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A Mute Queen

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Ilona Bell, *Elizabeth I: The Voice of a Monarch*, Basingstoke, England: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010. xiv + 207 pp.

Ilona Bell's study belongs to a series published by Palgrave Macmillan entitled "Queenship and Power," which singles out queens as particular monarchs and power as the overall theoretical approach, a topic which has been fashionable since Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* appeared in 1975. The series contains two other titles and two forthcoming titles on Queen Elizabeth I. Its editors, Carole Levin and Charles Beem, lay the stress on "the strategies that queens . . . pursued to wield political power within the structures of male-dominated societies."

The first chapter, which is extremely short, sums up the Queen's eventful life and how she verbally reacted to it. It serves as a sequel to the preface proper, and spells out its main thesis: the Queen was not "an aloof, inaccessible Petrarchan lady" but "a marriageable woman" (p. 3); she "conducted her courtships neither like a conventional, subordinate early modern woman nor like a typical king or queen" (p. 3). The first point adds little to Susan Doran's *Monarchy and Matrimony: The Courtships of Elizabeth I*.[1] The existence of two identities owes much to Marie Axton's *The Queen's Two Bodies: Drama and the Elizabethan Succession*.[2] How could a queen possibly act like "a conventional, subordinate early modern woman"? And what is a typical king or queen?

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[1]Doran, *Monarchy and Matrimony: The Courtships of Elizabeth I* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996).

[2]Axton, *The Queen's Two Bodies: Drama and the Elizabethan Succession* (London: Swift Printers Ltd. for the Royal Historical Society, 1977).

Common sense dictates that, given their position, kings and queens are necessarily extraordinary and unique creatures.

The second chapter deals with "The Art of Poetry, the Art of Courtship: Elizabeth I and the Elizabethan Writing Culture." Astonishingly, Bell does not mention the seminal *Elizabeth I and the Culture of Writing,* which offers in-depth case studies ranging from the Queen's distinctive hands to the numerous genres she engaged in.[3] The focus on Puttenham's *The Art of English Poesy* is ill-founded, since, as pointed out by Peter Mack in his *Elizabethan Rhetoric: Theory and Practice*, the treatise was never reprinted.[4] Puttenham probably had no impact whatsoever on the Queen, who was significantly more influenced by scriptures and classics she sometimes translated. Neither do comparisons with Donne and Shakespeare help. A queen, a divine, and a playwright belong to three radically different types of writers. Beatrice's independent spirit in *Much Ado about Nothing* is attributed to the Queen's influence on Elizabethan society (pp. 26–27). This is wrong for several reasons. One, a naïve confusion between the stuff of comedy—where female characters may be exaggeratingly and frighteningly more powerful than their historic counterparts—and reality. Two, a failure to acknowledge basic hierarchical norms according to which the Queen's conduct could certainly not apply to any other woman, not even the most powerful ones at court.

Chapter 3 analyzes the Queen's voice in the pre-coronation procession. Bell finds it remarkable that Elizabeth spoke in public on that occasion "despite ideological pressure on women to remain silent" (p. 36), but she was not any woman, and her people rightly expected her to do so. The common German idiom "Realpolitik" becomes the pseudo-French "réal politique" (p. 36). As is the case throughout the book, Bell's over-ingenious readings treat such straightforward words as "continual endeavour" as yielding "interpretive dissonance" and the sort of ambiguity found in Elizabethan drama and poetry.

Chapter 4 gathers readings of as generically diverse pieces as the 1559 parliamentary speech and the Woodstock epigrams. This is risky at best,

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[3] *Elizabeth I and the Culture of Writing*, ed. Peter Beal and Grace Ioppolo (London: British Library, 2007).

[4] Mack, *Elizabethan Rhetoric: Theory and Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 76.

since political speeches and epigrams are, as it were, generic opposites in terms of length, rhetorical aims, and production. The far more interesting (and deceptively simple) question of who wrote what in the case of the Queen's speeches, which only a careful comparison of manuscripts and hands may begin to answer, is not asked. Bell picks out a word as common as "suspect" to connect the speech to the Woodstock epigram, which is not very convincing. The word "will" in the 1559 speech, "to draw my love to your liking or frame my will to your fantasies," which is understood as meaning "carnal desire"—duly recorded in the *Oxford English Dictionary*[5]—most probably simply expresses what the Queen really wants. When the widespread belief "that female orgasm was necessary to conception" is mentioned (p. 61), no early modern source is given, but instead baffling lengthy references to websites on recent fertility research, which is a topic in itself to be treated in medical journals.

Chapter 5 centers on conversations the Queen had with several ambassadors. What Bell terms the Queen's "reported speech" is particularly tricky to assess as being authorial, and if the Spanish ambassador de Quadra does offer valuable testimony on the Queen's reactions to the Archduke's marriage proposal, inevitably, he had an agenda of his own and should not be entirely trusted. The misogynistic rhetoric at work in the ambassadors' reactions to the Queen's constant refusals to marry is irritatingly compared with Hamlet's misogyny (p. 87). That early modern men were misogynistic is too obvious to be heavily underlined and does not improve our knowledge of the Queen's language. "Dialogic in the Bakhtinian sense of anticipating or incorporating an answering response that embodied an entire culture of dissonant voices" (p. 91) seems to be a clever, if old-fashioned, way to characterize the reported diplomatic conversations, but sounds so vague and puzzling that it throws no light on the real conversations. More importantly, the ambassadors, who presumably were not fools, are chastised for not understanding the Queen (p. 91) "because they were unable to live with what Keats called 'Negative Capability.'" The amusing anachronism suggests diplomats by trade had problems with "uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts," which is hard to accept.

[5]S.v. "will," n.[1], I.2. *spec.*

Like chapter 4, chapter 6 tries to draw significant links between diverse material since it reads the 1563 and 1566 parliamentary speeches alongside the psalter posy. Bell writes that "In the Elizabethan political and gender unconscious, the presence of an unmarried woman on the throne constituted an 'unspeakable' threat to the social order" (p. 94), when the real problem was marrying a Catholic who would threaten the new religious order. The other serious problem was, of course, the Queen's succession in the absence of progeny. Why someone would expect Elizabethans to be "gender conscious" seems impossible to comprehend. The note to the sentence is even more surprising. Taken together, the sentence and the note sound like a weak attempt at surrealist prose when *non sequiturs* are artfully sought for. A simple Latinate inversion in the 1563 speech—"the princely seat and kingly throne wherein God (though unworthy) hath constituted me"—leads Bell to state that "Elizabeth's syntax goes askew" (p. 97). More worryingly still, she suggests Elizabeth may imply God Himself is unworthy, which is absurd. For one, the syntax forbids it. Second, unworthiness is an endlessly repeated commonplace which defines the sinner's position in respect to God's mercy. Third, the Queen was a devout monarch.

Chapter 7 examines "Popular Debate and Courtly Dialogue." At the outset, the book's feminist *credo,* according to which the Queen "challenged the dominant ideology, which required women to be chaste, silent, and obedient," is repeated yet again.[6] Surely, this did not apply to the Queen. Forced comparisons are made between contemporary sources by women and the Queen's language, such as Isabella Whitney's poetry or *A Letter Sent by the maydens of London*, which is all they have in common. A far better starting point would have been to look into what the Queen read, based on Jane Lawson's work.[7] The mayden's letter is equated with "late twentieth-century feminist discourse" (p. 123), which suggests women had the same thoughts and spoke the same language

[6]For other repetitions on the Queen refusing to marry someone she had not seen, see pp. 108, 114, 127, 128; a near identical passage involves John Knox (pp. 49 and 96).

[7]Lawson, "'This Remembrance of the New Year': Books Given to Queen Elizabeth as New Year's Gift's," in *Elizabeth I and the Culture of Writing*, pp. 133–172.

more than four centuries ago. Follows a quotation for which no source is given.

Chapter 8 brings Bell's thesis on the Queen's attitude towards marriage to a close. The opening lines clumsily underline Bell's own repetitions in a statement on Elizabethan poetry—"the preferred medium for exploring complex thoughts and feelings that could be expressed straightforwardly or openly" (p. 146)—which is so vague that it could apply to literature in general. A few lines later she describes her "own process of discovery" as "a roller coaster ride that became more gripping as the final twists and turns came into view" (pp. 147–148), an experience which remains purely personal. Many pages are devoted to a close reading of "On Monsieur's Departure," in which Bell sees the final stanza as a critique of "Petrarchist [*sic*: why not Petrarchan? (which even then is unclear)] ideology." This is how she reads poetry:

> For an interpretation of a poem to be not only plausible but also compelling, it must be compatible with the poem as a whole, in *all* its intricate, multifaceted detail. Hence we need to ask not only whether there is sufficient evidence to support a particular reading but also whether there are alternative interpretations of the details we have already considered, and, moreover, whether there are details we have not yet considered that might undercut or complicate our reading. In short, we need to ask ourselves not only whether our interpretation may be proved but also whether the opposite can be proved.
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> (p. 162)

This is far too longwinded, obvious, and should have been stated in the preface. In lieu of an exciting discovery on what the Queen meant in her poem, Bell offers much speculation based on too many "ifs" (p. 168).

The eight chapters in this slim volume—171 pages, excluding the endnotes—cover a lot of ground, for they tackle the Queen's entire life in chronological order and her writings, not to mention public debates around her and processions, and even though the title uses "voice" in the singular, the Queen is evidently endowed with several, depending on the medium she chooses, and even within one particular medium, such as the missive. Underneath the variety of sources, which sometimes coexist uncomfortably within a chapter, the coarse thread which runs through

the entire fabric of the book (and allows Bell to declare her allegiance to feminist criticism) is the Queen's response to her courtships.

Surprisingly enough, Bell does not mention the Queen's letters in the preface, nor are they listed in the index, yet she does discuss a few, notably in the last chapter (p. 156), when she writes on the Queen's courtships. Now, the Queen's correspondence is a huge territory whose map is still being drawn, especially its foreign parts. There are indeed more than six hundred extent letters in French attributed to the Queen and a smaller but no less significant body of Italian and Spanish letters. When quoting letters, Bell relies on existing editions without going back to the original material, a choice she justifies by writing that "Since we are dealing with translations, this chapter focuses less on syntactical ambiguities and verbal nuances than on broader political goals and rhetorical strategies" (p. 71). Though "Elizabeth's words deserve the same painstaking scrutiny" (p. 9) as Shakespeare's and Donne's works, Bell's larger concerns are not based on any new sources, but on feminist assumptions, which are often reiterated and identical with her findings. As is sometimes the case for overtly theoretical readings, the hermeneutic circle according to which the hypothesis is the conclusion proves difficult to avoid.

Ironically, the central problem is never clearly addressed, that of the Queen's voice. One of the main difficulties the editor of the Queen's letters is confronted with is precisely ascribing letters, or even portions of letters, to her or to Cecil, who drafted a large number of them, or to the secretary of the French tongue, or to the servant who happened to be there when a letter needed to be penned. All in all, taking into account more of the Queen's unpublished writings would have made for a more convincing and scholarly book.

Here lies the rub: it is not easy to decide what readership the publisher has in mind, apart from the comfortable feminist critic happy to recognize her own beliefs proven right yet again. Such a specialized monograph should have appealed to scholars working specifically on the Queen, but it seems that it is often the ignorant undergraduate to whom Bell is writing, when one learns Petrarch is "the seminal Italian Renaissance poet who gave his name to the Petrarchan literary tradition that pervades discussions of Elizabeth and Elizabethan tradition" (p. 9). Furthermore, her vision of history is highly debatable when she compares de Quadra's strategy with President Kennedy's resolution of the Cuban

missile crisis (p. 90). Bell has got every right to like modern popular culture, but Patti Smith (p. 7) or *Lost in Translation* (p. 65) take us far from the Queen's court. Pages in the first chapter read very much like a vague high school textbook on early modern culture.

The book's main virtue is that of a counter-model. Unwittingly, it warns scholars against preconceptions and crude comparisons, and encourages them to return to what the Queen said and wrote in manuscript to hear her multiple voices.

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