholicism. But Protestantism had taken deep roots, and Mary’s brief reign could not eliminate the growing opposition to Catholicism.

When Elizabeth took the throne, the country was split between Catholicism and Protestantism, with the latter split into several factions. Elizabeth moved the official English church back to Protestantism, but she remained unclear as to how strictly Protestant her policies would be. Negotiating between appeasing the Catholics and promoting the spread of Protestantism, Elizabeth seemed ambiguous on her religious stance. Her vague approach added to the religious confusion, with the Protestant factions competing with one another for Elizabeth’s support and the Catholics hoping her tolerance toward them predicted reconciliation with Rome. But her approach was politically rather than theologically motivated. While she remained devoted to her own personal beliefs, a moderate form of Protestantism, she understood the political necessity of accommodating both sides to maintain stability throughout the country.

Haigh supports the assertion that Elizabeth’s politics were not ruled by her religious beliefs, which contrasts the seventeenth through mid-twentieth century images of a devout Queen fighting for a Protestant ideology. In this respect Haigh agrees with the idea that Elizabeth remained a moderate in religious issues, identifying with the Protestant religion, but wary of religious means to dictate politics and against extreme Protestantism even more so than Catholicism. Her religious views gave credence to her rise to power although she was female. Those who felt a woman could not effectively rule the nation omitted Elizabeth from this generalization because of her moderate Protestant leanings; she was chosen by God to restore the true faith in England. Elizabeth herself often mentioned her divine right to rule, as chosen by God to rule England, and used this rationale to assert herself as the rightful monarch of England.

17 Haigh, Elizabeth I, 15, 25-7, 175.
regardless of her sex. But she used this tactic to focus more on the legitimacy of her rule rather than on establishing England as a Protestant nation.

But as with the other aspects of her policies, Haigh asserts Elizabeth did nothing to excessively risk the stability of her power and control. Although she might have held deeply religious beliefs, she attempted to compromise between the needs of politics and what she viewed as religious truth. While not above appeasing the Catholics for political reasons, she aligned herself with the Protestants to insure a base of power separate from Mary Tudor’s reign. Elizabeth had also identified with the Protestant church since childhood. Wanting a Protestant England, Elizabeth and her councilors attempted through political maneuverings to diminish the control of the Catholics, but the Catholic-leaning lords in the North proved to be a formidable obstacle in achieving such a goal, as they still held significant power in the Parliament. While still pursuing her own religious goals, she seemed to maintain a tolerance of religion and acted against both Catholics and Protestants when their doctrines were contrary to her own Protestant beliefs. However, Neale claims Elizabeth’s moderate stance on religion caused a clash with an increasingly radicalized Parliament.

ISSUE OF SUCCESSION

The issue of succession, key in providing stability to the reign of a woman whose position was insecure from the beginning, plagued Elizabeth throughout her reign. After Edward VI’s death, the line of succession seemed unstable with a woman, Mary Tudor, on the throne with no children. Accused numerous times of being involved in plots to overthrow Mary, Elizabeth was well aware of the dangers of the succession issue. When she finally succeeded

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18Haigh, *Elizabeth I*, 31-6, 41.
Mary, Elizabeth’s advisors urged her to find a husband and to produce an heir to create a stable atmosphere for her to rule. But she never did, whether from reasons personal or political, and refused to name an heir. In not naming a successor, Elizabeth attempted to avoid naming a front man for potential coups against her own rule, and this emphasized the idea that she was the sole ruler of England. This, however, did not produce the total stability Elizabeth strove for as her reign was complicated by numerous plots and conspiracies to place others on the throne, although the religion issue fueled several of these. The two issues were interconnected, as the religious background of a potential husband often came into question when seeking to resolve the succession problem. The religious affiliation of Elizabeth’s prospective successors also produced tension within the country, fueling plots against Elizabeth as religious conspirators sought to ensure their vision of England’s future.

ENGLISH POLICIES AND POLITICS

Both the religious and succession issues commanded top priority during her forty-five year reign and impacted both foreign and domestic policies. The two issues influenced, and, in turn, were influenced by England’s relationship with the continental countries, notably France and Spain. While enjoying a relative peace spotted with brief military confrontations in the first two decades of Elizabeth’s reign, her last two decades were embroiled in foreign political intrigues and hostilities. Haigh places the blame on the commanders and military institutions rather than Elizabeth for the failure of the English military in many of these conflicts. When dealing with war, her generals only saw Elizabeth as a woman, and women were not military strategists. Even though she would repeatedly prove her competence, winning battles against her Council and Parliament, her generals refused to submit to her authority, often disregarding her
orders. To aggravate matters, the Council would often disagree on which military tactics to pursue, so Elizabeth had partial support depending on the military situation. Attempting to keep England out of foreign conflicts, she failed as political pressures from her cabinet members and foreign allies persuaded her to invest men and money in disputes and skirmishes often originating in religious turmoil.

Spain, traditionally an ally of England since the reign of Henry VII, had become an enemy by Elizabeth’s death. A Catholic country, Spain felt threatened by Elizabeth’s Protestant practices, and eventually the King of Spain saw it as his mission to bring England back to the Catholic faith. Elizabeth managed to avoid war with Spain until 1587 despite growing hostility since the 1560s over the Netherlands. The Netherlands were controlled by Spain, although in the 1560s a growing Calvinist population brought unrest and dissidence. But unlike the Spanish who quickly sent troops to the Netherlands to crush the rebels, Elizabeth was hesitant in providing support for Protestants in foreign countries. Her hesitation arose from a fear of foreign entanglements, a fear exacerbated by the Calais disaster in 1563 when French Huguenots in a truce with French Queen Mother Catherine de Medici both turned on the English because of Elizabeth’s demands of Calais.

By the 1570s however, Elizabeth realized that the Spanish control of the Netherlands caused a serious risk to English safety, and took measures to support the Protestant rebels. Connected with this support was a tentative alliance with France, who also viewed Spain’s involvement in the Netherlands as a security risk. Elizabeth felt uneasy about her French alliance, worried that if the Netherlands achieved full independence from Spain, France would quickly fill the political void, which she viewed as an equally alarming situation. Nonetheless Elizabeth lent the French Prince, the Duke of Anjou, money to continue the fight in the
Netherlands, as well as entertained a marriage proposal from him to further cement the English and French alliance against the Spanish.

Elizabeth’s advisors negotiated potential marriage contracts for fifteen years with the French in order to curtail Spanish control in the Netherlands, with the first Duke of Anjou, and then later with the second Duke of Anjou after the former became King Henry III. Regardless of the anti-Spanish alliance England had with France, the English people were alarmed and disgusted with such a suggestion after the St. Bartholomew’s Day massacre orchestrated by Catherine de Medici in which thousands of Protestants were slaughtered. Elizabeth appeared to have a more personal interest in the marriage proposal to the second Duke of Anjou, but her subjects’ and advisors’ oppositions to the marriage eventually won out. By 1584 a marriage alliance between France and England was no longer seriously considered.

Relations between Spain and England continued to worsen over the Netherlands issue, especially when France could no longer support the Protestant rebels in the Low Countries. In 1584 the Duke of Anjou died, leaving a Protestant heir to the French throne should Henry III die. The Guise family, who wielded considerable power in French affairs and who were staunch Catholics, made an alliance with Spain to prevent a potential Protestant King. With internal political strife, Henry III had no choice but to join the Guise family and the Catholic League in order to remain in power. Thus Spain had effectively gained political influence in France, the Netherlands, and Portugal. By 1585 Elizabeth realized England needed to intervene in the Netherlands situation directly, sending men and money. While Elizabeth meant to pressure Spain into negotiations, Spain regarded English involvement in the Netherlands as an act of war.

English intervention in the Netherlands did not go as well as Elizabeth had hoped, as the English commanders clashed with their Dutch allies. Negotiations for a last effort peace
between Spain and England failed, with Spain’s refusal to grant the Dutch religious toleration. English-Dutch relations eventually improved in the late 1590s with the appointment of a capable and amiable English commander, although Spain would control the Netherlands until 1648.

Tensions with Spain escalated through the 1580s, culminating with Philip sending the Spanish Armada against England. Sir Francis Drake delayed the assault with his raid on the Cadiz harbor, but only by one year. When Philip finally sent his Armada against England, Continental Catholics and Catholic refugees from England were sure a Catholic uprising would occur to support Spain in its holy mission, but instead the English nation rallied around Elizabeth, choosing nationalism and patriotism over religion. The English were spared a major assault with storms scattering and delaying the Spanish ships, along with Drake’s fireship tactics that resulted in a retreat and Drake’s eventual defeat of the Armada. Although the English were victorious, the threat of future Armadas loomed through the 1590s as Philip resolved to cleanse England of its Protestant heretics. Philip felt he had the backing of Rome in his crusade against Elizabeth and Protestant England. The Pope had long supported the anti-Protestant movements in England, sanctioning open rebellion against a woman he saw as a heretic and pretender Queen. Two more Spanish Armadas were dispatched, only to meet their demise by heavy storms, saving England from further attacks.

Tensions with France were even more convoluted and hectic than those with Spain, with Elizabeth more hostile towards France in the 1560s than with Spain, mainly due to France’s connections with Scotland. Mary Stuart, Queen of Scotland married Francis II, briefly attaining the title of French Queen. Controversy arose when Mary included on the French royal hangings the seal of England, implying a claim to the English throne. In Scotland, Mary’s mother the Queen Regent, Mary of Guise, proclaimed Protestant ministers enemies of the nation. Having
anti-Catholic motives these Protestant ministers aimed to abolish Catholicism in Scotland. Mary of Guise requested French military support, which greatly alarmed Elizabeth, who aided the Protestant rebels with weaponry. The French removed their troops from Scotland with the death of Mary of Guise in 1560, and the English followed suit, although Elizabeth continued her cooperation with the Scottish Protestants. That same year Mary Stuart became Queen of Scotland and returned from France. Since the death of Mary I of England, Mary Stuart had been a strong candidate for the English throne as the Catholics viewed Elizabeth as illegitimate and an imposter on the throne. Mary Stuart was the granddaughter of Margaret, Henry VIII’s older sister, and according to primogeniture the next in line to the throne after Elizabeth. The presence of Mary Stuart so close to English soil only increased the trouble for Elizabeth, and continued to counter her foreign policy plan of creating a united Protestant British Isles, which aimed to include Ireland and Scotland.

Tensions with Scotland intensified with Mary Stuart’s marriage to her cousin Lord Darnley, a Catholic with his own ties to the English throne through the older sister of King Henry VIII. Darnley, an arrogant drunkard, brought about his own downfall when involving himself with the murder of Mary’s secretary Rizzio. The murder outraged the Scottish populace, and Darnley confessed and sought refuge with Mary. At the same time Mary held negotiations with Shane O’Neill, the leader of the Irish insurgents, causing Elizabeth great alarm. Continuing to make destructive decisions, Mary Stuart antagonized both her own subjects, causing alarm for Elizabeth’s advisors. Darnley was soon murdered, supposedly a revenge killing for Rizzio’s murder. In a move that infuriated the whole of Scotland, Mary married his suspected killer, Bothwell, causing a Scottish rebellion and forcing Mary to resign in favor of her son, James I. Mary made weak and ignorant choices when it came to men, quickly finding herself in situations
beyond her control. She claimed Bothwell had raped her to make the marriage less offensive to her people, professing her actions were a move to preserve her honor. Few, if any, believed her. Mary eventually escaped to England where she made overtures to the Spanish ambassador for help to take the English throne.

By the 1570s Scotland was causing significant problems for Elizabeth. Mary’s continued defiance lost her any good standing she had with Elizabeth, who had previously wanted to return her to the Scottish throne with a limited role. Now Elizabeth wanted Mary on trial for the murder of Lord Darnley, but without public knowledge. The Scottish nobles refused to take the blame for executing a former monarch alone so Mary remained a compulsory subject of England. Elizabeth sent men and money to help the Protestants overtake Mary’s few but persistent supporters. For a brief period relations were calm between the two countries, but the Guise family in France continued its interference in Scotland, causing disruption for the next decade. The Regent of Scotland, Morton, was backed with English support, which garnered both Catholic and Protestant Scottish enemies. The Guise’s used this to have James declared as King of Scotland and placed his French cousin, the new Duke of Lennox, at his side as an advisor, hoping to sway the King to the French. After internal political maneuvering, which Elizabeth’s advisors may have orchestrated and certainly knew about, James VI emerged out from under French influence. Looking to the future with the hope of succeeding Elizabeth onto the English throne, he remained careful not to alienate the Queen. Elizabeth ended her support of pro-English factions in Scotland, and relations between the two countries remained stable. The transition from Elizabeth to James VI as James I of England and Scotland was uneventful and painless, mainly due to James’s willingness to cooperate with England with the hope of receiving the English throne after Elizabeth’s death.
Elizabeth saw herself increasingly forced to align England with France as a countering act to Spain’s rise in influence and power, although the political situation in France deteriorated in the 1580s to a point where France became a limited ally. France had been embroiled in an inner conflict surrounding the three Henry’s: Henry III, King of France, Henry of Navarre, the Protestant, and Henry of Guise, the Catholic. Elizabeth continued to pressure Henry III to align himself with Henry of Navarre, but the Guise Catholic support in France was too strong and Henry was forced to side with the Catholic League and Guise family to remain in power.

A year later Henry arranged the murder of Henry Guise, resentful of the Catholic League’s power and wanting out from under its control. Negotiations with Henry of Navarre began, neither King nor Huguenots strong enough to defeat the Catholic League alone. This pleased Elizabeth and the decision to support the Henrys was unanimous. With the assassination of Henry III and Henry of Navarre’s ascent to the throne, English support doubled, and the Huguenots were successful against the League at first. When Spain added its support to the League however, Henry was forced to convert to Catholicism to garner the support of the moderate French Catholics. Elizabeth continued to lend French monetary and military support until 1595 and in 1598 France made a separate peace with Spain. Elizabeth, although concerned about the French situation, had to pick and choose where to give her support by the 1590s, especially with Ireland becoming more of a problem.

Ireland was a source of problems for England before Elizabeth’s reign, but the loss of previous loyal Irish communities and an increase in possible foreign intervention escalated the Ireland issue that remains unresolved to the present day. Loyal communities in Ireland came to resent the English government and sought to distance themselves from the English through religion, identifying with Catholicism. England’s response to Ireland mirrored that of Spain’s to
the Netherlands, with Elizabeth ordering the same plan of action she condemned Philip for taking in the Netherlands. Taxes and English military involvement increased throughout the 1560s, but the largest threat in Ireland was the possibility of foreign influence and interference. That Shane O’Neill, the leader of the Irish rebellion, was negotiating with Mary Stuart and Charles IX, King of France for military support, greatly alarmed Elizabeth, and she gave her advisors permission to quell the rebellion by any means necessary. The English gained relative authority in Ireland, starting a surge of English colonization that worried the Irish nobles, whose lands were being forfeited whether they were loyal to the English or not. The Irish nobles organized and sought support from Spain, confirming the beliefs of Elizabeth’s advisors that a subdued and obedient Ireland was the only answer for a safe English border. This was further encouraged when the leader of the Irish nobles escaped to the Continent and petitioned France, Portugal, Spain and the Pope for support.

Conditions in Ireland worsened as the English attempt for control became more brutal and violent. For almost a decade the English military, led by nobles known as the Commanders and hand-appointed by Elizabeth, was sent to Ireland to quell the uprisings. These Commanders often resorted to massacring whole communities, scorching the land, and executing prominent Irish noble families as punishment for the rebellions. By 1582 Elizabeth felt the Commanders were becoming too extreme and recalled Lord Grey, the current Commander in charge and placed a bounty on the Irish rebellion leader’s head. This achieved the desired results and the rebellion was over. As problems with Spain in the 1580s intensified, Elizabeth diverted her attention away from Ireland because the situation appeared to be stable.

However in the 1590s, when the English attempted to further limit the power of the Gaelic Lords even further, the clans united against the English under Tyrone, who led the Irish
rebellion until its defeat in 1603. The English-backed government in Ireland clashed with Gaelic Lords, uniting under Tyrone. Elizabeth attempted to negotiate, but would not acquiesce to Tyrone’s request that Catholics receive religious toleration in Ireland. Again the Irish situation paralleled the one in the Netherlands, Elizabeth having requested religious tolerance for the Netherlands which Philip refused to give. Tyrone attacked English forces and achieved victory after victory for the next few years. Spain sent men to support the Irish cause, but the foreign army was intercepted by the English and defeated. Tyrone’s defeat and surrender occurred a year later, but Elizabeth did not live to see it.

By the end of Elizabeth’s reign, England saw a reversal in its traditional allies and enemies. The wars with Spain and Ireland and the support given to the French and pro-English in Scotland took its toll on the royal bank. Elizabeth was finding it harder to obtain money to continue England’s foreign policies, as well as to pay soldiers returning from services in the various military expeditions. The last two decades of Elizabeth’s reign were strained with war and rebellion, suggesting to historians that Elizabeth’s reign may have been grander if it was shorter.

SUCCESSION CONSPIRACIES

The issue of succession also demanded the attention of Elizabeth and her advisors throughout her reign. Claims to the English throne started immediately after Mary I’s death, the two strongest candidates being Mary Stuart and Katherine Grey. The most ardent claims were made for Mary Queen of Scots, who would antagonize Elizabeth’s reign, both directly and indirectly, until her execution in 1587. Katherine Grey was considered an able alternative, the grand-daughter of Henry VIII’s younger sister Mary, until she married Edward Seymour in
secret, which deeply angered Elizabeth. For members of the court, all marriages had to have the approval of Elizabeth in case a powerful union should pose a threat to the throne. Katherine spent time in the Tower and eventually died while under house arrest.

Sympathetic to Mary Stuart in the beginning, Elizabeth eventually began to view her cousin as a viable threat to her reign as some of her advisors and nobles from the North became entangled in a conspiracy to place Mary on the throne. The nobles in the North were resentful of Elizabeth’s treatment toward them because she transferred power from their hands to weaker nobles in the South or to Northerners who lacked a significant base of power. Several of the Northern nobles were against Cecil, Elizabeth’s secretary of state and one of her most trusted advisors. These nobles wanted Mary restored as Queen of Scotland, Cecil out of power and Elizabeth under the control of the Northern nobility. DeSpes, the Spanish ambassador, along with nobles Northumberland and Westmoreland, wanted Mary Stuart made Queen of England and the Catholic Church restored to power. The Northern nobles decided on Thomas Howard, the Duke of Norfolk, as the possible husband for Mary Stuart.

Norfolk headed the commission assigned by Queen Elizabeth to hear evidence of Mary’s involvement in Darnely’s murder. When Elizabeth learned of Norfolk negotiating plans to marry Mary Stuart, she adamantly forbade the union. That the head commissioner would seek such a power play behind her back threatened Elizabeth’s sense of security. Norfolk then attempted to back out of his arrangements, seeking forgiveness from Elizabeth. Westmoreland and Northumberland were requested at court, an invitation which they denied, and Elizabeth sent troops out to arrest them. Both nobles responded with rebellion but were defeated. Northumberland was eventually executed while Westmoreland fled to the Continent. The other
nobles involved in the conspiracy, including Norfolk, were arrested but forgiven on the condition that they remain obedient to Elizabeth.

After the Northern Rebellion failed, DeSpes and a papal agent, Ridolfi, took over the conspiracy, known as the Ridolfi Conspiracy, with Norfolk still in place to marry Mary Stuart and take over the throne of England as Catholic monarchs. Spain agreed to support the conspirators and invade if Elizabeth was assassinated, but papers implicating the conspiracy were confiscated and the plot disintegrated. DeSpes was removed from England, Norfolk found guilty of treason and executed, and Mary Stuart implicated by her own writing to Norfolk. At this point Elizabeth understood the dangers Mary posed to her security. Although Parliament demanded Mary’s execution, Elizabeth was hesitant to set a precedent of beheading an anointed monarch.

In the 1590s minor attempts were made on Elizabeth’s life, although the seriousness and magnitude of some of the conspiracies may have been fabricated by her advisors to pressure Elizabeth or Parliament or to gain public support for Elizabeth. However the Essex rebellion at the end of Elizabeth’s reign was a very serious state matter. With matters worsening in Ireland, Elizabeth sent the Earl of Essex with an army of 16,000 men to put down insurrections.

Blundering the effort, Essex returned to court despite Elizabeth’s orders for him to remain in Ireland. He was brought to trial on charges of disloyalty, which he was cleared of, and misconduct in the governing of Ireland, of which he was found guilty. Sentenced to house arrest, he became more embittered toward Elizabeth and paranoid her advisors had plans to assassinate him. In a strange and senseless progression of events, Essex planned to overtake the Court, marching on the city of London. Not receiving the civilian support he expected, Essex retreated back to his house where he eventually surrendered.
MARRIAGE ISSUE

In addition to conspiracies and plots to control the succession to the throne, Elizabeth had to deal with succession issues posed by possible marriage alliances. There are differing opinions on Elizabeth’s motives to marry or not to marry. The most common opinion is that Elizabeth used marriage as a political tool to keep negotiations open with foreign countries and calm claims to the throne. Bassnett claims Elizabeth’s choice not to marry was prudent and not unusual in a time when many noble women did not marry for love but rather to further their family’s success. The normal assumptions made about Elizabeth’s refusal to marry are derived from “the view that marriage is desirable and that without it a woman is unfulfilled.” But Bassnett takes a feminist approach in regards to the issue, viewing Elizabeth as ahead of her time, choosing to be her own woman and no one else’s. Elizabeth became Queen at the age of twenty-five, with total control of the realm. Had she married, following the customs of the sixteenth century, she would have been subservient to her husband. Such a status would seem unattractive to Elizabeth, having risen from a state of fear and uncertainty to the highest position of power in England. To remain in control and in power, Elizabeth would have to stay in complete control of herself.

Elizabeth did entertain notions of marrying Robert Dudley, often labeled the love of her life. Elizabeth named Dudley the Earl of Leicester and he served on her council until his death, despite his family’s treasonous tendencies. Dudley’s father had been executed for involvement with a plot to put Lady Jane Grey on the throne instead of Queen Mary I. Elizabeth favored Dudley over the other nobles, especially in the first part of her reign. But opposition to the

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19 Bassnett, Elizabeth I, 40
20 Bassnett, Elizabeth I, 10, 40.
marriage by members of her Council who doubted Dudley’s motives convinced her of the dangers of such a union. Bassnett acknowledges the closeness of Elizabeth and Robert Dudley’s relationship. Bassnett finds it possible that Elizabeth viewed the idea of virginity metaphorically as opposed to something literal, but whether she had a physical relationship with Dudley is irrelevant. Elizabeth’s closeness to Dudley produced results that furthered his career as well as offered Elizabeth a cherished companion whose opinion she valued. A physical relationship would not have changed their relationship since ultimately marriage between the two was not an option.21

MacCaffey analyzes the relationship between Dudley and Elizabeth in terms of Dudley’s ability to adapt to his current situation. Acknowledging the potential wedding between the two, MacCaffey argues Elizabeth backed away romantically from Dudley, but maintained her fondness for him. In return Dudley sought to carve out a new place for himself, working his way on to her Council and proving himself adept at political maneuvering. MacCaffey also argues that Dudley appealed to that rebellious side of Elizabeth. While Cecil represented the norm in Elizabethan court and politics, rising to prominence through the layers of Court with dignity, Dudley represented the defiant side of Elizabeth. While she remained very concerned with preserving a dignified image and followed the rituals of court almost religiously, she also indulged in scandalous behavior. Partly to shock the foreign dignitaries, particularly those of Rome and Spain, and partly to satisfy a repressed rebellious personality, Dudley’s charm and affections offered a playful outlet for Elizabeth’s humor.22

Elizabeth also considered marriage to Francis, the Duke of Anjou, but public opinion against the French halted anything more than a political alliance. At times Elizabeth seemed

21Bassnett, Elizabeth I, 47-8.
willing to overlook the Duke of Anjou’s Catholicism, even accepting his conditions that he be able to practice mass in private. But Elizabeth changed her mind over the religion issue. Even though she requested his attendance at Court twice, a practice she required to reduce the number of serious proposals, after almost a decade of negotiations from 1570 to 1579 it was clear no marriage would take place, much to the relief of her Council and subjects.

In the 1560s marriage negotiations between the Austrian Archduke and Elizabeth took place, although whether Elizabeth actually planned to marry the Archduke is unclear. But such an alliance would counter-balance Mary Stuart who had recently married Lord Darnley, doubling the couple’s claim to the English throne. Negotiations were shaky at first due to Elizabeth’s refusal to allow the Archduke to openly attend Catholic mass as King of England. In 1566 she asked if the Archduke would be willing to privately worship the Catholic mass while publicly attending Protestant mass. With this agreement the alliance seemed manageable, but Elizabeth refused to consent without advice on the issue from her Council, who were split on how to counsel her. Eventually Elizabeth decided to end negotiations, since she would not allow the Archduke to practice Catholic mass even in private. This relieved those against the marriage who feared a Catholic king would cause religious tension while encouraging Catholics to revolt.

The issue of Elizabeth marrying was a sensitive one for the Council to consider. While Elizabeth remained without an heir, the succession of the throne remained in doubt. This was connected with religious tensions, as a Catholic Mary Stuart was next in line as heir. Marriage was also connected to foreign policies, as an alliance with one of the Continental nations could prove advantageous or disastrous, and the question of religion remained as most of the nations offering proposals were Catholic, with the exception of the German Princes.
In the marriage debate, Haigh argues against the feminist viewpoint and instead finds the search for a husband a means to produce an heir rather than to find a male ruler for England. The need for an heir to eliminate the succession issue was the motivation behind the Council’s marriage arrangements, but Elizabeth preferred to use marriage as a political tool rather than a solution to the succession problem. For Haigh, this is another example of how Elizabeth did not look to the future after her reign, but instead concentrated on maneuvering within her own sphere of power. After it became clear Elizabeth had no intention of marriage, the debate concerning the succession became even more heated. Elizabeth refused to name an heir and ordered the suppression of any succession speculation. With this suppression she sought to stabilize her own power, making herself necessary to the nation as the focal point of power, but such a move could risk the future stability of the nation.²³

COURT AND COUNCIL RELATIONSHIPS

Another point of interest for historians is the role Elizabeth’s Council and court life had during her reign. Historians debate the influence the Council held over Elizabeth, and its actual strength of power. MacCaffey places great value on Elizabeth’s Council, particularly in Cecil and Dudley. Cecil made a perfect Protestant ally for Elizabeth, as he viewed the religion in secular terms as it broke away from the higher authority of Rome and the Pope. Foreign politics brought out the politician in Cecil, and he pursued policies with a sense of isolationism, wanting minimal foreign entanglements and full English control over those in which the nation did involve itself. MacCaffey attributes the development of Elizabeth’s power system to the Queen herself, her leading council man Cecil, and council favorite Robert Dudley. The start of her

²³Haigh, Elizabeth I, 14-5, 21-2.
reign was heavily shaped by those three personalities as well as their reactions to significant events of the time. Elizabeth believed adamantly in her complete control as Queen, and could be insensitive towards the ideas and policies of her Council and nobles. Cecil and Dudley countered Elizabeth with their more open-minded approach to issues, although their motives still had some self-serving undertones. Cecil and Dudley sought to influence Elizabeth towards a more activist mindset, as the conservative Elizabeth acted passively, hesitant to proceed in commitments unless absolutely necessary.²⁴

Neale argues that Elizabeth made the decisions and her Council simply offered their opinion and advice. Cecil and a select others would play advocate to Elizabeth’s decision, but ultimately the power rested with her. Cecil held a highly respected position in Elizabeth’s council, one of her most trusted advisors and one who would match her decisions with his own. With the Scottish situation in 1559, Cecil felt it best to send troops to fight against the French in Scotland. As in all matters of war, Elizabeth was uncertain and hesitant to commit troops without the odds significantly in her favor. But this situation provides an excellent illustration of Cecil and Elizabeth’s relationship. With the majority of the Council against his plan, Cecil needed the Queen’s backing. Originally not feeling the time was right to make a military commitment in Scotland, Elizabeth eventually capitulated to Cecil’s plan. Exactly what occurred between the two remains unknown, but Cecil threatened resignation, and rather than lose her most trusted advisor, she put faith in his strategy and could only hope for the best. Cecil’s plan was victorious in its execution and England was granted a brief reprieve from tensions in Scotland. However, in the coming decades the situation would only become more critical, particularly regarding Mary Queen of Scots.²⁵

²⁵ Neale, Queen Elizabeth, 90-2.
As practice and tradition had established the monarch as a male, Court life found itself engineered to cater to a male environment. Although Mary Tudor’s short reign preceded Elizabeth’s, it was regarded as a failure and did not impact the mechanisms of Court life. However, Elizabeth quickly adapted and the gender issue solved itself. Whereas the nobles at Court would flatter a king, they found themselves falling in love with the Queen, although mostly in an artificial sense. This devotion to the Queen provided Elizabeth with the courtly support she needed to maintain her power, and she learned to use her womanly charms to earn the service of her nobles. Neale cites her intellect, humor and quick wit as factors in keeping the flirtatious nature of Court as innocent in nature as royal decorum demanded, but real enough to provide results for Elizabeth.26

PERSONALITY OF A QUEEN

Historians consider Elizabeth’s personality and her outlook on her position as Queen an important factor to understanding her reign as well, some taking a psychological approach in analyzing her decisions on political and personal matters. For MacCaffey, Elizabeth’s personality strongly influenced her politics. While very interested and involved in politics, particularly concerning domestic issues, she lacked several of the attributes which defined her father’s and sister Mary’s reigns. Elizabeth had no desire to rule any nation other than England and Ireland, which she considered part of her realm. She had no conquest ambitions or deep theological issues to guide her foreign politics, but rather reacted to the situations around her, giving her “political outlook a certain detachment.”27 While Elizabeth provided a strong sense of leadership with domestic issues, she remained hesitant and uncertain in how to proceed with

26Neale, Queen Elizabeth, 63-5.
foreign engagements. For MacCaffey, this uncertainty stems from her understanding the limitations of her rule as a woman; she could not physically carry out her policies like a male monarch. Dealing with foreign issues reminded her of the limits of control she would have as a female monarch. She wished to direct events within her immediate power as much as possible, and this resulted in a conservative outlook in her politics.²⁸

She viewed the role of the monarchy as a position of divine right and responsibility, necessary to create and maintain stability for the nation. Her stubbornness and resentment of decisions forced upon her by the Council or military arose from this sense of being God’s instrument. MacCaffey further implies that Elizabeth’s resentment toward forced advice stems from her belief that such help was given because her Council doubted her ruling capabilities due to her gender. What resulted was an intelligent yet slow-moving leadership that allowed the Council members to devise and initiate policies while Elizabeth stood by to accept, change, or reject their proposals.²⁹

Haigh views Elizabeth’s success in her reign, which he sees as her ability to remain in power, as a product of survival instincts rather than the use of great diplomatic skills. He argues that outside forces are responsible for the achievements of her reign due to Elizabeth’s personal understanding of her role as Queen. Rather than seeking solutions to problems, she instead avoided them, not looking to the future of the nation. Her aspiration was to be Queen and it was a goal she achieved. She sought no higher purpose for her reign as “her exercise of royal power was not a means to a higher end, it was an end in itself.”³⁰ Although she proclaimed to rule for God and the people, it was another strategy of survival, to keep the support of her subjects and the illusion of power going.

²⁸MacCaffey, The Shaping of the Elizabethan Regime, 458-60.
²⁹MacCaffey, The Shaping of the Elizabethan Regime, 460-1.
³⁰Haigh, Elizabeth I, 181.
As Elizabeth aged, she failed to maintain her role, and her projected image and the reality of who she was were at odds. This prompted a lack of faith in her rule, especially during the last fifteen years when England became heavily entangled with foreign wars. Disillusionment set in and Elizabeth was mocked as a “silly old woman”. Only when the Scottish Stuart line failed to live up to people’s expectations did Elizabeth’s reign set a gold standard to measure James I and Charles I against. But this reverence of Elizabeth was more a negative commentary of the Stuart policies than an extolling of Elizabeth’s politics. Made to reflect everything the Stuarts should have done, this revised image of Elizabeth was just as distorted as the “silly old woman” image perpetuated by the disillusioned.

Neale praises Elizabeth’s diplomatic skills and credits her education with providing the necessary tools to rule, particularly languages. Elizabeth could converse fluently in Italian, Latin and French. Her language skills only fueled her vanity, especially when she beat foreign diplomats at their own games in their native language, prompting their respect and awe in a female monarch. Although the idea of a “modern woman as a ruler” was still unheard of in the sixteenth century, Elizabeth had infatuated her people and her Court. Her intense desire to rule infected those around her, and she used her wit and speech to gain the people’s affection. She demanded efficiency and could instantly rage against some indiscretion or advantage she felt her nobles had made or taken against her. But her ability to provide her subjects with an intimate gratification for some service went a long way in keeping their support. She understood the complexities and jealousies of Court and would use them to her advantage.

Bassnett spends a significant amount of time discussing Elizabeth’s personality, as it explains her often contradicting sense of control, seeming to have both a decisive and indecisive

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32 Neale, *Queen Elizabeth*, 212-16.
mind depending on the time or issue. Finding her intelligent, with a strong sense of humor and shrewdness, Bassnett claims Elizabeth surrounded herself with strong men who were granted limited control. Her unpredictability regarding political and personal issues kept her council sharp and alert. Doing one thing while saying another was a necessary tactic with the political and religious atmosphere that surrounded Elizabeth early in life while she fought to stay alive and reach power. She “learned that flexibility could mean survival,” particularly while navigating the ever-evolving religious controversies.\(^{33}\) This fickleness and impulsiveness, shaped during her young adulthood, carried through in her political policies as ruler.

Regarding Elizabeth as vain, Bassnett emphasizes her enjoyment in playing the intellectual game of courting and finding amusement in “being the object of desire without being possessed.”\(^{34}\) This courting game expanded to include political dimensions as situations abroad impacted Elizabeth’s tactic of using marriage as a political weapon. She understood the gravity of the political situation and the tenuous power she held as an unmarried Queen. Elizabeth often played the gender card when dealing with political opponents, never degrading herself because of her gender, but acknowledging the prejudices against women at the time. This proved to be an effective method for stifling critical remarks and further displayed Elizabeth’s shrewd understanding of political propaganda and manipulation.

Bassnett views Elizabeth as a woman and a ruler, with the understanding that “her sex never diminish[ed] her prestige, it actually enhanced it.”\(^{35}\) Women were generally not seen in positions of power when Elizabeth began her reign, and she had the unusual opportunity to use two other prominent Queens as models: Mary Tudor, her half-sister, and Mary Queen of Scots, her cousin; viewing both as examples of what to avoid as a Queen. Instead of becoming a victim

\(^{33}\)Bassnett, Elizabeth I, 121.
\(^{34}\)Bassnett, Elizabeth I, 42.
\(^{35}\)Bassnett, Elizabeth I, 15.
and ineffectual ruler due to assumptions of femininity, as Mary Tudor did with an unhappy marriage or Mary Queen of Scots did with her reliance on charm, Elizabeth emerged as a strong ruler, able to use her feminine downfalls as attributes. She strongly “reiterated her divine right as monarch” and her capability as a woman to rule, fully aware that maintaining her power and keeping a stable balance within the nation during tumultuous times was as much for her own survival as it was England’s.\(^{36}\) Her legacy is that she succeeded at both.

Elizabeth ruled for forty-five years, achieving military successes over Spain and Scotland while contributing to the ongoing struggles in Ireland. The years ranging from the mid 1560s to the mid 1580s are often regarded as her golden years; years of relative prosperity and peace. But events in the late 1580s and 90s entangled Elizabeth in foreign conflicts that left many of her subjects feeling unfavorable about her reign.

\(^{36}\)Bassnett, *Elizabeth I*, 55.
CHAPTER 4:
HISTORICAL ANALYSIS OF THE FILMS

The five films range from 1939 to 2007, differing in plot points and issues covered. The main question is whether they should be considered legitimate histories of Elizabeth or pieces of factious entertainment. The narrative of the film can provide some guide as to the film’s intentions, either entertainment or education. Analyzing the historical accuracy of each film using the true versus false invention method will help determine the films’ importance within historical discourse on Elizabeth. If the film is considered a history of Elizabeth, then it must be determined whether it is a complement or supplement to the written text. Rosenstone argues that good historical films are supplements in that they can stand alone as their own history. Whether this is true depends on the topics the films cover. The main issues of Elizabeth’s reign concern the religion and succession issue. The films should cover these issues and explain their context within Elizabeth’s reign, connecting her personal life and her political reign, to be considered supplements.

The look of the films is an important factor as well. Historical texts describe the era through facts, while films uses the viewer’s senses to connect them to the past. A theatrical production provides no more accurate context than a historical novel. For a film to be useful, it must accurately depict the look and feel of the era, bringing the facts to life visually. Because of the medium constraints that film works within, condensation of facts is expected. As long as the narrative provides the viewer with a clear sense of how the depicted events connect the story to a larger historical context, then its purpose as a history is achieved.
I chose the order of the films at random to eliminate any bias towards the issues covered or time the films were produced in. Treating Shekhar Kapur’s 1998 and 2007 films as a connected piece of work also impacted how his films were considered histories. In dealing with films that range over several decades, the styles of dialogue, sets and costumes, and cinematographic look of the films greatly differ. These factors help provide an understanding of the films’ purpose, whether to entertain or educate. In analyzing the films, both content and visualization of the narrative are assessed. Films rely on the visual to engage the viewers just as a written text relies on its structure. Both the content and the visualization of that content in the films must provide the viewer with an accurate sense of the history to be considered a historical text of Elizabeth’s life and reign.

ELIZABETH I

This two-part mini-series produced by HBO, taken as a three hour movie, traces Elizabeth’s reign from 1579 to her death in 1603. Broken into two sections, the storyline revolves around her two most discussed romances: Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester and Robert Devereux, Earl of Essex. The film attempts to show the conflicts between Elizabeth’s personal life and political rule through her tragic romances, unfulfilled because of her political obligations. Depicting how Elizabeth’s private life influenced her political rule is a popular approach of historians, but the film falls short in its aim. The film does not put her life, political or personal, in historical context. The actress playing Elizabeth, Helen Mirren, appears in nearly every scene. Dealing more with emotions, personality and relationships, the film uses politics as a background against which to explore Elizabeth’s personal life and a way to further the narrative of her story.

The romance theme connects both sections of the film as well as provides the overarching thesis the film attempts to argue: attaining personal happiness and being Queen can never coincide. Effectively portraying Elizabeth’s struggles to contain her heart’s desires, the film summarizes its romantic theme in Elizabeth’s quote: “the hardest thing to govern is the heart.” Constantly setting aside her own wishes in order to fulfill matters of the state, her romances only prove to complicate both her political and personal life. Both Leicester and Essex are involved in state affairs, and their connection to Elizabeth has far-reaching consequences. The film accurately portrays this idea that the two aspects of her life were intertwined, as everything Elizabeth did in her life affected her reign.

However, the film has a narrow perspective on events in Elizabeth’s life, only showing them from her perspective. Nothing is shown without its relation to Elizabeth. The Council’s debates without Elizabeth’s presence, the execution of military actions, and the planning of conspiracies against Elizabeth are all absent from the film. Instead, the film focuses on Elizabeth’s reactions to events, exploring her personality and behavior as a female Queen. This positions the story more as a psychological study rather than a historical study. In an interview about the film, Helen Mirren states, “Within the landscape of these huge historical events taking place, you have a very personal story.” It is that personal story the film illustrates, using those historical events as markers to show the personal changes in her life.

Helen Mirren’s performance of Elizabeth adheres to historians’ descriptions of the Queen’s personality, providing an accurate interpretation of how she dealt with her personal and political decisions. She uses her power to both manipulate and keep her favorite men around her. Her vanity shows through her orders to remove all the mirrors in her chambers and her jealous side is seen in her dealings with men. For example, when Leicester and Essex have intimate
relations with other women, Elizabeth punishes both men, using her power to banish Leicester from Court and to force Essex to marry. Her weaknesses regarding men are illustrated by her inability to remain angry at Leicester or Essex for long, eventually forgiving both for any offense they may have done.

The film immediately sets up the succession issue, opening with Elizabeth being checked by a doctor to confirm she is still fertile. A possible alliance with France through the Duke of Anjou is pushed by her Council and she entertains the idea, agreeing to see Anjou. While historians agree Elizabeth seemed to have a personal interest in the Duke, the film takes their relationship a step further. In the film Elizabeth plans to marry Anjou but the public’s aversion to a union with France is too great an obstacle to overcome. Rather than using Anjou’s courtship as a political maneuver, for the director, it is a matter of the heart.

In the second section of the film, the conflicts between Elizabeth and Essex are explored. Accurate in the depiction of their love/hate relationship, their personal feelings did impact state matters in Ireland and in England. Essex was involved in the Lopez scandal and facilitated the doctor’s death as the film shows. Roderigo Lopez, Elizabeth’s personal physician, was accused of planning to poison the Queen and confessed to the conspiracy under torture. Essex used this to further his favor with the Queen, although it backfired. The film shows how Essex’s personality was his ultimate downfall, how he reached too far in his ambitions and, when he failed, became brash, arrogant, and paranoid. He saw himself as an equal to the Queen and increasingly questioned her authority. His reckless attitude and riotous actions led to charges of treason and, ultimately, his death.

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The film portrays the Council as having a limited role in making political decisions, while depicting Elizabeth as commanding an almost absolute power. The Council even states in the film that they do what the Queen wants. Apparently present for comic relief, the Council acts as a peanut gallery commenting on Elizabeth’s decisions and life. She does maintain a close relationship with her Council that is effectively demonstrated in the film, particularly with her use of pet names for individual members. However, Leicester is seen as her primary confidant in the first section of the film while historians consider Cecil as her main advisor. The second part is accurate in Essex and Robert Cecil competing for Elizabeth’s favor, with the second generation of advisors rising to power.40

Overall the film gives an accurate depiction of events and personalities, with some compression of the timeline and a few exaggerations of Elizabeth’s relationships, such as with the Duke of Anjou. A sense of Elizabeth’s personal life seems to be the main purpose of the film and in that it succeeds. With its reliance on romance to provide the catalyst for Elizabeth’s decisions and actions against the background of politics, the film moves away from historical explanations and instead towards emotional interpretations. But because the focus of her life stays in the personal arena, its use as a history of her reign is tentative, at least regarding the details of her political policies.

THE VIRGIN QUEEN

Produced in 1955, The Virgin Queen is merely a story of romance.41 The interesting twist is that Elizabeth acts as the antagonist. She is the obstacle the two lovers Sir Walter Raleigh and Beth Throckmorton must overcome to be together. The film is very critical of

40 Haigh, Elizabeth I, 105.
41 The Virgin Queen. DVD. Directed by Henry Koster. 1955, Twentieth Century Fox Film, 2007
Elizabeth and offers no discussion of historical issues such as England’s relations with other European countries or the questions of religion or succession. Robert Dudley and Christopher Hatton are her two main advisors, with Dudley being on the side of love and good and Hatton being the evil conspirator against Raleigh and Beth. The film takes Elizabeth’s use of bestowing affection on those in her Court and accounts of her favor of Raleigh and turns it into a love story that has only a skeleton of historical truth. Raleigh and Beth did marry without Elizabeth’s permission but whether the union angered Elizabeth out of jealousy or for political reasons is a matter of interpretation. While Elizabeth did regard Raleigh as one of her favorite Courtiers, there is no evidence that the relationship was more than the usual Court flirtation practices.

There is also no evidence of a rivalry between Christopher Hatton and Raleigh. Both held the position of Captain of the Guard, but Hatton was not one of Elizabeth’s main advisors or on the Council as the film suggests. Instead the main rivalry was between Essex and Raleigh. Elizabeth enjoyed having young men at her Court to flatter and amuse her. She did award her favorites wealth and positions of power. This bequeathing of monetary and political rewards provides the basis for the film’s claim that Elizabeth was in love with Raleigh.

The film also incorrectly claims Elizabeth was found to be sterile at the age of eighteen. On the contrary, royal doctors would confirm Elizabeth’s childbearing abilities publically to assure the English people and any potential suitors of her capability to produce an heir. The sterile issue is the film’s interpretation of why Elizabeth never had an heir and where her jealousy of Beth’s pregnancy arises from, but such a claim is not supported by historical fact.

The look of the film does not provide an accurate depiction of the Elizabethan age, but instead illustrates the common period piece practices of the 1950s and of Hollywood’s golden

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age. The costumes and sets are very theatrical, not even attempting to create an air of reality. Every dress of Elizabeth’s appears as though it is from one of her portraits, which would depict clothing worn for special occasions and not for everyday wear.

The film grossly abuses historical fact and does not intend any educational purpose. It only seeks to be romantic entertainment. While Bette Davis’s depiction of Elizabeth is correct in her obsession with youth and vanity, she is perceived as a cruel hindrance to true love, embittered by her own failures of the heart. This is not Elizabeth’s story, but Raleigh and Beth’s story of how they found love and happiness in a world where Elizabeth demanded undeterred devotion to herself.

THE PRIVATE LIVES OF ELIZABETH AND ESSEX

A product of the studio system in Hollywood, The Private Lives of Elizabeth and Essex from 1939 is no more than a romance story to promote two leading movie stars, Bette Davis and Errol Flynn. Like the 1955 Bette Davis film, Private Lives uses a broad interpretation of events to form its plot. Based on Maxwell Anderson’s play Elizabeth the Queen and Lytton Strachey’s bibliography Elizabeth and Essex, the film continues the romantic approach to Elizabeth’s life. Most historians challenge Strachey’s account, which he claims is a psychobiographical approach. The film uses Elizabeth’s policy of using affection as a political tool to construct a romance between Essex and the Queen. While some biographers stress a romantic relationship between the two, most historians find their relationship similar to others in the Court where Essex, alongside others, flattered Elizabeth to receive her favor and affection. The film falsely invents historical incidents to provide dramatic obstacles.

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45 Bassnett, Elizabeth I, 114.
The film’s focus is the romance between Elizabeth and Essex rather than the political aspect of her reign. Like the other films, it uses her political decisions to support or determine her romantic and emotional needs. The film’s theme is one of love and hardship; Elizabeth must prioritize matters of the state over her personal happiness. The ending affirms that theme. Essex dies to keep Elizabeth and her throne secure even though they love each other. Essex’s overreaching, cocky attitude is correctly depicted and did actually cause his downfall. But in the film it is suggested that Elizabeth and Essex could have worked out their tensions if only they could communicate. The Council factions and tensions were accurate but there is no evidence of Council conspiracies to discredit Essex as the film suggests. The withholding of letters is untrue, and, in fact, Elizabeth repeatedly wrote to Essex about the campaign.\textsuperscript{46} The film also contributes Essex’s failure in England to Elizabeth withholding supplies in men when, in fact, Elizabeth provided Essex with the largest army sent to Ireland. It was Essex’s poor commanding skills and lack of strategy that gave Tyrone the upper hand, prompting Essex to negotiate a truce.\textsuperscript{47}

The film also attempts to claim the truce was forced upon Essex through Tyrone’s trickery. This follows the film’s idea that Essex was a victim of outside circumstances rather than of his own faults. In the end Essex redeems himself by accepting his death, acknowledging that as long as he lives he would want the throne more than Elizabeth’s love. Again there is no evidence to support this; rather historians see Essex’s revolt as a last attempt to gain power knowing he was out of the Queen’s favor.

Lastly, one of the most important changes made by the film is the fact that the people rose up with Essex during his revolt. This is the opposite of what happened and one of the reasons his rebellion failed. The film is right in dramatizing Essex’s belief that he had the

\textsuperscript{46}Bassnett, \textit{Elizabeth I}, 116.
\textsuperscript{47}Levin, \textit{The Reign of Elizabeth I}, 78.
people’s love and adoration even more than the Queen and that this false impression of his own power led him to act against the Queen. No mob joined with him however, and he retreated back to his house for safety. The film changes the events of the rebellion, making it a personal confrontation between Elizabeth and Essex to emphasize the love betrayed. But love was not a motive of Essex’s. Rather he felt the Council conspired against him and he wanted to secure his position with the removal of certain government officials, by force if needed.  

These changes made by the film are false inventions in that they go against documented evidence of what actually happened. Such changes provide a completely different explanation for events that have no basis in historical fact. More than an interpretation, the film ignores historical evidence to support its own romance driven plot. Providing no other discussion of issues besides Essex and his influence over Elizabeth and at Court, this film intends to entertain viewers and advertise the studio’s main stars.

**ELIZABETH**

The 1998 film *Elizabeth* is part one in a proposed trilogy about Elizabeth’s life and reign by the director Shekhar Kapur. Starting from Mary Tudor’s reign, the film traces Elizabeth’s uncertain rise to Queen to the failure of a plot against her, the Ridolfi Conspiracy. The film takes certain liberties with events and people, but follows Rosenstone’s four fictional moves. None of the changes impact the overall history but instead attribute certain actions to different people or times. The sense of what Elizabeth experienced and the hardships and uncertainties of her reign are still expressed and understandable. However, if the viewer wanted a completely accurate comprehension of events during her first 15 years, the film confuses rather than clarifies.

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The main historical discrepancy is the treatment of the Ridolfi plot. Rather than portray that one event, several succession and assassination conspiracies are condensed into the one illustrated in the movie. The Ridolfi plot ends with Norfolk’s death, which is seen in the film. The Earl of Arundel is also beheaded in the film, but he was involved in the Northern Rebellion, the precursor to the Ridolfi Conspiracy, and actually was not executed. The Bishop Alvaro de la Quadro was the Spanish Ambassador, but not at the time of these plots. The ambassador was instead Guerau DeSpes, who is in Kapur’s 2007 film; although he should have been already expelled from England for the timeline the 2007 film covers. Also the fact that Alvaro is killed is incorrect as none of the Spanish Ambassadors were executed. This would have been a great insult to Spain which neither Elizabeth nor her advisors would have dared commit, no matter what the offense. Daniel Craig plays a priest sent by the Pope, probably meant to be the Papal agent Ridolfi, but instead he is billed as playing the priest John Ballard. John Ballard was involved in the Babington Plot which took place ten years after the conclusion of the film’s timeline. This is the plot that implicates Mary Queen of Scots and results in her death as seen in the 2007 film.  

50 The condensation of these plots and switching of people does not change the effect of the conspiracy plotline in the film. The idea that Elizabeth’s life remained in danger throughout her reign and was particularly vulnerable in its beginning is still clear. The only problem comes from confusion a viewer might have if he has any knowledge of the particular conspiracies.

The film provides an excellent personal understanding of Elizabeth, as few cover her time as a princess to her coronation as Queen. As the film progresses, the character of Elizabeth develops. The viewer experiences the changes in Elizabeth’s life with her, understanding how her emotions become controlled. Constructing the careful balance she maintains between  

50 Levin, The Reign of Elizabeth I, 44, 87-98.
compassion and indifference, Cate Blanchett portrays Elizabeth as having a cold demeanor with moments of weaknesses of the heart. The film is a psychological study of how the icon came to be and how the mythology of her reign developed. The intelligence and commanding presence Elizabeth was known for comes through successfully in her conversations with both Parliament and suitors. Particularly clear are her use of wit and her ability to perform under pressure. But a vulnerable side is portrayed as well, with Elizabeth practicing the speech she plans to give before Parliament concerning the Act of Uniformity. Stuttering and frustrated in practice, she exudes authority in front of her audience.

Her relationship with her Council is portrayed in the film in a way that accepts both historical interpretations of the issue. When Elizabeth first ascends the throne, she relies heavily on her Council’s advice, but later on, after a series of military failures, she announces she will follow her own advice. In the film this shows her development as a Queen and her understanding of her role. Historically, it acknowledges different interpretations of her relationships, which is unique for a film to realize. However, Walsingham is portrayed as her main advisor, the one who counsels her on both personal and security matters. Cecil is shown as having a smaller role than is historically true and it is implied that he no longer counsels Elizabeth when she gives him the title of Lord Burghley. Cecil remained her most trusted and valued advisor until his death when his son took over the position.

The film also deals with the issue of marriage and Elizabeth using her proposals as political weapons. In welcoming the Duke of Anjou, the elder, she is aware of Spain’s hostile reaction. She seems to have readily considered marriage until discovering the Duke’s like of cross-dressing, a trend of French Court parties that he reported to have participated in. But the emphasis on the cross-dressing was more a comedic move for the film than an element grounded
in historical fact. The film also addresses the close relationship between Robert Dudley and Elizabeth, even depicting them as physically intimate. Kapur and the writer Michael Hirst state in the DVD commentary that they are not proposing the physical relationship is history but rather a “nudge towards romanticism.” They based the intimacy on inconclusive evidence that such a relationship could have been possible. This follows several other films’ treatment of Elizabeth and her relationships, grabbing on to the smallest detail and elaborating. Historians do agree Dudley remained Elizabeth’s favorite until his death, except for a few years when she banished him from court for marrying.

The film places Elizabeth’s personal life in the forefront, yet connects it with her political decisions by depicting how the personal and political aspects of her life affected each other. The film is placed within a historical discourse, necessary for the film to be considered a historical work, by acknowledging key historical issues that impacted her reign. But the intense focus on her relationships restricts the narrative, making it seem like a story between her and Dudley. The condensation of conspiracy plots, although still effective in illustrating the dangers to her throne, is too convoluted for a history student to come away with a clear and accurate understanding of the involvement of key historical figures. This film represents the best of the five in its attempt to show the complex relationship between Elizabeth’s personal and political life, but still focuses too heavily on the personal to be considered a supplemental history of Elizabeth.

**ELIZABETH: THE GOLDEN AGE**

The second film by Shekhar Kapur dealing with Elizabeth’s life starts its narrative in 1585 and continues through to the defeat of the Spanish Armada.\(^{51}\) While meant to be a continuation of the first, this film mainly deals with one topic, Sir Walter Raleigh. Not a

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complete exaggeration on the relationship between the two, Raleigh is never portrayed as being in love with Elizabeth but rather enamored with her intelligence, wit and curiosity. Raleigh is portrayed as a good friend who enjoys her company while Elizabeth is positioned as the one falling in love. The film uses this storyline to introduce the usual theme that Elizabeth put politics over love and Raleigh represents one of many of whom she could have been happy with. The scene in which Raleigh and Beth dance and Elizabeth sees her youthful self dancing illustrates her longing and envy to be free to love as she desires. Raleigh represents freedom and adventure which, the film implies, is the reason she loves him. The film interprets their relationship as having a higher meaning, continuing the theme of love over duty from Kapur’s first film.

As with the first film, the major historical discrepancies come from the assassination plots, although the condensation of events does not take away from understanding the historical context. The plot portrayed should be the Babington plot; the one in which Mary Queen of Scots was accused of participating. John Ballard is absent from the Babington plot, having been in the first film. Anthony Babington is renamed Thomas Babington and the scene where he fires a pistol at her is fictionalized, a metaphor for the planned conspiracy on her life. The Spanish Ambassador Guerau DeSpes was expelled from England in 1572, thirteen years before the start of this film’s timeline. Instead the Spanish Ambassador should have been Bernardino de Mendoza, who was determined to do anything and everything to remove Elizabeth from power. But as with the first film, these changes do not affect the historical importance of the conspiracy, as it still resulted in the execution of Mary Queen of Scots.

The film also illustrates her growing jealousy and embitterment towards couples, especially those married in secret without her permission. Raleigh and Beth did fall in love and
marry, with Elizabeth eventually finding out and imprisoning Raleigh. However, Elizabeth did not discover their secret marriage until well after the invasion of the Spanish Armada, but the film’s timeline was condensed for a more dramatic performance of events. Raleigh played an important part in the defeat of the Spanish Armada, and while he did counsel Elizabeth on the importance of naval power, the true hero of the battle in 1588 was Sir Francis Drake. Many attributes of Drake are incorporated into Raleigh’s character, such as his piracy of Spanish ships and exploration of the New World. While Raleigh is known for these as well, Drake was more the explorer while Raleigh was more the government man, having a place in Parliament and counseling Elizabeth on political matters. This suggests Raleigh represents the development of English exploration and the rise of her naval power in addition to providing a love interest.

In a scene dealing with the marriage issue, Elizabeth’s advisors present her with numerous portraits of potential suitors. The political tactic of her courtships is stated directly when she whispers to Walsingham “how long will we continue to play this game?” One of her more successful courtships, with the Archduke Charles of Austria, is dramatized in the film. Although the scene effectively illustrates Elizabeth’s intellect with her command of languages, it does not present the courtship as having serious potential. Elizabeth disregards it immediately due to his age, although historically the Archduke remained a prospective suitor for five years. Eventually religious issues caused a breakdown in negotiations. The timeline is also wrong regarding the Archduke with marriage negotiations taking place in the 1560s, two decades before the start of the film’s timeline. But these changes do not significantly change the history; they still acknowledge the issues important to understanding Elizabeth’s reign.

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The same can be said for the film’s portrayal of the execution of Mary Queen of Scots. The main issue is Elizabeth’s hesitancy to order the execution on the grounds that Mary was a God-anointed Queen. Whether she knew about the execution as it was occurring, as the film depicts, or learned of it afterwards, as historians claim, remains a moot point. The execution still occurred and caused Elizabeth great emotional and spiritual distress.  

Similar to Kapur’s 1998 film, *Elizabeth: The Golden Age* illustrates the idea of what Elizabeth’s life, both political and personal, would have entailed. It does have the period look while not being overly theatrical, allowing the viewer a glimpse of how Elizabeth’s life might have appeared. However, it is even narrower in its choice of topics than the 1998 film, hindering its use as a history. Providing an introduction to people and a general understanding of events is as close to historical fact this film gets. However, it is useful in further following Elizabeth’s personal development as a Queen, especially when taken together with the 1998 film. This film offers another psychological study of the Queen, with her political choices put in the context of her personal life.

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CHAPTER 5:
CONCLUSION

The five films present a diverse but connected collection of representations of Elizabeth. Three are modern while two are from Hollywood’s golden studio age. Three different actresses portray Elizabeth: Helen Mirren, Bette Davis and Cate Blanchett. The three portrayals are all different, ranging from victim to antagonist to icon, each offering a different interpretation of her personality and power.

The two main themes of religion and succession are only dealt with in the Kapur and HBO films. The 1939 and 1955 films disregard the importance of these themes and instead devise romantic dramas meant to entertain, although some aspects of Elizabeth’s personality and relationship with her Council and Courtiers are accurate. Only the Kapur and HBO films discuss the issues of religion and succession and how they impacted Elizabeth’s reign. However, they mainly use these issues as means to further or hinder romantic developments between Elizabeth and her various suitors. The Kapur films do explore the political struggle Elizabeth endured throughout her rule as a result of the religious turmoil and succession questions, providing some historical context of her reign. Yet, Elizabeth’s emotional responses to these issues, examined through her personality or romantic engagements, remain the focus of the films rather than the historical importance of the issues, and how Elizabeth’s struggle impacted European politics of the era.

These films all have certain inventions they dramatize, mainly dealing with Elizabeth’s romantic life. The issue is whether they are false inventions that ignore historical fact or true inventions that work within the historical evidence to provide a more cohesive narrative for the
 viewer. While no evidence supports any intimate romantic involvement with men, historians generally accept Elizabeth’s close relationship with Robert Dudley. The other relationships depicted in the films are greatly exaggerated from historical evidence. Elizabeth did use her emotions and affections as a source of power, manipulating her Courtiers to follow her will in exchange for listening to their advice on political decisions, or receiving means of income such as tax rights. Any romantic involvement with Raleigh or Essex apart from the usual affections bestowed on her favorite Courtiers is exaggerated. While the films are correct in showing how her affections influenced politics, especially at Court, they focus their narratives around romance. The recent films still follow the 1939 and 1955 films’ storylines, just adding in more political intrigues and historic undertones.

The comparison of the films and the historical texts about Elizabeth produce two different images of Elizabeth, one popular and one scholarly. The films highlight the emotional reasoning behind Elizabeth’s actions, while historians, although they give weight to emotion, cite political motives as the prevailing basis for her actions. This popular image portrays Elizabeth as vain and intelligent, trying to contain her woman’s heart in a man’s political world. Examples of Elizabeth placing the needs and concerns of her people and country over her own wishes dominate the films’ storylines. The refusal to marry is generally seen by historians as a political tactic, while filmmakers and scriptwriters see it as an emotional decision. Although the more recent films acknowledge the political usefulness of courting potential husbands, the focus remains on the man she wishes to marry, but cannot because her heart no longer belongs to herself. That longing for the freedom to love how and who she wishes permeates all the films. The iconic image of Elizabeth is one of a virgin queen married to England and her people, yet viewers are reminded of all she gave up to wield such power.
Until Kapur’s films, the dominant image of Elizabeth has been one of a mature aging Queen. Used to reflect her vanity and fear of losing male affections, this image furthers the romantic plotlines. Whether a romance story between herself and one of her favorites, or a story of betrayal by one of her Courtiers, the aging image provides the character of Elizabeth with emotional motives as well as the wisdom to understand her actions. Kapur’s films do not conform to the conventional representation of an elderly Queen, but do adhere to the convention of having her choose between love and duty.\textsuperscript{55}

This personal and emotional aspect of the films forms the main issue of whether these Elizabeth films can be seen as histories or pieces of entertainment. While the HBO and Kapur films could serve as personal histories because they deal with her personality and relationships, they lack any historical substance to stand alone. However, Kapur’s films do attempt to place Elizabeth’s life in its historical context, dealing with several political issues that influence her personal life and depicting events that Elizabeth has no control over. The question is whether Elizabeth’s personal life can be separated from the politics of her reign, and the historical consensus is it cannot.

Every decision in Elizabeth’s life impacted, or was influenced by, some other decision. The marriage and succession issues were heavily connected with the religious debates. Her relations with European countries depended on her consideration of their marriage proposals and vice versa. No single issue in Elizabeth’s life can stand alone and be fully understood, and that is why the films fail as histories. Even with the use of Rosenstone’s four fictional moves, compression, condensation, alteration, and metaphor, the Elizabethan story remains too complex for the film medium to cover in its entirety. A weakness of film, this is where Rosenstone’s film

theory starts to fall apart. His methods work when dealing with a singular, isolated historical event such as the assassination of JFK or Amelia Earhart’s transatlantic flight. However, Elizabeth’s life must be separated into pieces or sections for film to compose a coherent narrative. Her reign impacted world politics at the time, influencing events far outside of her reign. The historical context surrounding Elizabeth is vast and convoluted, difficult for film to depict within the confines of the medium, particularly with the one-dimension or linear storyline factor of film.

The 1939 and 1955 films must be completely disregarded as histories because they provide false inventions to further the plot, completely ignoring historical facts. The recent films by Kapur and HBO do place their narratives in the historical discourse of Elizabeth’s reign, discussing issues of succession, religion, marriage, and political intrigues and maneuvering. According to Rosenstone, the three recent films follow the structures of mainstream film to be considered histories: there is a beginning, middle, and an end showing the progression of history; the history is personalized and shown through the individual’s story; one perspective of the past is depicted; the visual and narrative bring the larger picture into view, comprised of several aspects of history. I disagree, however, that they can stand alone. These films are complements (work together) rather than supplements (stand alone) of the historic written text because they still place her personal life at the focal point of the narrative. While great for understanding the personality and emotional motives of Elizabeth, the films present complex political events in one-dimension. This brings into focus the limitations of film. Rosenstone’s criteria for mainstream films can become constraints when dealing with dense and complicated issues.

What film does achieve is to provide an emotional truth. Film presents history in a way that personalizes it for the viewers, allowing them to connect with something typically foreign.
and unfamiliar. A visual medium, film places the viewer in the time and place dramatized, providing a vicarious journey through history. Often, written texts can become dry and tedious, compiling the facts without any passion. Objectivity is desired when dealing with historical narratives, but indifference is often a by-product. The written text leaves out the emotions and sentiments generally found at the center of any event, historical or personal. Film brings those emotional human elements back into the narrative, and although sometimes placing too much emphasize on the emotional motives of characters, it places the history in a personal context every viewer can connect with, not just the scholar or history expert. All five films use Elizabeth’s emotions as the basis for depicting her reign, although the 1939 and 1955 films give false representations of her motives, exaggerating romantic interests for the benefit of dramatic progression. This reliance on understanding Elizabeth’s personal history, or emotional circumstances, positions the films, particularly the Kapur and HBO films, as psychological studies of Elizabeth. This type of historical narrative, one based on psychoanalysis, can be useful in providing a deeper understanding of the events in her reign, while connecting viewers to an era most consider irrelevant and dissimilar to their own.

However, Elizabeth’s life and reign is too complicated to understand simply through a psychological study or political analysis. The two must balance each other, something some written texts fail at as well. To understand the complexity of Elizabeth’s life and reign, the films must be viewed in conjunction with a written historical text to be considered historically relevant. However, the three recent films are great for an introduction to Elizabethan history. They are important in providing an emotional and psychological understanding of Elizabeth, allowing the viewer to understand the person in order to understand her actions. This is film’s strength in its deliverance of historical fact: engaging viewers emotionally. The films are
important in that they give an understanding of the time or a sense of the era, establish the ever-changes list of players in her political and personal life, and, most importantly, spark the viewer’s interest in the history by appealing to the emotions, something often difficult for a purely historical written text to accomplish.
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