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Elizabeth's Gambit:

A Historiographical Review of Queen Elizabeth I's Decision to Remain Unmarried

By Kirsten Ehrke

With Mentorship from Professor Valerie Kivelson

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Queen Elizabeth I was the only queen regnant of England to remain unmarried and childless – a feat amazing for both her time and ours. Her decision to sustain a 45-year-long reign alone has been a fascination to historians and has been given multiple explanations and reasons for success. This project seeks to explore various historical perspectives of her decision not to marry through a historiographical review of several prominent historians of her reign. Within this paper, the hypotheses of these historians regarding her decision are outlined and explained with historical context. Each argument is compared to the others, where similarities and differences are ascertained. This project aims to showcase the differing prominent theories of Elizabeth's decision to remain unmarried in an endeavor to understand the consensus and disputes of modern-day historians regarding Elizabeth's unique situation.

#### Book One: *Elizabeth's Women* by Tracy Borman

Tracy Borman's *Elizabeth's Women* aims to explore the relationships Queen Elizabeth shared with various women throughout her life and their impacts on her decisions. Borman highlights Elizabeth's relationship with her mother, stepmothers, half-sister, cousins, and the various ladies who were in her employ during her reign. Concerning Elizabeth's marital decisions, Borman draws a connection to her mother, Anne Boleyn, her stepmother, Katherine Howard, and her half-sister, Mary I, regarding her decision-making in the matter. Borman frames Elizabeth's personal feelings about marriage and childbearing as formed in her childhood and adolescence through the fates of her mother and stepmother, along with her sister's tumultuous relationship with her own marriage and struggles with childbearing.

Borman utilizes a variety of primary and secondary sources in this book to not only share direct accounts from the time but also provide additional historical background to the reader. Borman relies heavily on the correspondence of Eustace Chapuys, the Savoyard diplomat and ambassador to England. Chapuys wrote extensively on the familial dynamics he witnessed while at court, though he left in 1545, before Elizabeth ascended to the throne. Much of his correspondence was used to explain the situation between Henry and his wives, which Borman relies on for this book. Borman explains that her other primary sources are mostly collected from other diplomats who spent time at the English court. Borman consults various other works on the Tudor family, which she uses to add to the historical background and the arguments she makes from them. One shortcoming of this book is that she does not quote from primary sources often; instead, she makes broader interpretations with general historical knowledge of Elizabeth's life. For the reader, it is hard to track what sources she is concluding from. This makes it challenging to pinpoint which of her arguments has substantial textual evidence attributed to it.

Borman's first piece of evidence to support Elizabeth's aversion to marriage was her mother's demise at the hands of her father. In leading up to this argument, Borman primes the reader with examples of the connection shared between Anne and Elizabeth. Anne Boleyn was largely unpopular with English Catholics after her marriage to Henry. She faced the consequences of Henry's divorce of his first wife, Catherine, and many debated Anne's legitimacy as queen due to the unpopularity of the divorce. The main connection Borman makes between Anne and Elizabeth was that they both faced uncertain futures due to Anne's debated legitimacy and, by extension, Elizabeth's. Borman exposes (what she deems to be) a competition for superiority between Elizabeth and Mary, one that Anne had continually struggled with due to her unpopular marriage to Henry. Anne is quoted as saying, "She [Mary] is my death, or I am

hers”, simply asserting that their innate opposition to the other will seal one of their fates in death. Struggling to assert her legitimacy as the new queen, Anne was continuously bitter towards Mary: “Anne came to believe that as long as Mary lived, she and her daughter would never be recognized as the true Queen and heir” (Borman 32). For Anne, Mary symbolized the fact that she didn’t belong as queen and posed a direct threat to her. Added to this fear was the continual fluctuation of Henry’s affection towards his two daughters, which waxed and waned. Though Elizabeth was young at the time of her mother’s death, Borman claims that the shared uncertain future that Anne and Elizabeth faced supported Elizabeth’s belief that she could meet the same fate that her mother did. Borman concedes that the direct emotional impact on Elizabeth after her mother’s death would be “lessened by the fact that for almost all of her childhood, Anne had been a distant figure”, along with the fact that Elizabeth, who was two at the time of her mother’s execution, would not have remembered her mother, but learned of her demise as she aged. Instead, she leans more into the reality that Elizabeth understood the dangers of being unable to bear a son or getting embroiled in adultery accusations, as she knew what that did to her mother. Borman argues that “From this [Anne’s death], her daughter learned not to trust expressions of love and devotion; she learned to guard her reputation fiercely; and she learned to be a self-reliant, political pragmatist” (Borman 43).

Borman’s second piece of evidence to support Elizabeth’s aversion to marriage was the execution of her third stepmother, Katherine Howard. About six years after her mother’s execution, her third stepmother was also executed by order of King Henry VIII on charges of adultery. Elizabeth was eight years old when Katherine was killed, and likely had a clear memory of the event. Borman insists that Elizabeth would’ve understood, and been negatively impacted by, the execution: “Katherine’s sudden and brutal demise was so similar to that of her

own mother that she was profoundly shocked by the experience” (Borman 76). Borman follows with apparent evidence from Robert Dudley that Elizabeth, since the age of eight, “declared: ‘I will never marry’” (Borman 77). Borman does not provide more quotation evidence to support this claim. She summarizes the impacts of Anne and Katherine’s deaths on Elizabeth as “The notion that marriage was inextricably bound up with death”(Borman 77). Borman does not provide primary source evidence for this claim. From here, Borman frames the fates of Anne and Katherine within a paradigm that she believes Elizabeth came to recognize after the death of these two women: “By taking a husband, royal women, exalted though their status might be, were placing themselves at the mercy of men” (Borman 77). This sentiment returns in Borman’s argument when she explains the impact Mary’s marital struggles had on Elizabeth’s view of marriage.

Borman’s third piece of evidence for Elizabeth’s aversion to marriage is the observation of how marriage impacted her sister, Mary. Borman frames her argument involving Mary as a result of the “inequality of her [Mary’s] marriage” (Borman 162), showcasing the beliefs Mary held about marriage and how they impacted her reign. Borman briefly describes how this “inequality” looked: Mary was obviously in love with Philip, and “seemed meekly to defer to him in all things”; oppositely, Philip “was struggling to keep up the pretence of affection [towards his wife]” (Borman 162). Borman alludes to this fracture as having demonstrated the weakness of Mary’s ability to rule. Borman explains that Mary regularly wrote to Phillip, even when he was away, asking him for guidance as she ruled. Borman does not provide any primary source evidence for this claim. Borman argues that Elizabeth was keenly aware of this dynamic between Mary and Phillip and watched her sister’s failure to assert herself within her marriage help to unravel her rule. In addition to this point of weakness, Mary failed to bear an heir.

Borman describes this as a great “humiliation” for Mary in the eyes of her people and her husband. During one of Mary’s “phantom pregnancies”, where she seemed to be with child but never actually gave birth, Philip and Elizabeth grew closer due to their forced proximity. Later, rumors spread alleging Philip had developed an infatuation with Mary’s younger, beautiful sister and would like to marry her, convinced she could provide him with heirs. Shortly after the end of Mary’s pregnancy, Philip left for the Netherlands, abandoning her. Borman insists that Elizabeth watched this spectacle and had learned that her sister’s situation “was a serious blow to her authority” (Borman 161). Borman goes further to say that “Mary had failed in her duty not only as a queen, but also as a woman” (Borman 161). Borman summarizes what she believes to have been Mary’s situation: “She [Mary] had played the role more of a queen consort than a queen regnant, losing the respect of her councillors and her people, whose fears about the weakness of a female ruler had apparently been realised” (Borman 173). Borman argues that these lessons were on display for Elizabeth as she saw her sister’s reign crumble, aware that she would be next in line due to the absence of an heir. Pointing towards where Mary started to lose confidence, Borman states that Mary had more power when she was a virgin queen, before her marriage. Since that turning point, her new label as wife overshadowed her label as queen. Borman believes that Elizabeth, watching her sister fall from authority, came to understand that she could not let herself meet the same fate; she would not make the same mistake of marriage. Borman finalizes her argument by stating, “If Elizabeth was to triumph as a queen regnant, then she must truly be married to her country. In short, she must remain a virgin” (Borman 174).

## Book Two: *The Heart and Stomach of a King* by Carole Levin

Carole Levin's *The Heart and Stomach of a King* explores the politics relating to gender, sexuality, and power during Queen Elizabeth I's reign. Levin frames the book not as a biography, but as an analysis of Elizabeth, both the figure and her image. Levin focuses on Elizabeth's decision to remain unmarried in the first half of the book, where she lays out a few arguments about Elizabeth's marital decisions in succession. She argues that Elizabeth remained unmarried chiefly for the political reason of safeguarding her power as monarch. Levin adds to this argument by asserting that Elizabeth utilized religious imagery to give strength to her role as a single, virgin queen under the threat of the looming distrust of a female monarch.

Levin claims that most of the primary sources she uses in her book come from "first-hand descriptions" of Elizabeth's court. Levin explains that oftentimes these sources can be littered with rumor and gossip, which can detract from their historical accuracy. However, Levin goes on to state that these descriptions can showcase the response to queenship that their authors may have been commenting on. She suggests that this approach to these sources can help illuminate her arguments relating to gender, sexuality, and power throughout Elizabeth's reign. The main primary source cited in the first half of the book is from the Spanish Ambassador, Guzman de Silva. Purportedly, Elizabeth and de Silva had a positive relationship throughout his time at the English court, affording him more access than most to the queen. In her study, Levin also cites secondary source authors, including sociologists, theologians, and other prominent historians of Elizabeth, throughout the book to frame her arguments and/or to give additional background to her writing.

Levin begins her argument by exploring the English aversion to female rulership that plagued Elizabeth's rule: "If a queen were confidently to demonstrate the attributes of power, she would not be acting in a womanly manner; yet womanly behavior would ill-fit a queen for the rigors of rule" (Levin 3). Levin frames the aversion as a "conflict between her [Elizabeth's] rule and her femininity" (Levin 3) that found its root in popular Protestant belief. She goes on to offer context for this belief by quoting John Knox, a Scottish minister who believed it to be blasphemous for a woman to rule, "To promote a Woman to beare rule, superioritie, dominion, or empire above any Realme, nation, or Citie, is repugnant to Nature" (Levin 10). Levin explains that Knox and Elizabeth were in some form of communication with each other after the publication of his pamphlet, *First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women*, when he offered an "apology" to her but did not retract his statement or change his beliefs. After providing this context, Levin discusses how Elizabeth navigated the challenging public opinion of female rulership by exploring other ways religion could help strengthen her rule. Levin gives context for this by explaining how monarchs in the sixteenth century began to make "claims of being God's lieutenant", shifting the office of rulership to be "so awe inspiring and powerful it could even encompass a female ruler" (Levin 12). For a queen, this relation made "it possible for her to perform religious acts - priestly acts - inconceivable for a woman in previous centuries" (Levin 12). Levin's goal in this exploration of religious context is to set up her argument for Elizabeth's adoption of her image as a Virgin Queen, where she explores how this was necessary for Elizabeth to maintain her rule and power at court.

Levin introduces the reader to Elizabeth's status as a Virgin Queen by framing it as a political decision to keep hold of her power as monarch and create a specific place for herself within the relentless religious framework that sought to disenfranchise her for being female.



Initially, Levin explores the religious background to this decision before she explains Elizabeth's political motivations for remaining single as a Virgin Queen. She delves into the history of religious rituals used by medieval kings and, continued by Elizabeth, specifically tailored to her gender. Levin discusses the rituals of "the royal touch" and "washing the feet of the poor" when explaining how Elizabeth utilized older religious practices to ally her image with religious figures. Levin also cites two examples of female saints that Elizabeth may have hoped to be compared to: Saint Frideswide and Saint Uncumber, two healer saints with devotion to virginity. Levin explains that allying herself closely with these figures may have helped Elizabeth retain her power in the eyes of Protestants due to religious conventions aiding in the establishment of legitimacy (which she cites from German sociologist Max Weber). One shortcoming of this argument is that Levin does not expound on the attitude towards Catholic saints in Protestant England during the time Elizabeth ruled. This leaves out a crucial piece of information pertaining to whether it was possible Elizabeth wanted to be compared to these two figures, and if that was something her Protestant subjects would appreciate. Levin carefully explains that "We have no direct evidence that Elizabeth saw herself as a continuation of such saints as Uncumber and Frideswide", but goes on to say that "surely the tradition for the virgin saint as healer would resonate as well for a Virgin Queen who healed by touch" (Levin 21). This religious background lays the foundation for the second part of Levin's argument about Elizabeth's marital decision: the fear of being robbed of power.

Levin's argument about Elizabeth's decision to remain unmarried is prefaced with a powerful assertion: "her [Elizabeth] success as monarch was inextricably woven into her refusal to wed" (Levin 8). Levin argues that "marriage to anyone would have robbed Elizabeth of power" (Levin 8), linking to her earlier argument about Elizabeth maintaining her power as a

female ruler despite the distrust and revulsion sown by writers like John Knox. Levin adds to this argument by stating that “the expectations that the queen would marry were strong, but there was also the conflict and contradiction that the queen was ruler while a wife was to be ruled by her husband” (Levin 43), which revisits similar contradictions pointed out by John Knox. Levin uses this as a foundation to explain how Elizabeth worked to safeguard her position as a ruler by positioning herself as the Virgin Queen. Levin argues that Elizabeth was aware of how quickly her rule would break down if she conceded to marry due to the push for male dominance and leadership. Eager not to fall into the convention of marriage, which would pivot power to her husband and require her to produce an heir, “Elizabeth refused the most obvious function of being a queen, that of bearing a son” (Levin 64). Levin goes on to explain that by surpassing these traditional gender roles, Elizabeth was able to concentrate her image on that of a virgin, healing queen rather than a traditional wife, sparing her from being forced to give up her power to a man: “Unmarried, Elizabeth avoided the role of wife and the risk of being perceived as the inferior partner in the marriage relationship” (Levin 65). Levin’s final argument ties back to her preface: it would’ve been impossible for Elizabeth to maintain power and respect in her court and country if she decided to marry.

### Book Three: *Monarchy and Matrimony* by Susan Doran

In Susan Doran's *Monarchy and Matrimony*, she explores the various courtships Elizabeth I was involved in throughout her reign. Contrary to the previous two authors, Doran believes that it was not Queen Elizabeth I's *decision* to remain unmarried, but rather that there were other reasons a marriage never succeeded. Doran states early in her book that Elizabeth "did not reject marriage from either psychological motives or political reasons associated with her gender" (Doran 11). Doran goes on to explain that the book will "focus on the debate surrounding the courtships, the sticking-points in the attempts to reach a matrimonial settlement, and the political tactics employed by the opponents of the various matches to ensure their ultimate failure" (Doran 12). Doran frames her book around the three most prominent suitors of Elizabeth: Archduke Charles, Henry, Duke of Anjou, and Francis, Duke of Alençon. With these courtships, three main themes emerge as reasons for their failure: religious practice, political strategy, and the threat of war.

In this book, Doran utilizes a combination of primary and secondary sources to form her argument about Elizabeth's failed courtships. She relies heavily on correspondence from Elizabeth, her suitors, her advisors, and other important political players, like Catherine DeMedici. Relying on correspondence direct from the people involved in these courtships lends more reliability to these sources than if they were from a commentator on these processes. Doran's references to her sources are the most substantial out of the three authors discussed in this review. For almost every assertion Doran makes, she has textual evidence to support her claim and gives additional historical context for the reader. Doran's clear reference to her sources

gives additional merit to her arguments and makes them more convincing since they are grounded in textual evidence.

Doran emphasizes the centrality of religious disagreements in all three foreign courtships. Firstly, with Archduke Charles, whose catholic views were not originally seen to be an issue. This belief changed as the marital contract was written up: “Only as it became apparent that the toleration of a Mass in the royal household was a prerequisite of a Catholic marriage did the project run into difficulties and support for it die away” (Doran 97). Doran explains how Elizabeth’s advisors became wary of the threat this could pose, withdrawing from their previous support, and ultimately rejecting the match. Doran includes that Elizabeth’s second courtship, this time with the French Duke of Anjou, included the conversation of the Duke’s potential conversion to Protestantism. This tactic seemed to hold sway in Elizabeth’s circle of advisors until they grew wary of the gamble they would be taking if the duke did indeed remain catholic. Elizabeth’s courtship with the French Duke of Alençon seemed less prone to disagreement as the duke was more lenient about his religious practices than his brother. However, it quickly became a large disagreement between Elizabeth’s advisors when he remained steadfast in his allowance of attending Mass once a week. Doran emphasizes that conflicting religious beliefs played a large role in her inability to find a match between the three of them.

Doran connects the issues with religious differences with the ensuing political fallout they would create. She explains that the issue of attending Mass, even a private one, became political quickly during the courtship with the archduke. Elizabeth was “in no doubt that marriage to the archduke on the terms he required would be extremely unpopular with her most zealously Protestant subjects” (Doran 92). Risking unpopularity and a potential uprising of protestants against a catholic king, Elizabeth “decided that she was unable to permit the archduke

the right to hear a private Mass within his chamber” (Doran 92). Doran describes the Anjou match as having “less impact on political life than most of Elizabeth’s other courtships”, which she attributes to the agreement of Elizabeth’s privy council regarding the match.

During the courtship with the Duke of Alençon, the current civil war in France impacted Elizabeth’s trust in the potential match. With the onset of the religiously motivated war, the duke “abandoned his Protestant allies and supported his brother” (Doran 144). Doran explains how Elizabeth’s courtship with the duke radically changed when he began to seek power in the Netherlands. The relationship between Elizabeth and the duke quickly changed as he advanced into the Netherlands, seeking to give aid to the States of Hainaut to gain ground and power in the region. This posed a direct threat to England due to the prospect of the duke being “rewarded for his assistance with some territorial gain” (Doran 146). Elizabeth and her advisors were concerned about this sudden decision, especially after the duke had turned his back on French Catholics during the civil war; his alliance with the Catholic States was dangerous. Elizabeth was still facing pressure to stay out of war with Spain, a struggle the French were also dealing with. The English had hoped that an alliance with France could keep them secure if they had to wade into war with Spain, but the duke’s unpredictable behavior made Elizabeth and her advisors lose confidence. Ultimately, “she feared that an Anglo-French league would commit her to financing a war in the Netherlands without a corresponding guarantee of French military help if she were attacked directly by Spain” (Doran 192). Doran explains that the French perception of Elizabeth might have also been uncertain: “her [Elizabeth] bald refusal to become involved in an open war with Spain confirmed his suspicions that she planned to look on while France took all the risks in the Netherlands’ war” (Doran 194). The threat of war for both countries became a leading factor

in the marital negotiation between England and France and was one of the principal causes for its failure.

Each author presented in this historiography comes to a different conclusion in their exploration of why Elizabeth never married; all of them are compelling. In *Elizabeth's Women*, Tracy Borman emphasizes the role that emotional trauma undoubtedly played in Elizabeth's life, specifically her childhood and adolescence. In *The Heart and Stomach of a King*, Carole Levin stresses Elizabeth's obligation to safeguard her political power in the face of a patriarchal system. In *Monarchy and Matrimony*, Susan Doran casts aside previous interpretations of Elizabeth's singleness and focuses on the geopolitical situation that made marriage an impossibility for her. All of the authors acknowledge the complex political environment Elizabeth had to navigate, which included familial relations, religious debates, and international diplomacy.

After studying each of these approaches, I believe that all of their arguments have merit and are all valuable when studying Elizabeth's marital outcome. Each author brings a different argument that highlights different truths about the time and place in which Elizabeth lived and ruled. I think that the emotional trauma Elizabeth underwent as a child certainly impacted her decisions as a young woman and queen; I think there was a necessary political strategy to ensure her reign as a woman in the period in which she lived; and I can imagine how marriage negotiations were tedious with the threat of war and religious division looming. An effort to understand why Elizabeth remained unmarried would be impossible without the nuanced understanding of these various factors that contributed to her political situation and led her to be the only unmarried and childless Queen Regnant of England.

## Works Cited

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